I am a Revolutionary Black Female Nationalist: A Womanist Analysis of Fulani Sunni Ali's Role as a New African Citizen and Minister of In-formation in the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Africa

Rondee Gaines

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ABSTRACT

Historically, black women have always played key roles in the struggle for liberation. A critical determinant of black women’s activism was the influence of both race and gender, as these factors were immutably married to their subjectivities. African American women faced the socio-cultural and structural challenge of sexism prevalent in the United States and also in the black community. My study examines the life of Fulani Sunni Ali, her role in black liberation, her role as the Minister of Information for the Provisional Government for the Republic of New Africa, and her communication strategies. In doing so, I evaluate a black female revolutionary nationalist’s discursive negotiation of her identity during the Black Power and Black Nationalist
Movement. I also use womanist criticism to analyze interviews with Sunni Ali and archival data in her possession to reveal the complexity and diversity of black women’s roles and activities in a history of black resistance struggle and to locate black female presence and agency in Black Power. The following study more generally analyzes black female revolutionary nationalists’ roles, activities, and discursive identity negotiation during the Black Power Movement. By examining Sunni Ali’s life and the way she struggled against racism and patriarchy to advocate for Black Power and Black Nationalism, I demonstrate how her activism was a continuation of a tradition of black women’s resistance, and I extrapolate her forms of black women’s activism extant in the movement.

I AM A REVOLUTIONARY BLACK FEMALE NATIONALIST: A WOMANIST ANALYSIS OF FULANI SUNNI ALI’S ROLE AS A NEW AFRICAN CITIZEN AND MINISTER OF INFORMATION IN THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF NEW AFRICA

by

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2013
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May 2013
DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my parents, to my elders, to my siblings, to my community family, to my ancestors who came before me, and to those generations who will come after me.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. M. Lane Bruner for constantly providing unyielding support as my advisor and mentor. You always helped keep me on track and motivated me to push beyond my limits. Thank you to my wonderfully understanding committee members Dr. Layli Maparyan, Dr. Shirlene Holmes, Dr. David Cheshier, and Dr. Akinyele Umoja. A special thank you to the Department of Communication administrative and support staff at GSU. And of course, thank you to my beautifully faithful community of family and friends for always believing, loving, trusting, giving, and understanding my journey and lifting me closer to my potential. Thank you.
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1 INTRODUCTION

On October 27, 1981, with several airplanes and helicopters hovering overhead, two army tanks standing in adjacent cow pastures, and over 200 federal, state, and local law enforcement officers scrambling throughout the yard and bushes, Fulani Sunni Ali (birth name Cynthia Boston), Jerry Gaines, and fourteen children were put under arrest. “It looked like they were ready for war,” said Jerry Gaines in an interview with the Jackson Advocate after they were taken to an FBI center in Gallman, Mississippi, just thirty miles south of the state’s capital in Jackson. At approximately six in the morning, the U.S. government had launched a predawn raid on Gaines’s home. Initially, the charges claimed that Fulani Sunni Ali was wanted in connection with a Brink’s robbery in Rockland County, New York, which took place on October 20, 1981. She was allegedly working with the Black Liberation Army, which included white and black radicals, and was working to acquire appropriated funds to support their revolutionary cause for social justice. However, after a car mechanic proved she was in New Orleans and therefore not in New Jersey, she was cleared of robbery charges. After the Brink’s charges were dropped, on the same day, Fulani Sunni Ali was served a grand jury subpoena to provide additional information about the Brink’s job. Using silence as a means of resistance, Fulani and other grand jury resisters refused to provide information to government officials (Obadele, Free the Land! 337). For this she was jailed again. Fulani Sunni Ali was finally released a year and a half later on October 19, 1983 from the Metropolitan Correctional Facility in New York City, along with Jerry Gaines.

Fulani’s ability to forge such a commitment of silence for a revolutionary cause was not only a part of her twenty-something years of activist experience, but also an example of the complicated tradition of black women’s resistance. For almost half a century, Fulani Sunni Ali has been a citizen of the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Africa (PGRNA),
which has historically sought to create a black nation in the five southern states of Mississippi, Georgia, Louisiana, Alabama, and Florida. She took the oath under her father, Alajo Adegbalola, who held various offices in the PGRNA that ranged from Minister of Defense (1970) to first Vice President (1971-1972). She was born in New Rochelle, New York and completed her primary education in that state. Since the early age of nineteen in 1967, she developed as a vocalist, educator, PGRNA government worker, and ultimately the Minister of Information for the PGRNA. After starting her community involvement with Blue Hill Christian Center (a community center that helped mentor and tutor youth) as a liaison and consulting leader for young teen mothers, she broadened her activism by joining the Black Panther Party in the late 1960s. As a Party member, she not only sang with Miriam Makeba, a South African female singer, but she also protected Stokely Carmichael, one of the Black Panther Party leaders. For four years, she and Makeba performed professionally as singers around the world. She eventually became involved in developing and teaching as a volunteer instructor and taught courses on black history. As one of the earliest citizens of the PGRNA, Fulani has experienced the building of black nationhood over several decades, and, from a citizen-Minister point of view, she has invaluable insights and lessons on nation-building and some of its challenges and successes. Over time, while she revolutionized herself and the world, she was a wife, mother, spiritual leader, and community elder.

Over the past decade, I have searched for information on black women’s experiences during the Black Power Movement, because I personally have known Fulani Sunni Ali and a number of black women like her for almost thirty years. At one point in time, I had forgotten and repressed a lot of my childhood experiences and the impact of the Black Power Movement on my life and my family, because I was also taken into custody as a child during the predawn raid,
which was extremely traumatic for me and everyone else involved. I pushed back all the memo-
ries of watching my seven siblings, my mother Jerry Gaines, Fulani Sunni Ali, and her husband
Bilal Sunni Ali handcuffed and arrested, as we all faced down the barrels of several U.S. military
tanks and over two hundred heavily armed government officials.

Eventually, I wanted to understand how the Black Power Movement drastically altered
my life and the lives of many others, and to connect the dots of a child’s sketchy memory. My
search yielded little information until the fall of 2002, when I found several autobiographies:
Assata Shakur’s *Assata*, Imari Obadele’s *Free the Land!*, and Elaine Brown’s *A Taste of Power*.
While I understood and empathized with each book, my connection with Obadele’s text was
more visceral. *Free the Land!* briefly narrated the FBI’s pre-dawn raid on our home in Gallman,
Mississippi. I was astounded to see my life written and described for the world to know, espe-
cially since my mother decided she would not have discussions about the event. She was held in
a New York City federal prison for over a year as a political prisoner, along with Fulani Sunni
Ali and many others.

After burying this part of my life for almost thirty years, attempts to piece together the
experience have been difficult for several reasons. One of the challenges came from the sheer
lack of information on the Black Power Movement and the PGRNA, particularly black women’s
experiences. Another issue stemmed from the inaccessibility of locating people who actually par-
ticipated in the movement. With so many Black Power organizations repressed by the American
government and infiltrated with U.S. informants, a number of Black Power Movement partici-
pants rightfully decided to strategically protect their communities and lives by closely examining
their internal and external networks of people. One of my biggest issues with situating a broader
and more closely related narrative to what I experienced with Black Power Movement partici-
pants was the overwhelming predominance of contradictory information created by black feminists.

Reading Michelle Wallace’s classic text _Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman_, I anxiously perused the pages for some fleeting remnant of the kind of black women and men I knew my entire life. One of the key arguments Wallace makes is that the Black Power Movement failed because black men and others involved in the movement were patriarchal and misogynistic, obfuscating women’s roles in black power. Also, the only interests that black men showed in women were their concern with dating and having sex with white women. Since black men historically dealt with the social myth of the black male rapist and were lynched for these reasons, with the passage of various civil rights laws, African-American males could now enjoy the fruits of his manhood, and, having acquired full manhood, he needed an ideal representative of womanhood: a white woman. His desire for white women was purportedly because black women did not know how to give black men support, since black women were incapable of demonstrating femininity. As workers in the movement, women were relegated to positions that served men, such as typing, cooking meals, and having babies for the black revolution, and, additionally, white women, in order to prove that they were not racist, were coerced into sleeping with African-American males.

Finishing Wallace’s book, which is similar to so many other black feminist texts, I found few parallels to the women I knew and had known for several decades. I am not denying Wallace’s experiences, but I questioned how she could rightfully suggest her experiences were the experiences of black women in the Black Power Movement. Attempting to remember from a failing memory and recognizing the revolutionary womanhood I saw and learned from, I strug-
gled to mirror mentally her representations with my own experiential reflections about black women in the Black Power Movement.

The black women I knew were more diverse, had more involvement, and were more respected than the women she identified. These women had no problem voicing their opinions, having a forum in which to speak, and locating a respected and appreciated location in the movement as activists. Yes, they cooked, cleaned, and supported the men in their lives, but they also organized political agendas, held press conferences, taught and learned paramilitary training, and worked in decision-making circles in their organizations. Did they deal with similar issues as other women who lived in patriarchal societies? Yes, of course they did, but, unlike a number of women outside the movement, these revolutionary women I watched and learned from in my childhood also mindfully developed self-identities and practices that reflected how they wanted to exemplify black womanhood. Moreover, as participants in a collective movement, they communally examined race, class, and gender issues, because any one limitation was dealt with as a limitation for the overall liberation of people of African descent.

My study will explore, therefore, how a key black revolutionary female nationalist, Fula-ni Sunni Ali, enacted her notion of black womanhood and activism. I will use interviews to look at her day-to-day activities and her personal archival materials to discover how she implemented her ideas about political involvement in concert with her construction of black womanhood. I want to find out how she succeeded, how she had setbacks, how she persistently fought for liberation, and to identify the driving forces behind her movement choices.

Historically, as I shall show, black women have always played key roles in the struggle for liberation. As captive slaves, African and African American women’s resistance strategies took the form of killing their offspring, poisoning the white slave master’s family, feigning sick-
ness, accommodating, negotiating, and participating in armed plantation rebellion (A. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* 19; Fox-Genovese 500). In the nineteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth century, black women continued this resistance tradition by engaging in public rhetoric and organizing black women’s clubs, which focused on self and community improvement, supporting black communities, galvanizing resources, building educational institutions, and building political power in American society (Giddings 45). Throughout the early twentieth century and up to the Civil Rights Movement, black women, such as Ida B. Wells, Mary McLeod Bethune, Anna Julia Cooper, and Mary Church Terrell, persistently fought against economic, socio-political, and cultural disenfranchisement along the lines of voting, lynching, rape, and employment disparities, at a time when over ninety percent of black women worked as domestic workers (90).

In the wake of the political climate of the Civil Rights Movement, African American women faced similar challenges and further developed political strategies by participating in sit-ins, holding leadership positions, and organizing and participating in marches and boycotts (Brush 171). Black women were “bridge leaders,” and African American women’s roles were critical to the success of the Civil Rights Movement (Springer 21). By the mid 1960s, black women’s activism evolved into what is commonly known as Black Power, and black women, such as Fulani Sunni Ali, were key forces in the movement (Springer 26). People such as Gloria Richardson, Elaine Brown, and Kathleen Cleaver were leaders who made critical choices about the direction of Black Power (Harley 179; LeBlanc-Ernest 305). Not only was Elaine Brown the Chair of the Black Panther Party from 1974 to 1977, but prior to this position she served as Deputy Minister of Information for the Southern California chapter, editor of the organization’s newspaper, and held a seat on the Party’s Central Committee (LeBlanc-Ernest 321). Sunni Ali
also worked in Boston with Black Power Movement organizations, was as a youth organizer liaison with the New England Grassroots Community Organization (NEGRO), and was also a member of the Black Panther Party.

A critical determinant of black women’s activism was the influence of both race and gender, as these factors were immutably married to their subjectivities. African American women faced the socio-cultural and structural challenge of sexism prevalent in the United States and also in the black community. Race and gender were indelibly mapped onto the type of activism black women enacted, and they were often forced to choose a political alliance with black men or white women, creating a race-versus-sex dichotomy (Giddings 323). During the nineteenth century, African American women prioritized black suffrage and supported black male leaders, such as Fredrick Douglass, who argued for black men receiving the right to vote before black women (Springer 21). Again, in the Civil Rights Movement, black men were in most of the leadership and decision-making positions that affected the black community as a whole. However, with the increase of political activity in the United States throughout the 1960s and Black Power on the rise, black feminists, such as Frances Beale and Linda La Rue, began to question publicly the role of gender in the social movement (Springer 26).

As a result of La Rue and Beale’s efforts, a number of black females were activists in both black liberation and female liberation movements. Where the Black Power Movement called for all people of African descent to unite to fight against white racial oppression and to mobilize all resources for the betterment of black communities (Ture and Hamilton 44), women’s liberation focused on the eradication of patriarchal oppression. The race-and-gender divisiveness became more publicly prominent for both movements, and the issues about women’s roles and obligations in Black Power and Women’s Liberation were front and center.
Scholarship dealing with black women’s roles during the Black Power Movement, as noted, is most commonly framed from a black feminist perspective, where women’s participation is primarily viewed as subjugated to the position of sexist black men (Matthews 277; Cole and Guy-Sheftall 96; hooks 182; K. Anderson-Bricker 49; Springer, “Living for Revolution” 28; Springer, “Good Times for Florida and Black Feminism” 123; Wallace 42; Roth 70; Brush, “The Influence of Social Movements” 124). According to a black feminist critique of Black Power, most black women were relegated to subordinate roles; however, this critique inadvertently disregards the influence of women such as Sunni Ali. Paradoxically, the black feminist perspective primarily focuses on the objectification and sexism that existed in the black liberation movement; therefore, black feminists have promoted a one-sided understanding about black women’s participation, over-focusing on the problems they faced and not thoroughly acknowledging black women’s diverse roles, modes of agency, and overall influence. A few black feminist discussions even went so far as to suggest that the Black Power Movement failed because black men wielded oppressive forms of patriarchal power, blocking a number of females from participating in leadership or decision-making roles (Wallace 70). As this dissertation will show, women actually played powerful roles in the Black Power and Black Nationalist movements, and Sunni Ali perfectly exemplifies this fact.

Where black feminist historical accounts of the Black Power Movement highlight the limitations and challenges of sexism, an Africana womanist framework, such as the one deployed in this study, is primarily concerned with the liberation of black people and black women’s activism in social movements (Hudson-Weems 22; E. B. Brown 613; O. Davis, “In the Kitchen” 310). Africana womanism, which is the dominant critical lens, does not explicitly place a priority on dealing with patriarchy but deems racial issues as the crux of black women’s prob-
lems, and it also considers the black liberation struggle and family- hood as the most important issues for black people to engage (Hudson-Weems 37). Where a black feminist critique primarily places emphasis on eradicating patriarchy, a womanist perspective does not specifically emphasize one form of oppression over another. Womanism, according to Layli Phillips, “supports the liberation of all humankind from all forms of oppression” and eagerly seeks to sustain community-building and problem-solving, not divisiveness (xxiv).

A number of historical analyses of black women’s activism have specifically acknowledged the centrality of race and gender, and they have similarly concluded that black women’s frustrations in a matrix of gender domination tend to be exacerbated by race (Giddings 97; Hudson-Weems 44; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 20; White 15). As women, African American female activists have struggled against sexual and labor exploitation differently than white women because of their racial status. Moreover, in the midst of black resistance, black women also have openly expressed gender, race, and class concerns to and with black men and black women (Giddings 302). By oversimplifying gender roles, the black feminist version of Black Power politics denies black female activists and community workers’ agency, and it furthermore disengages with the wide-range of empowering activities and roles of women who supported Black Power. An Africana womanist analysis of Sunni Ali and an archival exploration with this revolutionary black female nationalist involved in the Black Power Movement can address the shortcomings of much black feminist scholarship and shed significant light on the way black women have sought to negotiate their identities, roles, and activities.

The roles of black women in Black Power have been relatively occluded. An imbalanced historical account by some black feminists inadequately portrays African American female advocates of the movement. Black women who supported the black liberation movement have been
denied agency, there has been a “minimization of women’s roles and experiences,” and this has led to “narrow-minded definitions of their roles in a revolutionary organization” (LeBlanc-Ernest and Huggins 164).

The following study, as a starting point to a more comprehensive study, is designed to correct this imbalance and also broaden the theoretical and methodological limitations of both womanism and black feminism. My study examines the life of Sunni Ali, her role in black liberation, her role as the Minister of Information for the Provisional Government for the Republic of New Africa, and her communication strategies. In doing so, I evaluate a black female revolutionary nationalist’s discursive negotiation of her identity during the Black Power and Black Nationalist Movement.

The following study more generally analyzes black female revolutionary nationalists’ roles, activities, and discursive identity negotiation during the Black Power Movement. By examining Sunni Ali’s life and the way she struggled against racism and patriarchy to advocate for Black Power and Black Nationalism, I demonstrate how her activism was a continuation of a tradition of black women’s resistance, and I extrapolate her forms of black women’s activism extant in the movement.

To accomplish these goals, chapter two reviews the historical context of black women’s activism and their forms of resistance from slavery up to the emergence of the Black Power Movement and the Women’s Liberation Movement, especially as those forms relate to issues of race and gender. I then focus on race and gender issues in the Black Power Movement and evaluate how black women’s activism was trifurcated between civil rights, women’s liberation, and Black Power. Finally, using womanist interviews as my research methodology, I explain my participant selection and how I critically evaluated interviews and personal archives using womanist
criticism. My ultimate goal is to compare Fulani Sunni Ali’s modes of activism with previous historical types of black women’s resistance.

Chapter three examines Sunni Ali’s coming-of-age experiences, maturing in the tumult of movement activity in black urban centers. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the historical context surrounding the emergence of the Black Power Movement and Sunni Ali’s role in that movement, contextualizing different issues that influenced her politicization. I then look at how Sunni Ali quickly transitioned from the Civil Rights Movement into the Black Power Movement, specifically looking at how the dominant ideology of the Civil Rights Movement changed from supporting direct citizen activism to enforcing a law-and-order doctrine to limit activists. As a result, there was an emergence of advanced radicalism, and I discuss the numerous urban rebellions that took place around the country throughout the 1960s. I then review the Black Power Movement, various strands of Black Nationalism, such as revolutionary nationalism and cultural nationalism, and further situate Sunni Ali’s revolutionary political activity. I also pay particular attention to the limitations and contentions of the different forms of Black Nationalism to show how Sunni Ali continued to negotiate her political choices.

Chapter four evaluates the construction of the Republic of New African national identity, and then provides a discussion about the founding of the black nation, its benefits, and the significance of creating the Republic of New Africa during the Black Power Movement. I discuss the founding convention and the first government leadership structure. After looking at the construction of nationhood in the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Africa, I then unpack that identity using Sunni Ali as a case study. I illustrate how she came to be a citizen and enacted her understanding of national identity in the Republic of New Africa.
Chapter five uses womanist criticism to analyze Sunni Ali’s experiences as a citizen and as the Minister of Information for the Republic of New Africa. I briefly overview womanist activism and historicize black female revolutionary modes of womanist activism as kitchen discourse, testifying discourse, and liberatory emergence. Next, I examine each mode of womanist activism in the RNA-11 case (which will be explained later), the PGRNA’s International African Prisoner of War Solidarity Day, and the 1981 predawn raid in Gallman, Mississippi. I specifically interrogate how Sunni Ali’s role as both a citizen and as Minister of Information for the Republic of New Africa sought to garner support for the Republic of New Africa though revolutionary rhetoric. I argue that Sunni Ali’s persuasive discourse sought to fashion a New African identity that would reposition the meaning of legal citizenship for people of African descent.

My concluding chapter provides an overview of the findings in my study. I also detail some conclusions about black revolutionary female nationalists’ modes of activism during the Black Power Movement and situate the discussion in the tradition of black women’s resistance. Additionally, I briefly suggest some of the limitations and implications of my research for future studies on race and gender issues in revolutionary social movements.
Fulani Sunni Ali’s participation in the Black Power and Black Nationalist movements is a part of the black women’s resistance tradition. Her political commitment to revolutionary change was a choice made by many black women, then and now, and she dedicated her liberation to the life of the oppressed black community. As a citizen of the Republic of New Africa, she placed herself in the middle of the individual-collective continuum. She, like other black women in the resistance tradition, imbued their revolutionary praxis with the indubitable understanding that there is a reciprocal relationship between the transformation of both the collective and the individual.

In order to gain a clearer picture of Sunni Ali’s movement involvement, I provide a historical overview of black women’s resistance from chattel slavery to the mid-twentieth century, paying particular attention to black women’s rhetorical strategies. I historicize their strategies of resistance during chattel slavery, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the civil rights era, and eventually during the Black Power Movement. As I will show, Sunni Ali’s revolutionary activism is a continuation of the black women’s resistance tradition and womanist activism. By centering on black women’s experiences and daily struggles to survive, work, and problem-solve, womanist activism focuses on using collective efforts to eradicate all forms of oppression and seeks out diverse perspectives, welcoming contentious views (Phillips xxvi). The contextualization of various forms of resistance allows me to compare my interviews with Sunni Ali and her archival data of her to traditional modes of activism for similarities and difference, especially as they relate to emerging and discontinued forms of political involvement.
2.1 Black Women’s Strategies Of Resistance In Chattel Slavery

The trajectory of black women’s forms of activism dates back to the beginning of chattel slavery. Enslaved black females struggled against subhuman treatment, yet they found numerous ways to transform oppressive situations and to create affirming characterizations of black womanhood (A. Davis, *Angela Davis* 27; O. Davis, “In the Kitchen” 366; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 143; White 119; Giddings 45). In an environment where African and African-American women’s bodies were sexually, physically, and financially exploited, black women sustained and developed relatively separate spheres of humanity. Instead of internalizing sub-personhood characteristics projected by a white dominant cultural ethos, enslaved black women strategically located emancipatory sites on and off the plantations by embedding a culture of resistance into their everyday lives.

Enslaved Africans and African Americans found ways to resist on a daily basis by poisoning the slave master and his family, practicing indigenous African spirituality, burning food for meals, pretending to be ill, inciting rebellion, and participating in plantation revolts (Fox-Genovese 500). To muster up a sense of humanity and dignity, people of African descent resisted in these and other ways in oppressed spaces.

One key way to engage in activism during slavery was through dialogue in “the kitchen.” The kitchen legacy reveals how black women conquered obstacles “despite discursive formations of domination,” enacted self-definition, and somewhat wielded power over the slave master and the plantation dynamics (O. Davis, “In the Kitchen” 369). Black women’s subversive “kitchen” activities included everything from adding finely ground pieces of glass or poison into the food to setting the white master’s house on fire (A. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* 367).
The slave kitchen also served as a place that literally provided the sustenance for the plantation’s slave population by creating the nourishment for their lives, whether the resource was food, cultural or resistance information, or clothing. The kitchen, as a cultural metaphor for womanist activism, expresses the dialectics of oppression and liberation struggles in the daily lives of black women. Womanist activism “involves revealing the culture and history of African-American women in an effort to create safe spaces of survival and wholeness for an entire people, both male and female” (O. Davis, “In the Kitchen” 365). Kitchen dialogue acknowledges the manner in which women create informally women-centered spaces in the midst of white oppression.

Though resistance activities were present in the kitchen, the dialogue between oppressed blacks traversed the boundaries of this private space in the public realm and affected the lives of many people on the plantation, clandestinely resulting into some public influence. Anyone was able to come and openly participate in the development of these emancipatory spaces. Disagreements did not have to be resolved, and, since the space was open-ended, differences and tensions that might arise from contending perspectives were expected and welcomed (Phillips xxvii). This dialogical expression was also present in black female slave narratives. While the narrator’s “main objective was to make known to all who would listen the gripping horror of a slave’s earthly condition,” this same discourse circulated stories about inhuman brutalities while simultaneously acknowledging the humanity of the enslaved female (Alonzo 143). Harriet Jacob’s 1861 narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* represents a kitchen dialogue, as she publicized her sexual and labor exploitation on the Flint plantation. From a first-person point of view, Jacobs used narrative to disclose her resistive tactics, such as managing the white slave master’s aggressive sexual exploitation, living in her grandmother’s attic for seven years, and publicly challenging her white slave master in this limited space (Houston 184; Braxton 24). Such narra-
tives scripted a framework for women of African descent to construct a “liberating persona” and punctured open an alternative glimpse into the brutalities of slave life. This helped African and African-American women write themselves into humanity (O. Davis, “A Black Woman as Rhetorical Critic” 85). The discourse transported their subjectivities into the realm of humanity, and writers like Jacobs were able to dialogue outside the confines of plantation subordinated status into the public sphere to possibly persuade Northerners to “rise up against” the inhumane reality of enslaving people (Braxton 26). The narratives not only resituated the perspective on chattel slavery, but the discourse also created a space for white women to confront their notions of womanhood and for non-black audiences to critique their own subjective positionalities. Black female slaves used discourse to enact womanist activism and to set in motion a sphere for others to engage the meanings of their stories.

Womanist activism as kitchen table dialogue celebrates the socio-cultural identity black women use to self-name and affirms their distinctive attributes pertaining to race and gender (Alexander-Floyd and Simien 69; Arndt 2000; Hudson-Weems 55). The process of naming was an act of power for enslaved women (Stephens, Keaveny, and Patton 471). Where the dominant discourse of slavery labeled African-American females as breeders and property, black women defied these stereotypes and self-identified as mothers, caregivers, and companions (Hudson-Weems 56; O. Davis, “A Black Woman” 77). Sojourner Truth’s often quoted impromptu speech “Ain’t I A Woman” demonstrated black women’s ability to critique reflexively oppressive structures and standards of prescribed femininity, inserting their subjectivity into the realm of humanity through discourse (Hudson-Weems, “Africana Womanism” 37; Campbell 435; Giddings 44). Truth’s rhetoric and presence at the Woman’s Rights Convention in 1851 in Akron, Ohio blatantly emphasized the “contradiction at the heart of slavery—the treatment of slave women,
which wholly ignored their status as women and treated them as chattel, as breeding stock” (Campbell 435). Through her presence, Truth physically and intellectually demonstrated women’s and Africana womanists’ ability to speak through a dominant discursive imposition and resist oppression (Fulton 25).

Similar to Truth, around the 1830s, Maria W. Stewart also transformed and redefined subordinated places with rhetoric. Lena Ampadu argues that Stewart achieved rhetorical success by stylistically employing a discourse steeped in a black cultural ethos and by blending familiar religious texts and linguistic structures (39). Stewart crafted a rhetorical presence that directly connected to her audiences’ experiences. Analyzing several speeches with a womanist framework, Ampadu found that Stewart’s discourse embodied characteristics of sisterhood, community, spirituality, and explicit opposition to social injustices (41). As a result, Stewart discursively prevailed over raced and gendered limitations.

In sum, the sub-human conditions of slavery gave rise to a creative socio-cultural tradition of black women resisting oppression. In a slave-owning society that promulgated the “cult of true womanhood” (characterized as chasteness, obedience, subordination, and domesticity) for white females, black women daily undermined structures of dominance to eke out an existence where they self-defined and self-named their bodies. The cultural metaphor of the kitchen space, along with publicized narratives, opened avenues for enslaved black women to reclaim their humanity, especially since their bodies were considered the property of white slave masters.

The black women’s resistance tradition was clearly alive and developing during chattel slavery. African and African-American female slaves struggled daily within subjugated sites, sustained a sense of humanity, and transformed oppressive situations. An integral aspect of “the kitchen” is the circulating and affirming of black womanhood attributes such as sassiness, inde-
pendence, strength, and assertiveness (Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within” 39; Braxton 31). Black female characteristics contradicted the “cult of true womanhood” and problematized the socially prescribed meaning of white femininity, because these contradictions revealed the man-made presuppositions of womanhood. As this discourse was primarily circulated within an internal audience. An African-American women’s culture of resistance effectively warded off negative stereotypes and counteracted the deplorable imagery of black womanhood with its own, more positive, representations.

2.2 Black Women’s Strategies Of Resistance In The Late Nineteenth And Early Twentieth Centuries

During Emancipation, black women’s activism continued to expand, building on the resistance tradition during chattel slavery. From the mid to the late nineteenth century, African-American females began to build upon and to participate in a number of institutions and organizations. Their activism was fueled by an urgency to re-characterize their moral status and evaluate how it affected their relationship to “true womanhood.” The dominant views of society cast black women as contemptibly promiscuous, stifling their progress “both psychologically and materially” (Giddings 85). Unfortunately for them, black women’s bodies were always raced and read against the grain of white women’s femininity.

One way black women rhetorically redefined their womanhood, as with earlier slave narratives, was by using a testifying discourse. Testifying discourses were circulated to external public audiences. As such, an Africana womanist testifying bore witness to the experiences and influences of things seen and unseen (Hudson-Weems 70). Even though only one individual tes-
tified, the person spoke as the voice of many in the community (O. Davis, “I Rose and Found My Voice” 316). The idea was to communicate with self and others a testimony of lived experiences, which were proffered as proof of their right to live with respect, dignity, opportunity, and rights as American citizens. Liberation struggle and liberation discourse were inseparably interconnected. “This is an important distinction because it suggests that for black women there is an interdependence between what one thinks of herself (one’s identity) and one’s actions (what one does to actualize that identity)” (O. Davis, “In the Kitchen” 370).

One method of womanist activism was through the testifying discourse of fictional writing. As a way to rhetorically counteract the white dominant cultural stereotypes of black womanhood, black female novelists were able to craft their own stories and hence identities. Vanessa Diana, for example, analyzed Frances E. Harper’s *Iola Leroy* and Pauline Hopkins’ *Contending Forces*, locating black women’s rhetorical forms of resistance through self-representation in their novels. Instead of creating characters that were promiscuous and unintelligent, both women’s protagonists were “model reformers” (Diana 174). Harper’s and Hopkins’ testifying texts were “innovative approaches,” where the novels used the trope of the family tree as a way to provide black people with stories of “ancestry, family history, courtship, and parenting” (174). In a social climate where “scientific racism” supposedly proved blacks as naturally inferior to whites, the fictional writings contradicted and rhetorically challenged the soundness and legitimacy of this so-called science. The novels’ testimonial discourses were narratives of resistance.

Black women’s rhetorical strategies of resistance were also employed as testifying discourses through public speeches (Washington 250; Fletcher 269; Fernheimer 288; Palmer-Mehta, 192). Frances E. Harper, for example, used public persuasion as a form of resistance. Analyzing two speeches from 1866 and 1893 and several essays, Valerie Palmer-Mehta argues that
Harper’s rhetoric challenged the dominant ideology about black womanhood (195). Harper spoke about her experiences dealing with injustices in white America as a way to testify about racist oppression against her and other blacks. Her rhetoric proved that on a daily basis black lives were under assault, and people were denied basic rights based on skin color.

Another rhetorical strategy of womanist activism was the use of a testifying discourse through the public press (Conaway 216; O. Davis, “I Rose and Found My Voice” 309; Abdullah 328; James 346; Giddings 19). “Nineteenth-century black newspapers were sites of awareness, protest, and resistance, and created a valuable forum for political discourse within the black community, discourse that often developed and matured into distinct black social and political theories” (Conaway 216). Mary Ann Shadd Cary was instrumental in providing persuasive oppositional discourse about the socio-political climate in white America, and with her newspaper *Provincial Freeman*, which was established in Ontario, Canada in 1853, she produced texts that focused on empowering people of African descent to be self-reliant (Conaway 217). Additionally, her articles were written with a black cultural ethos, countering a white dominant aesthetic as the lens through which to understand black life (218). Her newspaper rhetoric “created imagined communities across broad geographical spaces” that “were instrumental in facilitating collective identities that became the basis for emergent nationalisms” (219). Shadd Cary produced a counter-ideology about and for the black community, and she was a mouthpiece to voice its concerns at a time when so many blacks could not speak in the public realm. Her persuasive discourse dealt with subjects such as “education, morality, and economic self-sufficiency” (223). For herself and for her community, she advocated a Black Nationalist stance of self-determination and black salvation by emigration to Canada (224).
With the development of the black women’s club movement at the turn of the twentieth century, African-American females used their womanist activism as a galvanizing organ to speak as a unified voice (Giddings 209; White and Dobris 171; Abdullah 337). With over one hundred and fifty organizations throughout the north, these clubs sought to influence “public policy in ways that advanced the interests of black women, the black community, and women as a whole” (Abdullah 338). Their political involvement was practiced by pushing for anti-lynching legislation, establishing and offering training programs for employment and homemaking, opening kindergartens and homes for elders, and providing childcare services.

Black women’s clubs also organized informal community networks to protest sexual abuse, economic exploitation, and educational inequalities (A. Davis, Women, Race, and Class 175). For them to speak out in male-controlled environments put them and their families at risk for more abuse and violence, even death. Women who blurred raced and gendered lines did so at the “jeopardy of respectability within their own communities” (Higginbotham 59). The assumption was that men “possess an incontestable” right to access black women’s bodies, and black women’s resistance to such presuppositions was considered as an anomaly, inappropriate behavior, wrong, and misguided. Black women’s clubs found ways to protect themselves and survive in hostile community environments by creating cooperative networks of information-sharing, watching each other’s children, actively organizing and participating in black churches, and attempting to unionize as domestic workers. The informal community networks opened new pathways for African-American females to develop resistive strategies and transmit knowledge. They collectively asserted their power and right to challenge openly their relegated status and to struggle against the coercive forces of controlling stereotypes and gendered institutional racism (A. Davis, Women, Race, and Class 372).
The club movements also served to construct black women’s identities rhetorically (White and Dobris 171). Their rhetoric was imbued with the notion of racial uplift for all black people, and, as such, the ideas they presented were prescriptive and resistive discourses designed to motivate, transform, and elevate people of African descent. Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, in a speech at the First National Conference of Colored Women in 1895, “testified to the interdependency of ideologies of race and gender in the construction of nineteenth century social relations.” She used the trope of the “nobility of womanhood” as a means to collectively organize black women and further agitate for educational and employment attainment. The rhetoric emanating from the black women’s club movement exposed the mythologized constructions of raced and gendered subjects and allowed them to insert an oppositional testifying discourse about black womanhood.

Black women’s day-to-day experiences were one of the ways they rhetorically used presence as a testifying discourse to prove the strength and ability of their activism. The ability to organize groups of people, start businesses, and educate youth was, in and of itself, a resistively rhetorical stance, contradicting the prevailing pejorative stereotypes. Layli Phillips’ womanist work points out that the black woman’s club movement symbolized, through the collective efforts of the club members, the ability of marginalized peoples to constantly develop and circulate problem-solving methods and not be “forced to succumb beneath institutional neglect, whether benign or malign” (xxix). Africana womanist activism was infused with the mission of their motto to “lift as we climb,” and in this vein club members shared valuable insights to cultivate and sustain a cadre of communal and cultural resistance workers.

As a club member, the rhetorical presence of entrepreneur Maggie Lena Walker enacted an everyday testifying discourse in her organizations and community (E. B. Brown 617). Work-
ing with other members of the Independence Order of Saint Luke, a fraternal organization, Walker collectively worked with other black men and women establishing “mutual benefit societies” that “combined insurance functions with economic development and social and political activities” to support “community self-help and racial solidarity” (E. B. Brown 616). Founding the Penny Savings Bank in Richmond, Virginia in 1903, Walker gained support and provided a network for black women. The Saint Luke women “were able to affirm and cement the existing mutual assistance network among black women within the black community by providing an institutionalized structure for these activities” (E. B. Brown 620). Along with these activities, Walker also worked closely with the National Association of Wage Earners to improve the economic situation of the black community, formed a department store, and was part of the community political organizing efforts. Through her activism, Walker’s presence was a living testimony to the tradition of black women daily striving to resolve issues for the betterment of the black community, persuasively challenging the myth of the stereotypes of black womanhood.

Black women’s development of a testifying discourse was also rhetorically effective in their public essays (Taylor 2). Amy Jacques Garvey was an exceptional essayist who wrote a number of editorials for the *Negro World*, which was the journal for the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) that was founded by her husband Marcus Garvey, who galvanized millions of blacks. Ula Taylor described Amy Garvey as a “race woman” who was both a helpmate and leader in her community (2). Her “burgeoning intellectualism blossomed into an authoritative tone and an expansive position in the UNIA,” and she worked tirelessly to promote the ideas of Pan-Africanism, a political perspective that calls for the unification of people of African descent. Additionally, she was the editor of two of her husband’s books, a journalist, public
speaker, and overseer of UNIA operations, and she persuasively mobilized support for Marcus Garvey.

The black women’s resistance tradition continued to expand during the post-Emancipation era. Fictional writing, public speeches, the public press, and the presence of black women’s clubs and of black female entrepreneurs influenced blacks and whites in the public and private spheres. Black women practiced a politics of transformation through a testifying discourse that re-characterized the meaning of black womanhood. Their discursive strategies of resistance were rhetorically effective and created a sense of identity and community for black men and women.

2.3 Black Women’s Strategies Of Resistance During The Civil Rights Movement

Black women’s rhetorical strategies continued to develop well into the mid-twentieth century in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement (Giddings 261; McDuffie 25; Cumberbatch 47; Gore 72; Horne and Stevens 95; Theoharis 138; Franklin and Collier-Thomas 21; Ransby 42; Parks 61; Gault 75; Height 83; Rouse 95; Crawford 121). They effectively expanded their rhetorical presence in American history, as with the earlier strategies in post-Emancipation, and actively mobilized around efforts to community-build, set movement agendas, press for good quality education, healthcare, and housing. African-American women like Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Mary McCloud Bethune, Dorothy Height, Rosa Parks, Septima Clark, Charlayne Hunter Gault, and Doris Smith Robinson developed and implemented a discourse of liberatory emergence to attain respect, civil rights, justice, and equality. There were three general modes of re-
istance: working within the mainstream political system, cultural nationalism, and revolutionary nationalism.

A discourse of liberatory emergence acknowledges the dialectical reality of activism and oppression Africana women face living through socially gendered and raced limitations (B. J. Allen 22). Marsha Houston described the discourse as a set of “how I got ovah” stories, which recognize how African-American females overcome challenges in their lives (81). In the face of many obstacles, black women persistently strove for freedom, even when there were no apparent options. The stories were powerfully persuasive anecdotes that nurtured other black women, encouraging their activism.

Black women’s liberatory discourse was exemplified by Bethune’s rhetoric in her 1936 speech “Closed Doors” (E. M. Smith 13). In New York, Bethune’s “Closed Doors” speech was delivered to a predominantly white audience, and she persuasively informed her listeners of the handicapped life she lived as a black woman in a white racist society. Her speech used the concept of a door as a metaphor to rhetorically address the many doors to opportunity closed to African Americans, and she avowed that through continual struggle African Americans “would batter them down” (14). As a leader, Bethune strategically negotiated the boundaries of race and gender. By appearing to couch her behavior and speech in traditional values of God, country, and family, she appealed to the sensibilities and expectations of her listeners. Bethune’s rhetoric fit a “feminine style” of discourse “consistent with traditional norms of femininity” (Campbell 440). A feminine style characteristically includes “modes of accommodation used by oppressed groups to adapt to their oppressors and means of persuasion responsive to the special conditions and experiences of the oppressed” (440). She was charismatic and had a true sense of self, and men and women, black and white, admired her life’s mission. Elaine M. Smith identified Bethune’s rheto-
ric as womanist because Bethune “addressed gender and race issues simultaneously without necessarily criticizing black men” (13). Characterizations of Bethune often suggest she was a conformist, and they position her behavior and speech as catering to the white establishment, even calling her an “Uncle Tom” (Height 86). While she was not as outspoken as other black male leaders such as Marcus Garvey or W. E. B. DuBois, Bethune gingerly brushed against oppressive structures (Giddings 200). Audrey McCluskey emphasized Bethune’s preference to use “honey rather than vinegar” to effect social, political, and educational change (237). Her insight and experiences positioned her at a vantage point where she simultaneously appeared to uphold the status quo and unravel the seams of oppressive structures.

African-American women’s organizations had a rhetorical presence and also pressed for civil rights. Looking at several groups, such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority’s Non-Partisan Council on Human Rights, and the National Council of Negro Women, black women, across class backgrounds, participated in development programs and mechanisms that trained black girls for employment, provided food, clothes, and reading materials to U.S. troops for WWII, and publicly spoke against lynching and police brutality (Franklin and Collier-Thomas 22). From the late thirties up to the early fifties, black women organized on the national level, presented their platforms to the black community, and inserted their oppositional consciousness into the dominant society. Evelyn V. Brock, who was vice president of a black women’s organization called the New Jersey Federation, was appointed to the New Jersey State Commission for the Study of Negro Population in Urban Centers. The commission worked on “educational forums, lobbying, scholarship programs, and fundraising for social welfare activities” needed to uplift New Jersey’s black communities. Throughout the forties, the Federation lobbied for fair employment, were granted funding for low-
middle-income housing, advocated for adult education programs, and successfully petitioned the governor to appoint several of the Federation’s members to the Women’s Advisory Council to the State Department Against Discrimination.

Important to the black women’s resistance tradition is the persuasive teaching and sharing of rhetorical strategies in the community. Leadership and mentorship were other forms of womanist activism. Ella Baker served as the first national director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and she was the “physical and psychological anchor for the [SNCC]” (Ransby 42). Directing and supporting the work of the young activists in the aforementioned organizations, her philosophy was “based on militant antiracism, grassroots popular democracy, a subversion of traditional class and gender hierarchies, and a long-term vision for fundamental social and economic change” (43). Calling herself the “Mother Confessor to the Little Folk,” Baker relentlessly worked alongside Thurgood Marshall, Du Bois, A. Philip Randolph, Dr. Martin Luther King, Dorothy Height, and Pauli Murray, and she also groomed activists, such as Robert Moses. She imparted rhetorical wisdom and persuasive tactics to various mentees. Barbara Ransby concluded that one of Baker’s most valuable traits was “her ability to suppress ego and ambition and to embrace humility and a spirit of collectivism” (54).

Other black women persuasively used their personal narratives of struggle and triumph to advance the cause of liberatory emergence during the Civil Rights Movement, such as Rosa Parks, Charlayne Hunter Gault, and Dorothy Height (Parks 61; Gault 75; Height 83). These women stressed how each move on their part was a collective move within the wider scope of the Civil Rights Movement, and they strategically and diligently worked in organizations like the NAACP, SCLC, and SNCC to challenge the constitutionality of Jim Crowism. One of the most
interesting stories is Height’s narrative about the lack of leadership from black women in the movement, because black men would not allow the women to have those roles. Instead of reflecting on the well-known 1963 march on Washington as a monumental marker centered on King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, Height redirected the reader’s attention to acknowledge the absence of women. Her memoir recounted a historical moment focusing on the rhetorical influence of Pauli Murray’s speech, not King’s “I Have a Dream.” Murray’s speech, which traced the black woman’s struggle for equality from slavery to then, resonated with Height and other black women in the audience and caused a “new awakening” in Height (90). Murray’s rhetoric effectively persuaded some female listeners to realize that they faced gender and race oppression within mainstream America and within their respective activist groups.

Black women were also involved in grassroots activities. Several women are noteworthy: Septima Clark, Fannie Lou Hamer, Annie Devine, and Victoria Gray. Septima worked as a community worker, moving from one rural community to another and teaching literacy and leadership classes (Rouse 96). Her adult literacy classes for illiterate rural blacks were structured so that they could use their daily lived experiences and link their conditions to the Civil Rights Movement, so participants developed movement consciousness through their experiences. It was important for Clark to also use people right from the community to help her teach and galvanize the students for her citizenship classes, which were taught at Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. She said, “Many middle-class blacks were extremely hostile and prejudiced one to the other. It would be better to use people from the community in which they lived who could just read well aloud and write legibly, rather than trying to use the others” (105). Such Citizenship Schools would later become one of the most important instruments of the SCLC to help build the Civil Rights Movement, particularly in rural southern black communities.
Other grassroots efforts were developed with the creation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), which was founded in April 1964 to end the political disenfranchisement and repression of blacks (Crawford 121). Among the MFDP’s founders were three notable black women: Fannie Lou Hamer, Annie Devine, and Victoria Gray (125). Each woman had a significant amount of influence over decision-making and political tactics. After the group elected its own sixty-eight delegates to challenge the all white “regulars” of the racist and repressive Democratic Party at the Atlantic City convention, the Democratic Party decided to offer the MFDP two at-large seats at the convention but do nothing about the racist repression against black people. In the end, a white congressman was elected for the Democratic Party because blacks generally refused to vote in the election (133).

Speaking to potential voters and registering voters were ways Fannie Lou Hamer effectively exercised her rhetorical presence and voice. With the ballot, most assumed black people would have full and equal participation in American democracy, and civil rights activists like Hamer valiantly fought to ensure blacks, especially rural residents, were fair stakeholders with the right to vote (Lee 154). Chana Kai Lee discusses how Hamer used memory, anger, and history “to craft a public persona and mobilize her needy contemporaries” (140). In 1964 at the Democratic National Convention in Washington, D.C., Hamer personified rhetorical presence and brilliantly exemplified the interdependency of thought and action, placing a black woman’s experience forever into the legislative historical documents. Not only was she active with the MFDP, Hamer directed a drive for food and clothing to increase black voters in the Mississippi Delta in the early sixties. “She defined her social change agenda by focusing on whatever needed to be done and wherever it needed to be done because this was only right” (155). In one instance, she registered thirty women in one morning.
Shirley Chisholm was a New York State Representative on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., also working in the mainstream political arena. Chisholm worked tirelessly to write, argue, and implement legislation and programs that supported poor working-class women. As an “advocate and publicist for the cause,” she used her influence as an “honorary president” of the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws to pass bills so women could have safer and more easily accessible abortions. Chisholm rightly understood the manner in which institutional oppression, coupled with a lack of resources and education, compounded the limited kind of abortion rights and birth control her constituents could access. In her speech “Facing the Abortion Question,” the representative rhetorically championed the lived experiences of her voters and used first-person accounts of women who either ended up with permanent reproductive problems from illegal abortionists or who required periodic treatment for a lifetime (Chisholm 390).

Chisholm openly repudiated the undermining logic of her colleagues and rhetorically challenged her white male counterparts to understand how the laws proposed directly limited the life opportunities of their democratic constituents. Ensuring that her supporters had a voice in the mainstream public sphere, Chisholm, during a meeting for the Constitutional Amendments Subcommittee of the Senate on the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, effectively demonstrated the prevalent inequalities in the U.S. for women and minorities. In a meeting of white and black lawmakers, she told the subcommittee that the current democratic laws were not “adequate to secure equal rights for women,” and she affirmed her position by drawing attention to the disproportionate number of women in the lowest paying jobs in America (Chisholm 22). She asked the committee, “If women are already equal, why is it such an event whenever one happens to be elected to Congress?” (22). By referencing her own position and questioning the economic barri-
ers for women, Chisholm challenged her colleagues to evaluate why some groups faced more obstacles in the democratic polity, where all citizens, ideally, equally contribute. If “men and women need these things equally,” why is it “that one sex needs protection more than the other,” and this notion of protection, as articulated by Chisholm, “is a male supremacist myth as ridiculous and unworthy of respect as the white supremacist myths that society is trying to cure itself of at this time” (22). She cleverly drew a distinction between the way race, class, and gender have contributed to the hierarchical status and location of various groups, and she used this rhetorical strategy to attack the myth of white, male, middle-class supremacy (J. Gallagher 393). However, even with Chisholm’s position, working inside “the system,” most black communities remained oppressed.

While Chisholm’s influence was limited as a politician, other black women, attempting to work inside “the system,” also faced challenges, hindering their effectiveness at making permanent changes. Some black women rallied to work within the political system by mobilizing resources to develop coalitions and create spaces for their rhetorical presence and persuasive tactics (McNeil 267). United through sisterhood, Genna Rae McNeil shows how African American and non-African American women came together to support the Free Joan Little Movement, and how they successfully launched a national campaign that acquitted Joan Little in the case State vs. Joan Little, who was imprisoned for killing a prison guard who sexually abused her. Several groups, such as “the Free Joan Little Committee, the JoAnn Little Defense Fund, the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ (UCC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Concerned Women for Fairness to JoAnn Little, which later became the Concerned Women for Justice (CWJ), and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC)” effectively worked together in State vs. Joan Little (263). Recognizing the significance of Little’s plight, the
political consciousness of some activists and supporters, like Bernice Johnson Reagon, expanded, highlighting “the commonalities of all women in that their bodies have the potential to be both sites of conquest and effective instruments of resistance to violation” (270).

Black women also organized to challenge the political system by publicly testifying about the unjust treatment against them. Coloring the invisibility that often negates the presence and humanity of black female subjectivity in the U.S., in some instances the mere recognition of daily struggles with gendered institutional racism and repressive tactics was a viable rhetorical option that helped ameliorate some of the inhumane effects of those struggles. Vividly describing her and other activists’ physical beatings ordered by white policemen, Fannie Lou Hamer provided riveting testimony to the National Democratic Party Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and she also testified about the “forced sterilization of rural women” (Chana Kai Lee 161). Using her voice and rhetorical presence as a community organizer, she transported her personal experiences to the convention. Hamer provided concrete evidence of the dehumanizing conditions black women endured for the public record of the white American political realm.

Also seeking to work within mainstream political activities, Johnnie Tillmon politically organized welfare recipients in California and across the county, persuasively remonstrating against the treatment, rights, and resources allocated to her and other women (Nadasen 322). Her “advocacy of respect and economic security for poor women without government intrusion embodied a vision of self-determination and black pride—one premised on a revamped social policy that treated people as human beings” (322). Through a wide-range of activities, from petitioning for a “basic minimum standard of living,” attempting to influence the development of welfare policies, meeting with government officials, and working to establish department store credit for black women, Tillmon and the National Welfare Rights Organization were determined to
contest their inferior status (323). Instead of accepting the socio-cultural prescription of devaluing single motherhood, Tillmon and other welfare recipients publicly spoke out against their unfair treatment and blasted the shadow of shame associated with receiving government assistance (327). She resituated and expanded the meaning of black motherhood, femininity, and gender roles by accentuating the man-as-breadwinner assumption and positively characterizing her experiences (328). Tillmon and her fellow organizers retaliated against those who sought to denigrate poor black families and strategized to open sites of respectable negotiability for the betterment of their communities.

The black women’s resistance tradition, thus far, demonstrates that women of African descent have many ways of resisting oppression, effectively using rhetoric to create community and identity, and persuasively teaching other black men and women how to organize and craft messages of opposition. Black women circulate positive characteristics of black womanhood and teach strategies of resistance, subordinately situated against the dominant cultural definitions of femininity and blackness. The interdependency of thought and action is a black woman’s emboldened embodiment of their self-definition, self-valuation, and humanity, refusing normative claims that they are un-feminine and unintelligent. The black women’s resistance tradition evinces a richly powerful history of combining words and actions to speak louder, across private and public spheres and in the ears and to the minds of interlocutors.

2.4 **Race Versus Gender**

As movement activity across the country intensified, black women’s roles and political consciousness also increased (Giddings 300; Brush, 2009 171). A host of social movements
swept across the country, and many institutions in the U.S. were dramatically affected and forever changed. Blacks and women began to reap the benefits of their agitation with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, but the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission still enforced employment discrimination and most of the commission’s activity concentrated more on sex discrimination than race (Giddings 300). Though their activism legally yielded them access to higher education, better jobs, and more federal government assistance programs to aid low to middle income families, enforcement of these laws was difficult because of the backlash from conservatives.

In the midst of rampant social and political upheaval, black female activists’ engagement in a tradition of resistance became strained (Giddings 309). A number of the most influential civil rights organizations waffled and became less effective in promoting widespread change and in mobilizing newer and younger activists (Joseph 124; Ogbar 37; Deburg 32). Organizations like the SCLC and SNCC, which were on the frontlines of social change for at least a decade, faced internal and external issues such as in-fighting, structural change, and organizational splits (King 438). Mary King, a SNCC staff member, detailed a slew of issues in her autobiography, and she noted how staff administration confusion, territorial anxieties, members’ celebrity-like egos, an overworked staff, project possessiveness, and organizational isolation “was straining” (439). Organizational issues were further complicated by a growing tension between white women, black women, and black men because many of SNCC’s black members felt that whites involved in their organization created more problems than solutions (Giddings 301).

Other organizations, such as the Black Panther Party, faced similar internal and external issues. In the wake of organizational dissension (some fostered by the U.S. government’s counterinsurgency program widely known as COINTELPRO), destabilization, leadership challenges,
office raids, and Party members’ assassinations. Sunni Ali, as a Black Panther in the Boston Chapter, told me in an interview that, because of such problems, she and some Party members assumed the next step of organizational development was nation-building.

African-American women were forced to grapple with the way their activism was raced and gendered and how both affected their roles in a tradition of struggle. A series of decisive events pushed the issues of race and gender equality to the forefront. One of the most crucial moments was SNCC’s Waveland Conference in 1964 (Giddings 302; King 443; Springer 24). A position paper was presented discussing the status of women in SNCC and reported that women were excluded from the decision-making process, explicitly acknowledging the dominance of male authority in the organization (Giddings 302). Furthermore, through movement involvement in black struggles, white women’s political consciousness grew, and as Women’s Liberation expanded with the creation of the National Organization for Women (NOW), so did a heightened awareness of feminist ideas and practices (300). As a result, white female SNCC workers were also vying for more inclusion and power.

Black women’s roles and perceptions in SNCC differed greatly from white women’s. African-American women “not only performed heroic deeds, but their activism did not preclude many of them from marrying and having children,” which was not the same for most white women (Giddings 300). Ruby Doris Smith was one of the most influential and hardest working black female leaders in SNCC, and she and many other females played critical roles in the leadership and membership of the organization (Fleming 199). Fleming noted most black women did not think their participation in SNCC was hindered by gender. In fact, several authors argued that SNCC had an “egalitarian atmosphere,” including one of the authors of the position paper (Gid-
Smith, for example, was married and successfully carried out her role as the elected executive secretary of SNCC in 1966 (Giddings 314).

Black women’s participation in the Civil Rights Movement increased their awareness about race and gender inequalities. Women such as Ruby Doris Smith and Mary King attempted to manage the instability in their organizations and to organize effectively their communities.

From the mid to the late 1960s, black women’s roles in social movements became sorted along the lines of race versus sex. In 1965-66, the call for black power emerged in Lowndes County, Alabama, as Stokely Carmichael, for whom Sunni Ali would later serve as a bodyguard, led a local protest (Joseph 130). With a shifting political climate and a destabilized structure in SNCC, Ruby Doris Smith and many others supported this new development called the Black Power Movement (Fleming 200). The Black Power Movement, which was also commonly known as the Black Liberation Movement, insisted all whites should be removed from the movement (Giddings 303). At the same time, the presence of the National Organization of Women (NOW) swarmed the media with images of bra burning, which steadily piqued the interests of many young women across the country, regardless of race (Giddings 304). As blacks worked to develop a practical and pragmatic agenda for Black Power, where the crux of the issue was racism, women advocated that male dominance was the “root of oppression” (304). Black female activists had to now choose if their allegiance was raced or sexed based. Not surprisingly, at a Women’s Liberation Day March in 1970, a SNCC contingency of young black feminists called the Third World Women’s Alliance surfaced and pronounced support to end male supremacy. African-American females were forced to select a side of the race-versus-sex dichotomy, and black women’s activism was now split: Black Liberation or Women’s Liberation (323).
As noted earlier, most of the historical record pertaining to black women’s activism in the late sixties and throughout the seventies was typically known through black feminist narratives, where black women were primarily discussed as subordinate subjects to the male chauvinism of Black Power male activists (Springer, *Living for Revolution* 28; Springer, “Good Times for Florida and Black Feminism” 123; Wallace 42; Brush, “The Influence of Social Movements” 124; Guy-Sheftall and Cole 90; Matthews 234; Roth 70). Black Power, through this perspective, essentially became synonymous with black male power, and yet it slighted and rather much denied the socio-cultural tradition of black women’s resistance and agency during the movement. With most of the narratives constructing a narrowly focused lens on some black women’s problems with sexism, African-American female activists lost significance and permanence in the story of the Black Power Movement.

The complexity and variety of black women’s roles was occluded in a number of ways by black feminists’ accounts. First, most of the literature cited the same evidence multiple times. The evidentiary claims used the same quotations from Maulana Karenga’s earliest work in 1968, Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, which was written before he became a member of the Black Panther Party, and the infamous statement by Stokely Carmichael stating that the woman’s position in the movement was “prone” (Matthews 234; Guy-Sheftall and Cole 90). Second, these discussions turned the diversity and transformative nature of the Black Power Movement into a movement primarily about the Black Panther Party and black cultural nationalism, and the texts did not examine the many forms of Black Nationalism present in the Black Power Movement, nor did the accounts evaluate the subsequent changes in the different modes of Black Nationalism (Joseph 212-14). Third, without an adequate consideration of the complexity of the Black Power Movement, one can easily conclude that all movement participants practiced the same principles
and agreed to set similar agendas for the movement, which is untrue. Additionally, such misconceptions led to distortions, conflating different types of Black Nationalism and supporters of Black Power. Fourth, the black feminist examination of Black Power provided little or no discussion about the significant disruptions of the American federal government’s counterintelligence program. Fifth, the majority of the conversations dealt with women who were involved in SNCC and a few women from the Black Panther Party (Cole and Guy-Sheftall 90; Fleming 207; K. Anderson-Bricker 49). The Black Power Movement was flooded with a host of participants and organizations ranging from the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Africa, US, Deacons for Self-defense, Black Arts Repertory Theater and School, Black Power conferences, the black theological church called the Shrine of the Black Madonna, Black Student Unions on several college campuses, the Congress of African People, and many others (Woodard 117).

My study broadens this discussion by gathering first-hand knowledge about black women’s experiences in the movement and by interviewing and working in the archives of a key participant: Fulani Sunni Ali. Following in the footsteps of black women’s resistance, she was involved in several aspects of movement activity, from organizing local community efforts, holding press conferences, fundraising, participating in a decision-making capacity, and providing mentorship and leadership to organizing international alliances with other disenfranchised groups. Since she participated in different Black Power Movement organizations and in the nationhood development of the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Africa, my research also analyzes the process of her politicization to better understand the shaded meaning of women’s experiences in the movement. Additionally, Sunni Ali provided me with an invaluable opportunity to respond and reflexively evaluate how she understood issues of race, gender, and resistance and how other people discussed her participation.
2.5 The Trifurcation Of Black Women’s Strategies Of Resistance During The Civil Rights Movement

The three basic modes of black women’s resistance in the Civil Rights Movement became increasingly complex: direct political participation in the established white system, cultural nationalism, and revolutionary nationalism. A closer survey of black women’s resistance in Black Power reveals a wide-range of roles and influences in the movement’s ultimate direction. Gloria Richardson’s womanist activism typified the shift in the political climate. Richardson, though she had a middle-class background, decided to work side by side with the working-class community because blacks were disenfranchised by systemic inequality and social discrimination. Similar to the Deep South, Cambridge, Maryland also had black residents who had a “lifetime of living without indoor plumbing and hot water, as well as routine mistreatment and segregation at work, in public recreational facilities and restaurants” in the Second Ward (Harley 179). Drawing upon her grandfather’s political career on the Cambridge city council, Richardson knew gradualism would not effectively improve the conditions in black communities. What was especially interesting about Richardson was the fact that her mother and sister were by her side in her activism and suffered the same consequences of going to jail. Richardson fervently fought for racial equality to exist with economic parity, because she understood that one without the other did not remedy the subordinate status of black people, regardless of class. Furthermore, to protect herself and other members of the black community from white local violence, she supported and participated in armed self-defense, because the local and federal government refused to provide them protection against white repression.
“Queen Mother” Audley Moore, similar to other black women during chattel slavery and the civil rights movement, also epitomized the black women’s tradition of activism as a community organizer, and she was highly respected because of her rhetorical presence (Weusi 1; Joseph 279; Gilkes 41; Ogbar 132; Eustace and Obadele 22). Moore was a community organizer for seven decades (Weusi 1). She was affectionately and respectfully called “Queen Mother” because she dedicated her entire life to the black struggle and to end white supremacist oppression. Moore was an active member of Marcus Garvey’s Pan-African Movement, the Communist Party, the Reparations Movement, and the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika.

To many people in black communities from New York City to New Orleans, Moore held a position of authority and status, and her input was highly sought out to help organize and create strategies of resistance (1). Community mothers, like Moore, were not only “role models, power brokers, and venerable elders, but the actuarial realities of black life [were] such that elderly black women provide[d] the continuity necessary to promote unity in the face of ever-changing historical conditions” (Gilkes 44). Her focus was not on self but community, and, as such, she realized her fate was always connected to the lives of others in the black community, further demonstrating the significance she placed on family-hood. Hudson-Weems asserts that a key feature of Africana womanism is family-hood and an ethic of care and responsibility for the collective (58). As we shall see, Sunni Ali’s trajectory in the Black Power Movement was somewhat similar. For example, Black women’s activist experiences were also influenced by familial relationships. Hudson-Weems claims that an Africana womanist tradition of resistance was strongly reliant on passing down family and community histories to teach significant lessons that pertained to strategies of self-commitment and discipline to uplift black communities (53). In my discussion with Fulani Sunni Ali about her childhood, she recalled how her father wanted to
teach her the importance of developing self-control and skill, when and if she had an altercation. After her father, Alajo Adegbalola, who was a boxer, taught her how to properly box, she realized her character was also enhanced, because she became more patient and learned “to be humble, to be low key.”

In addition to black women seeking to work in the community and directly in the government, black female cultural nationalists were also abundant during the Black Power Movement (Woodard 183; Joyce 42; Foster 434; Barrios 611; Walters 213). Cultural nationalists “write for black people and they write about their blackness, and out of their blackness, rejecting anyone and anything that stands in the way of self-knowledge and self-celebration” (Cook and Henderson 65). As poets, dancers, playwrights, singers, visual artists, photographers, and novelists, black cultural nationalists’ primary goals were to revolutionize the meaning of blackness, to foment social transformation, and to systematically educate blacks and non-blacks about black cultural values. Amina Baraka, for example, was a poet and dancer in the sister-arm of Black Power, which was the Black Arts Movement. Her poetic persuasion was infused with a black cultural ethos, similar to Maria E. Stewart’s rhetoric during chattel slavery, and Baraka’s poetry affirmatively redefined black people’s cultural and socio-political standards. She was also one of the founding members of an all women’s black cultural nationalist group called the Black Women’s United Front (BWUF) in July 1974 at the International Afrikan Women’s Conference, which Baraka also organized with the Social Organization Council of the Congress of African People (Woodard 180). BWUF was instituted to establish more equality for women in the organization, and they spoke out against polygamous practices and other sexist ideologies that subordinated the status of women. The conference sessions revolved around issues of women in the workplace, education, child-rearing, and imprisonment. The sessions also focused on “raising the
political consciousness of women and men about the triple oppression [race, class, and gender] of black women” (183). Also, the BWUF was an attempt to recognize the leadership and participation of women in the movement.

On yet another front, in addition to community activism, direct involvement in mainstream politics, and cultural nationalism, the roles of black female revolutionary nationalists were numerous in the Black Power Movement (James 138; Huggins and LeBlanc-Ernest 161; Abubakari 553; Abu-Jamal 159; K. Cleaver, “Racism, Civil Rights, and Feminism” 48; K. Cleaver, “Women, Power, and Revolution” 123; LeBlanc-Ernest 305; Corrigan 4). Revolutionary Black Nationalist females addressed public audiences and the media, organized against police brutality, fed and clothed the homeless and poor, founded schools and developed educational curriculum, and struggled on behalf of all blacks, Black Panther Party members like Kathleen Cleaver exemplified revolutionary nationalism by working as a spokesperson and press secretary for the Black Panther Party (BPP), and as a member of the Party she became the first woman to join the National Central Committee, the principle decision-making body. By writing press releases, contacting various media, producing official BPP documents for the public, lecturing, and public speaking, K. Cleaver’s discourse, as the BPP communications secretary and spokesperson, ultimately persuaded thousands of black Americans to support the organizations through membership, volunteering, and funding. Like all other BPP members, K. Cleaver carried out whatever duties needed to be done, which included developing and overseeing community programs, gathering signatures for petitions, getting clothes for the needy, selling Panther newspapers, and any other tasks (Abu-Jamal 186). K. Cleaver, along with several other black activists, was also involved in international political affairs while she lived in Algeria (K. Cleaver, “Women, Power, and Revolution” 211). From 1969 to 1972, K. Cleaver was instrumental in developing
a global presence for the BPP, and she and other freedom fighters struggled on behalf of the lib-
eration of blacks in America and on the African continent.

Black female revolutionary activism was also present in the Provisional Government of
the Republic of New Africa (PGRNA), the organization Sunni Ali would eventually join. Unlike
the BPP, which wanted to completely overhaul the white capitalistic country of America, the
PGRNA wanted to develop a separate black nation in five southern states of the U.S. (South
Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana) (Deburg 145; Obadele 23). Women in
the PGRNA held several key positions: Betty Shabazz (Malcolm X’s widow) as the second vice
president at the Detroit headquarters, “Queen Mother” Audley Moore as Minister of Health and
Welfare and Minister of Culture, Joan Franklin as Minister of Information, and Sunni Ali also as
a later Minister of Information. One strategy of resistance was to control the PGRNA’s political
representation and to inform other Americans about the black nation, which was obviously no
easy task. As a revolutionary rhetorical tactic, Sunni Ali created and disseminated communica-
tions that promoted PGRNA principles of self-determination, self-definition, and nationhood.
For example, when the media showed up at a political prisoner rally in Jackson, Mississippi in
1974, as the Minister of Information, Sunni Ali informed PGRNA citizens to only recite the
black nation’s creed when any media person wanted an interview. The black woman’s revolu-
tionary stance, as a citizen of PGRNA, was diverse, and it was also exercised through mother-
hood by instilling a New African worldview in her children. PGRNA female citizens were highly
respected revolutionaries inside and outside the home.

The Black Power Movement, in sum, was a continuation of the black women’s resistance
tradition, branching into community activism, mainstream political activity, and cultural and
more militant forms of nationalism. African-American women, such as Amina Baraka, Kathleen
Cleaver, Shirley Chisholm, and Sunni Ali, diligently worked in divergent and sometimes intersecting circles, yet the sum of total of their activism was for the betterment of everyone in the black community. Black women’s wide-range of activism, varying from armed self-defense to writing press releases, incontrovertibly contributed to the sustenance and overall development of the Black Power Movement.

2.6 Conclusion

From the preceding historical overview, it is clear that black women’s roles in resistance activity were consistently and significantly integral to the development of black emancipatory social movements. Using kitchen table dialogue as a cultural metaphor, black women transformed subjugated sites into critical locations of resistance. Traversing public-to-private boundaries, African-American female activists planned plantation revolts, challenged white dominant discursive formations of black womanhood through public speeches and newspaper articles, pulpits, uplifted each other through sisterhood and family-hood articles, and shared many resources such as money, education, mentorship, and socio-political capital.

Up to the mid-twentieth century, black women’s forms of womanist activism also existed as testifying discourses and as practices of liberatory emergence. Their modes of resistance were found in fictional texts, black women’s clubs, community networks, educational institutions, public essays, personal narratives, black women’s organizations such as the NACW, and voter registration drives. They used a variety of persuasive strategies, such as rhetorical presence, public speeches, published novels, and press releases. By beginning to map a historical tradition of
black women’s activism, it is undoubtedly clear that black women have consistently been crucial driving forces in political struggle.

Currently, however, there is limited knowledge about black women’s roles during the Black Power Movement for several reasons. While there are a small handful of studies on black female revolutionary nationalists’ activities during the Black Power Movement, the list is short, and, even while the list is short, the scholarship covers the same women such as Assata Shakur, Elaine Brown, Afeni Shakur, and Angela Davis (Corrigan 4; Perkins 34; James 138; LeBlanc-Ernest 305; LeBlanc-Ernest and Huggins 161). Another reason for the lack of scholarship is the paucity of primary resources from the Black Power Movement and the accessibility of acquiring the materials. To advance this area of research, my study, as noted, will extend the dialogue about black women’s roles in Black Power through extensive interviews with Fulani Sunni Ali and an analysis of her extensive archive. I comparatively evaluate the data I collected from the twenty interviews and archives with the other modes of activism and rhetorical strategies in the black women’s resistance tradition, which I discussed in this chapter, looking for similar, dissimilar, or emerging modes of activism and rhetorical strategies. Comparing information from the interviews, her archive, primary resources from periodicals, and secondary resources, such as books on the PGRNA (e.g., Imari Obadele’s *Free the Land!*), the Black Power Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement, I analyze the details about various historical events, looking for corroborating explanations. As an insider-researcher, creating analytical distance for my scholarship, I consistently verified contextual details, analytically situating all information.

To broaden the range and depth of this scholarship, I will use an Africana womanist perspective, which allows us to see more of the complexity of black women’s modes of resistance and also elucidates the distinct specificity of their activism. Womanism, as Phillips points out,
does not have to resolve the tensions or contradictions extant in black feminists’ critiques, which impose a race-versus-sex dichotomy, but permits the co-existence of such contradistinctions (xxv). One of the white and black feminists’ criticisms was that Black Power female activists were unaware and unwilling to confront black men about any abuse or misuse of power (hooks 182). However, women like Amina Baraka never hesitated to speak and act against any attempt to subordinate the status and position of female activists (Woodard 180). Most of those activists, as noted by Huggins and LeBlanc-Ernest, were oftentimes welcomed to challenge issues that outright hindered the development of the movement (164). The decision, in tune with Africana womanist activism, was to work in concert with black males as a unified force and to understand the prioritized goal of Black Power, which was to effectively liberate black subjects from the tyranny of white supremacist oppression (Hudson-Weems 61). Revolutionary black female nationalists continued a long historical tradition of activism and resistance, of oppression and liberation struggle, and this meant, similar to past movements, actively resisting side-by-side with black men. An Africana womanist angle of vision particularizes a more nuanced understanding of how and why these women engaged in Black Power and does not deny their agency and cultural subjectivity. The case study on Sunni Ali’s experiences is an alternative pathway to understand black women’s participation in the Black Power Movement.

Situating black revolutionary female nationalists in an Africana womanist framework extends the peripheral margins of race and gender to also address the erasure of female militancy in the history of black resistance. The historically significant fact that women of African descent, especially since colonialism, have always endured sexual and other forms of physical abuse cannot be underestimated (A. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* 6). Black women’s bodies in white America have always been under assault, and black women have resisted these attacks, not just
through discursive strategies, sit-ins, boycotts, and petitions, but also by taking up arms and acquiring other means of self-defense (Bush 154). Angela Davis’s autobiography noted the extent of the American government’s repression against both black male and female activists. In 1969, she, along with several other BPP members, was literally held captive in their community of Watts, California. The Los Angeles Police Department’s counterinsurgency force—the Special Weapons and Tactical Squad—was “determined to hold [them] prisoner indefinitely in [their] houses and storefronts” (Angela Davis 234). Several other autobiographies, personal reflections, and research projects also discuss the calculated methods of repression enacted by the U.S. government against all black activists during this time, regardless of gender (Shakur 161; Obadele 163; Guy 66; Grady-Willis 363; Umoja 417; Major 184). The distorted view of primarily attributing militant resistance to the men of Black Power denies African-American female militancy a presence in the history of black struggle. My study will explore how a central revolutionary black female nationalist learned paramilitary training, martial arts, guerilla combat, self-defense moves, as well as communication strategies (Abu-Jamal 162; Obadele 89; Guy 80). Though a number of black feminist narratives characterize the male militancy of the Black Power Movement as too aggressive and assertive, female activists have an accessible history displaying surprisingly similar attributes (Matthews 277; Cole and Guy-Sheftall 96).

Finally, an Africana womanist lens allows for deeper understanding and clarification as to why and how black female revolutionary nationalists worked in concert with black men for black liberation. In the following chapters, I will explore ways in which Sunni Ali took a tremendous amount of time to educate black youth, to develop study groups, to create higher education curriculum for black studies, to strategize organizational direction and goals, to raise and instill movement and cultural values in children, to maintain a sense of community, and to use
both militant and rhetorical strategies (Shakur 173; A. Davis, *Angela Davis* 160; LeBlanc-Ernest and Huggins 170; Nadasen 317; Smethurst 205). Sunni Ali’s political evolution, like the social movement activity from previous decades, emerged to fit the ever-shifting context. Black female revolutionary nationalists were politically astute, well-studied, and versed in the history and actualization of Black Power’s development of resistance and struggle, and, as such, they conscientiously decided to weather the Black Liberation storm. With agency, black women decisively weighed their options and opted to hone their activism and to struggle on behalf of the black community. Just as black women strived to attain equality working within the mainstream political arena, though their attempts all too often failed, nonetheless, the black women’s resistance tradition continued. As we will see, particularly through Sunni Ali’s revolutionary career, the black women’s resistance tradition, even present in cultural and revolutionary nationalism, persisted, despite setbacks.
Coming of age during the 1960’s, Fulani Sunni Ali experienced life amid intense political activity, and the 1950’s and 1960’s were momentously transformative for her burgeoning activism. After the Supreme Court struck down the separate-but-equal doctrine, black and white communities gradually implemented integration policies and faced seemingly insurmountable obstacles. As society shifted, so did Sunni Ali’s modes of activism. Her political acumen, evolving from her childhood in a predominantly black community to her role as the Minister of Information for the Republic of New Africa, is a testament to black women’s resistance and the womanist tradition. Her life’s journey was a committed choice to make the lives of African Americans better, liberating them from the tyranny of white American repression.

Before I critically analyze Sunni Ali’s activism in the Black Power and Black Nationalist movements, I first need to contextualize various issues that created the exigencies for her political involvement. While the preceding chapter detailed the black women’s resistance tradition from chattel slavery to Black Power, this chapter recounts the specific dynamics of black resistance from the 1960’s to the 1970’s. Sunni Ali matured in the midst of the one of the most tumultuous and transformative times in American history, and her life bears witness to how
movements mold revolutionary consciousness. Such recounting helps us to gain a clearer understanding of how external influences impacted Sunni Ali’s life, placing her in the black women’s resistance tradition.

The chapter next contextualizes Sunni Ali’s revolutionary subjectivity by delving into the limitations of civil rights ideology, which created the exigency for Black Nationalism. I specifically look at how the dominant ideology of the Civil Rights Movement shifted from encouraging direct citizen action (e.g., being active with sit-ins, boycotts, and marches) to encouraging peaceful reconciliation, legitimizing a law-and-order doctrine and repressing more militant dissenters. I then refocus attention back on Sunni Ali and other revolutionary black female activists’ early childhood experiences and discuss how their political awareness was shaped by these changes. Sunni Ali, as well as other black females, were raised in black communities and dealt with many problems. Nonetheless, they used the meager resources available and maintained a sense of humanity. Using the cultural metaphor of the kitchen, I draw parallels between the socio-political location of black communities in the mid-twentieth century and the plantation kitchen. I demonstrate that most black communities are socially and politically unchanged: the black ghettos are urban plantations. Black women, in the plantation kitchen or in the urban center, craft modes of activism through affirming black womanhood characteristics, redefining themselves, and teaching strategies of resistance.

Next, I illustrate how the material conditions in many black communities directly contradicted the prevailing ideology of racial equality and harmony, and I particularize the ongoing struggles in black communities, as well as black activists’ efforts to mobilize and increasingly radicalize citizens. The passage of civil rights legislation left most black communities unchanged, still beleaguered by police brutality, lack of employment, poor housing, and inadequate
education. Across the country, African Americans took action, assembling collective resources, and black radicalism was widely viewed as the preferred route to freedom and community uplift.

After chronicling the emergence of advanced radical activism, I then trace the beginning of the Black Power Movement and pay close attention to the divergent strands of Black Nationalism. The review of Black Power and Black Nationalism further situates Sunni Ali as an activist in these movements. I demonstrate that her decision to become a Republic of New Africa citizen was an attempt to continue growing in revolutionary consciousness. At each stage of advancement, from being a defender of tenants’ rights, to becoming a member of the BPP, to becoming a militant Black Nationalist, Sunni Ali fervently practiced a politics of transformation, garnering beneficial insights and overcoming the various obstacles encountered when moving from one phase to another. Once again, I use a womanist lens to analytically interpret the black urban centers as sites of subjugation and resistance, characteristically paralleling the kitchen during chattel slavery. My goal is to highlight the persistent race, class, and gender issues in America that contribute to black women’s dialectical reality, tenuously revolving around liberation and struggle. In doing so, I will evaluate how and if Sunni Ali’s life of activism was inspired by similar, dissimilar, or emerging issues relative to the tradition of black women’s resistance. This discussion necessarily moves my conversation forward, so I can eventually unpack Sunni Ali’s rhetorical strategies as the Minister of Information for the Republic of New Africa.

3.1 The Incompatibilities Between Dominant White Ideology And Black Realities

The unceasing struggles associated with the Civil Rights Movement caused sweeping institutional adjustments across America, and mainstream politics subscribed to a new American
ideology: racial equality and harmony. Adopting a new political position to quell persistent social unrest, influential political leaders wanted to change the direction of social and political activism in the country and depoliticize the populace, and, with this paradigmatic shift, they hoped the American public would be redirected to understand the social and political landscape differently.

Many civil rights workers and other activists, however, were gradually becoming more radicalized (Deburg 31). With the Civil Rights Movement accomplishing many of its goals, especially with the Supreme Court’s decision to racially integrate all aspects of society, legal barriers of overt racial discrimination were overcome; however, many black communities were unchanged, even after the civil rights legislation was implemented (Ture and Hamilton 9). Nathan Wright noted that “throughout the 1955-1965 ‘decade of progress’ the dollar income gap between black and white Americans moved steadily toward a perilous proportion, relief rolls mounted, northern schools and residential segregation increased, and the economic control by black people of their local environments continued to decrease” (194). Without “economic substance and economic control,” blacks did not have enough political power (Obadele 28). Even with civil rights legislation in effect, black communities continued to endure insurmountable disparities and inequalities from systematic oppression within white society.

Some African-Americans started to revolt against the many inequities beleaguering their communities (Dates and Barlow 392). Researching the revolts, commonly referred to by the mass media as “riots” (Hamilton 171), Tomlinson found the majority of the African-Americans involved viewed their actions as “a revolutionary effort” (35). Rebellion participants were often well-organized, and they cognized that they were not engaging in wild, unrestrained actions, as the idea of rioting suggested. Instead, they strategically and purposefully engineered activities as
oppositional tools of rebellion against the white power structure. Tomlinson concluded that “riot-ing” was “a legitimate and effective method of calling attention to Negro problems and dramatiz-ing the plight of inner city residents” (56).

The revolts were a strategic tool to fight against systemic white dominance. One re-searcher maintains that “the revolts [we]re expressions that challenge[d] the legitimacy of existing authority and institutions: in defying the police and looting commercial establishments, ghet-to blacks suddenly expressed attitudes which they held all along, to the effect that local institu-tions were not of their making, were inimical to their interests and had a legitimacy only by virtue of definitions which they did not share” (Rossi 9).

Nevertheless, throughout the early 1960s, many Americans, including black and white Americans, concluded that African-Americans had achieved equality in the larger society. Con-sequently, some whites and blacks viewed more militant civil rights activists as irrational. They did not support the activists’ efforts because, situated in the dominant ideology of racial equality and opportunity, they believed that black and white citizens should have had no complaints. American institutions and citizens, legally, were supposedly transformed by the progressive so-cial, political, and economic gains produced and instituted by the civil rights policies (Kavanagh 314). James Kavanagh posits that “ideology is less tenacious as a ‘set of ideas’ than a system of representations, perceptions, and images that precisely encourages men and women to ‘see’ their specific place in a historically peculiar social formation as inevitable, natural, a necessary func-tion of the ‘real’ itself” (310). After the passage of the civil rights legislation, the dominant ide-ology was that social and political dissent, especially related to racial issues, were irrelevant, considering the governmental policies instituted from the Civil Rights Movement, and “real” Americans were able to “see” and comply without protest against the changes.
As a result of these ideological shifts, more militant black and white civil rights activists confronted a new social and institutional challenge that hindered further progress. John M. Murphy’s article “Domesticating Dissent: The Kennedys and the Freedom Rides” clearly demonstrates the socio-political and discursive shift throughout the U.S., as President John F. Kennedy’s administration went from supporting to domesticating the Freedom Rides (66). The Freedom Riders, an interracially mixed group of blacks and whites that openly challenged racial segregation, rode on buses throughout the South, and their expressed intent was to urge the American government to enforce racial integration. Initially, in spring of 1961, Robert F. Kennedy, the U. S. Attorney General, “was empowered as the President’s representative” and authorized federal intervention to transport the Riders from Birmingham, Alabama to New Orleans, Louisiana. The Freedom Riders “direct action came to be viewed as provocative, as a kind of ‘baiting,’ even by sympathetic observers,” and the portrayal of Southerners in the mass media went from showing mobs to “efficient state troopers and liberal leaders who condemned the violence” (70). Protests against racism, as repositioned by the Kennedy Administration and throughout the mass media, were viewed as eminently manageable, thereby proving “the system’s competence to resolve racial conflict” (70).

The recalculated ideological maneuvers swayed public opinion from supporting the Riders’ actions to engendering unsupportive attitudes among most Americans. “The dominant discourse produce[d] an audience, context, and text in which the reigning political framework appear[ed] as ‘normality’ itself; any other sociopolitical nuances of a text [were] rendered imperceptible – ‘just the background’ – or impossible to take seriously – the effects of a demon ideology” (Kavanagh 318). Confrontational civil rights activism, situated in the dominant political framework, was constructed as an abnormality and “impossible to take seriously.”
Appearing to manage successfully the country’s contradictions, the Kennedy Administration also symbolically garnered the support of the international community. In 1961, as the Freedom Riders readied for their national tour, they were told that their actions sparked embarrassment for the country and would weaken the perception and influence of America in the global community, but the Riders insisted that black people had been “embarrassed all of [their] lives” (Klinkner 259). Nevertheless, the actions of the Kennedy Administration were primarily concerned with protecting the image of the United States of America as a leader in democratic practice.

Continued resistance from protesters, such as the Freedom Riders, however, countered the dominant claims to racial harmony and equality. The Kennedy Administration and mainstream American citizens started to believe firmly that direct action from civil rights activists needed to be curtailed if not halted, and they sought to reinforce the status quo through a doctrine of law and order, but the 1960s unfolded and revealed the persistent racial fault lines in American democracy.

Civil rights activists insisted that racial disharmony and grievances still prevailed, in spite of the non-discrimination and equal rights laws, but mainstream America reasoned that racial issues, though not permanently eradicated, were largely a thing of the past. Kavanagh contends:

Much better is a situation in which everyone – from dominant and subordinate class alike – understands and perceives the prevailing system of social relations as fundamentally fair on the whole (even if it hasn’t done well by them), and/or as better than any possible alternative, and/or as impossible to change anyway. This is a situation in which ideology, rather than force, is the primary means of managing social contradictions. (308)
Attempting to manage the country’s social contradictions, the dominant ideology declared America as a unified country and racial problems resolved; therefore, time was needed to allow the laws to gradually change and correct past injustices, and radical social and political activism was counterproductive, if not irrelevant.

Participants in the ongoing activist community refuted the mainstream ideology and pointed out the insurmountable disparities and brutalities African-Americans encountered before and after the Civil Rights Movement. One of the most egregious acts of racial violence was the Birmingham, Alabama protest that was planned by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. throughout the spring of 1963. Strategizing to exploit the inhumane treatment of blacks in the stifling conditions of the Jim Crow south, King presumed that the extreme encounters with the Public Safety Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor would spawn a maelstrom of chaos and bring both national and international attention to the injustices against blacks. King’s prediction was proven correct, and there were national and international consequences. Nationally, after the media graphically showed countless non-violent protesters jailed, fire-hosed, and physically assaulted by Commissioner Connor, other local officials, and white extremists, 758 demonstrations sprang up, while 13,786 demonstrators were arrested in seventy-five cities in eleven Southern states (Klinkner 267). Internationally, the blatant contradictions of American democracy were broadcast, and countries such as the Soviet Union aired thousands of stories that detailed the horrific brutalities against children as young as six years old (265). Other non-democratic countries, such as China, highlighted the violence to demonstrate American hypocrisy and to castigate publicly the U.S. for allowing racist practices and violence against black citizens.

After decades of social, political, and economic unrest, those supporting the dominant ideology wanted to stabilize America, while radical civil rights proponents sought to present an
alternative ideology; they protested to continue destabilizing the country’s power structure and effectively increase the distribution of power, goods, and services for more Americans. Joanna Schneider Zangrando and Robert L. Zangrando note that the American Dream was an “insufficient” reality for most black Americans in a “white-dominated nation” (142). Still according to Kavanagh, “it is also that progressive ideological struggle inevitably confronts tenacious structures of social and class power, and can overcome their resistance only in conjunction with a progressive political struggle that is equally forthright and tenacious” (19). At a time when America was beginning to become more racially integrated, civil rights activists interceded to oppose defiantly the mainstream ideology and politicize African-Americans, and possibly other people of color, to heighten their political activities and demands.

The gradual process of integrating American cities was slow and painful. Droves of white Americans moved to the suburbs in cities where blacks lived, and their departure signaled a reluctance and unwillingness to participate in integration. Complications along the race line increased as blacks faced high unemployment, the flight of businesses, lack of decent affordable housing, and higher costs of goods and services in the inner cities (Kerner Commission 150).

Black communities, despite the civil rights legislation, continued to face many challenges. Most African Americans’ lives were unchanged if not worsened. Wright’s analysis, as previously shown, concluded that economic disparities actually increased at the height of more militant activists’ activity (194). Civil rights activism continued, and community organizing eventually became more intense and radicalized. Rebellions in urban centers spontaneously occurred and were direct challenges to the constant police brutality and lack of socio-political infrastructure. In a climate ideologically shifting away from supporting civil rights advocates, activists
now confronted increasing threats from state, federal, and local government agencies under the guise of a law-and-order doctrine.

The law-and-order doctrine was a guaranteed legitimation for government forces to use any means necessary to put down rebellions in urban centers. In respect to the ideological maneuvers, radicalized black activists’ grievances were ideologically reframed as anomalies, because Americans were now fictionally presumed to be equal.

3.2 Black Mothers Instilling Information In The Urban Kitchen

Fulani Sunni Ali’s politics of transformation was greatly impacted by all of these changes in the 1950’s and 1960’s. From early childhood, Sunni Ali showed an awareness of social and political critique that rooted her lifelong activism to make the world a better place for New Africans, by any means necessary. Her community, like other black communities, confronted a number of issues yet still managed to thrive. Despite material and discursive domination, Sunni Ali and other black Americans committed themselves to community organizing and maintaining a sense of humanity, paralleling the womanist activism that took place in the plantation kitchen during chattel slavery. Olga Davis noted that the kitchen, as a relatively safe space for enslaved females, is also a cultural metaphor, illuminating black women’s ability to resist oppressive sites of domination, to transmit self-defining characteristics of black womanhood, and to continue the legacy of the black women’s resistance tradition.

The apparent material contradictions in most black communities were similar in several ways to chattel slavery during American colonialism. Similar to the antebellum slave kitchen (a physical, cultural, political, and social detachment from the slave master’s house), the demarca-
tion of urban centers spatially encoded a message, signifying a predominantly black area. The slave kitchens and urban centers symbolize how “space provide[s] a marker, a symbol of limits, a metaphor for outsider; spaces defin[ing] the dialectical nature of white and black” (O. Davis, “In the Kitchen” 366). What is in the “kitchen” directly correlates to structures of domination and subordination, and blacks, in the antebellum kitchen and in the city ghetto, are relatively raced into subordinated sites (Cruse 76). Systemically forcing African Americans into black urban centers elucidates the control of space as “acts of degradation and inhumanity” (O. Davis, “In the Kitchen” 366). “Like the peoples of the underdeveloped countries, the Negro suffers in varying degree from hunger, illiteracy, disease, ties to urban and semi-urban slums, cultural starvation, and the psychological reactions to being ruled over by others not of his kind” (Cruse 76). An American black in the post-civil rights era usually lived in a different system of inhumanity, as did enslaved Africans and African Americans.

Similar to captive slaves under the brutal tyranny of chattel slavery, black people also calculated a formula for resistance in the civil rights era using some similar methods. African Americans, for example, though lacking in resources, adeptly used many self-defined black aesthetic standards of beauty and character, validating their own humanity and inspiring future generations. Urban centers were transformed into sites of black liberation. Community organizers, like Sunni Ali, were first nurtured in these community safe spaces. Black parents and neighbors daily taught and enacted lessons about race, class, and gender issues, and they encouraged African American youth to resist oppression, to learn their history, and to affirm their cultural values (O. Davis, “In the Kitchen” 369). The “urban kitchen plantation” was the incubator for Sunni Ali’s revolutionary nationalism.
Suni Ali’s growth in an urban-centered kitchen situated her in the black women’s tradition of womanist activism. As the remainder of this chapter illustrates, there are clear similarities between resistance strategies from chattel slavery to post-civil rights America, and the systematic effects of domination are also rather similar. I begin discussing her early childhood life with her mother and grandmother, drawing parallels between her experiences and the experiences of other revolutionary Black Nationalist females in their respective communities. I exemplify the continuation of the kitchen legacy in their communities and how the urbanized kitchens in the 1950’s and 1960’s were instrumental to inspiring their politicization. Revolutionary Black Nationalist activism, in sum, is clearly connected to the rich trajectory of the black women’s resistance tradition.

Fulani Sunni Ali’s childhood, throughout the 1950’s, was experienced in New Rochelle, New York in a predominantly black community. There, living with her mother, grandmother, and older sister, she learned and experienced the meaning of black motherhood in an urban kitchen. She came of age in a community-centered home, experiencing the reciprocity and the interdependency of individualism and collectivism. All four of the women’s lives were interconnected, and what affected one affected them all. The collective ethos was the character, sense, or perception of community and common purpose, where the individual was more concerned with building collective common interests than of privileging individual demands. Molefi Asante asserts that the centrality of community produces equilibrium between the individual, the group, and the world (193). Similarly, communal ethos is characterized by the ability of an individual to place the needs of the entire community—the collective—at the center of one’s life.

Learning within the urbanized community kitchen, Sunni Ali always recognized the connection she had to her family, the society, and her immediate surroundings. Her life experiences
as an activist, mother, wife, daughter, and sister, greatly influenced the way she defined her subjectivity, because, even at the early age of five, she faced the challenges of being a black female in a dominant white society. To navigate and make sense of those experiences, she “processed” and closely observed black and white people’s reactions to her and one other. She often referenced how she went through an encounter and then gained invaluable insight.

Her most memorable moment and first experience with sadness was when she saw how unfairly society was structured and how it created certain harmful demands on black people, particularly her mother. At five, she saw her mother physically hurt by falling by the side of a subway train, where she wounded the entire right side of her body. Even though her mother was blind, she still had to work every day, and she took the train to work as a clerical employee. On the day of the accident, she did not have any help with getting to work or going home. She went home only after her boss made her leave early. When Fulani returned from school, noticing her mother was there, she asked her grandmother what was going on with her mother. Learning what happened, Fulani said:

Every time I thought about it, even at five, I processed all of that. And one of her sides was wounded from the bottom of her rib cage to the bottom of her leg. And oh man, it was horrible. My grandmother was taking care of her and making her rest. And I remember that so much because I had, I guess what people define as a tantrum. I really was upset. I started to cry and yell at my grandmother. I said she’s not gonna stop and I say you’re her mother. You make her stay home. Don’t let her go back there. And I just felt it so deep. And so I knew that this was not right. My mother should not have to go through this. This was one of the early signs of me not being really happy with the way society must be: a woman who is blind, having to do this. And people tolerate it.
Processing this situation, Fulani knew “this was not right,” and though she did not fully understand the historical and socio-political dynamics at that time of her life, she recognized that her life, the lives of her mother and grandmother, and society were influenced and intimately connected at some level. She understood that her mother, as a black, blind, working-class female, needed support, beyond what was provided for the average person. She later used these kitchen experiences as a way to further make sense of the injustices she lived and saw in various black communities.

Another dimension of the urbanized kitchen was demonstrated in her familial relationships. Almost every aspect of Sunni Ali’s kitchen conversation was directly related to her mother, grandmother, father, and sister. As the youngest of three children by her mother, she remembered the importance of knowing one’s family history. She said:

And so for the first nine nearly ten years of my life, I have the examples of my big sister, my mother and my grandmother; very strong matriarchal tree and energy pervaded the environment of my home, my atmosphere: three strong women with strong personalities and really great character, spiritual women, women with a work ethic. They gave the best examples of the belief in god, respect for spirits unknown to us, and recognition that they exist. They instilled information in my sister and me about our ancestral background. So I knew as a very very young child my great grandparents’ names and my great great grandparents’ names. A little story about each one of them was shared with my sister, and I and later my first cousins. We, my family, have a very strong connection to our family line because we know it. And I believe that is one of the ways that you do have it, knowing something about your ancestral line and tree. So it’s been good in my opinion that I had that kind of childhood.
In her home, Sunni Ali experienced the affirmation of self and the significance of black history as her examples of black womanhood. Her “kitchenizing” (what I refer to as black women transforming spaces of subjugation into safe spaces of liberation) encouraged and reinforced a standard of femininity based on strength, not the docility of mainstream womanhood. On a daily basis, she developed an empowered black woman’s perspective, seeing black women as having “great character,” spirituality, and a “work ethic.” Fulani’s understanding of community was first experienced and imparted by her mother and grandmother, and this demonstrates that “Afro-American women create and pass on self-definitions and self-valuations essential to coping with the simultaneity of oppression they experience” (Collins 43). Also, Collins identified this kind of experience as an act of sisterhood, defined as “a supportive feeling of loyalty and attachment to other black women stemming from a shared feeling of oppression” (44).

In the kitchen, black women, such as Sunni Ali, created and circulated culturally significant representations of black womanhood. Another impactful anecdote from her childhood, for example, revolved around her mother. Sunni Ali stated that her mother was her “shero.” Throughout her childhood, she watched her mother work to overcome the social, economic, political, and physical impediments from being a blind black woman. One major event was her mother’s enrollment in the New York Institute for the Blind. Geneva, her mother, was the first black woman admitted to the institute. Initially she was denied admission because she was racially discriminated against. With persistent support from the community and the Catholic Church they attended, however, Geneva matriculated into the institute and learned how to read and function as a blind person in society. After I asked Sunni Ali if “something happened legally that changed that or if she was just admitted,” she responded, “No, she had to struggle. She had to be disciplined about it and patient: meaning there had to be letters written. She had to continue to go
back and take it further and further each time they denied her entrance. She was denied entrance. And I think she says it took her a couple of years to get in the school, but she was the first black female and among the first black people, which I think were only about three, to be admitted into that school during that period.”

Growing up a black girl in white America, Sunni Ali’s yet unarticulated and unidentified politicization would eventually yield a productive life of activism, and the same conditions that nurtured her maturation process became the same conditions that nurtured her resistance. Other revolutionary Black Nationalist women had similar experiences growing up in America. As noted by Barbara Bush, in her article on black women’s resistance, though the dominant white society prescribed negative roles, stereotypes, and myths to characterize black women, the internal dynamics of the black community not only shielded black youth from some of these external forces, the community also provided alternative representations and ideas about the meaning of blackness (152). Thus, activists, such as the Black Panthers Afeni Shakur, Assata Shakur, and Black Panther Elaine Brown, all experienced a kind of protective, nurturing, and supportive buffer between their lives and the greater white society.

Similar to Sunni Ali, all of their mothers played an instrumental role in the development of the women’s lives. Collins reasons that black motherhood serves as a foundation for black children and others to self-actualize, and it offers black women “status in the community” and can be used as a “catalyst for social activism” (118). She further notes: “African Americans see their work as both contributing to their children’s survival and instilling values that will encourage their children to reject their prescribed ‘place’ as Blacks and strive for more” (125). As a result, black women involved in movements directly experienced this kind of community network
within the black communities in which they were raised, and the years of their youth were a critical component for politicization in their future lives as activists.

In her childhood, for example, Assata Shakur said her staunchest supporters were her immediate family and grandparents. She pointed out how “[a]ll of [her] family tried to instill in [her] a sense of personal dignity” (19). Her grandparents disallowed her from saying “yes ma’am” and “yes sir.” They also told her she was just as good as anyone else, especially white people, and that Assata Shakur should never let people tell her they were better than Assata Shakur. In her childhood, Assata’s community instilled in her a positive sense of who she was, sheltering her from as much negativity as possible. She added: “The tactics my grandparents used were crude, and [I] hated it when they would repeat everything so often. But the lessons that they taught me, more than anything else [I] learned in life, helped me to deal with the things [I] would face growing up in [A]meri[c]a” (20). In her autobiography, she demonstrated, through example, a question-and-answer dialogue with her grandmother, exemplifying the instillation of “personal dignity”:

“Who’s better than you?”

“Nobody.”

“Who?”

“Nobody.”

“Get that head up.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, who?”

“Yes, Grandmommy.”
“I want that head held up high, and [I] don’t want you taking no mess from anybody, you understand?”

“Yes, Grandmommy.”

“I don’t want nobody taking advantage of you, you hear me?”

“Yes, [I] hear you.”

“Yes, who?”

“Yes, Grandmommy.”(19).

The kitchen tactics Assata Shakur learned were strategies of survival to equip her to live as a black woman in white America, with no one “taking advantage of her.” Again, as with Sunni Ali, black female youth were taught, in their respective urbanized kitchens, to self-value blackness.

Similar to Assata Shakur, Elaine Brown’s mother encouraged her daughter to have a healthy self-perception as a black female. Her mom was a “strong, protective female” who spent a lot of time “doting” on her daughter and “fixing” her outer appearance so E. Brown could always look “right” (21). Unlike the other black girls in their neighborhood, E. Brown was light-skinned with “good” hair, while the rest of the female youth had darker skin and African facial features. In her familial safe space, E. Brown also learned about the “achievements and machinations” of blacks, with her grandmother reading the news events from the black Philadelphia newspaper the Pittsburgh Courier (21). E. Brown was nurtured and protected by black women in her immediate surroundings. They fortified an environment at home and in the community that promoted self-confidence in E. Brown, as a young black girl.

Black women who serve as surrogates for someone’s mother are also integral to sustaining the kitchen. Afeni Shakur’s childhood exemplifies the significance of “othermothers.”
Othermothers were black women who took care of children in the community even though there was no blood relation. “Community othermothers work[ed] on behalf of the Black community by expressing ethics of caring and personal accountability which embrace[d] conceptions of transformative power and mutuality” (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 132). Afeni Shakur’s community othermother was Miss Hattie. Afeni said: “This lady liked my mama, and she knew our situation. You didn’t have to tell her anything or ask her anything, but this is how cool she was” (Guy 15). Waiting until Afeni’s father left home, Miss Hattie went to their house, took her mom grocery shopping, and asked no questions. Miss Hattie, as the othermother, gave the family support by taking care of their groceries and other household needs, especially when the father and mother could not. Miss Hattie felt personally accountable, making sure her community and its residents were viably sustained, as best as she could. In a similar vein, one could easily understand her actions as exhibiting what Marsha Houston defines as an “ethic of care.” Houston asserts that black women engage in such actions to offer “alternative forms of women’s moral development” and to advocate for those who cannot on their own (78). Afeni Shakur, in her community kitchen, learned the value of advocating on the behalf of those in her community by watching Miss Hattie’s othermotherness.

In sum, urbanized antebellum kitchens were safe spaces for key revolutionary black female nationalists, allowing them to experience a community of caring and support, which eventually bolstered, strengthened, and shaped their political activism. Their respective communities, mothers, grandmothers, and othermothers supplied Sunni Ali, Elaine Brown, Assata Shakur, and Afeni Shakur several important insights: 1) an awareness of the distinction between themselves, as young black girls, and white America; 2) protection from as much outside negativity as possi-
ble; 3) pride in their blackness and femaleness; and 4) different examples of black women struggling to eke out some semblance of humanity and joy in a disparaging and bleak reality.

Sunni Ali, Assata Shakur, Afeni Shakur, and Elaine Brown were also raised in a culture of resistance. This was critical because the revolutionary womanist consciousness was nurtured and articulated in the safe space of the urban kitchen, and “this may be all that stands between many black women and the internalized oppression fostered by our status as the Other” (Collins, Black Feminist Thought 144). In plantation-like ghettoes, they all found themselves, their families, and their communities embattled in a struggle against white America.

The intensified activism during the Civil Rights Movement and in Sunni Ali’s community also transformed her political awareness. Raised in a climate of radicalization and heightened interracial conflict, which was created in large part by the forced integration policies, Sunni Ali and countless African Americans experienced the success of Brown vs. the Board of Education as a failure. The prevailing ideology of racial equality and harmony was, at least for them, not an American dream but a nightmare, for the reality was that the material contradictions in black communities were anything but equal or harmonious. These material contradictions would eventually spur the Black Power and Black Nationalist movements. Sunni Ali was uniquely positioned in these movements because she used her “kitchen” experiences as navigational tools that later informed revolutionary lessons, catapulting her to the next stage of growth.

In the remainder of this chapter, after outlining the contours of the Black Power and Black Nationalism movements, I can then shed light, under the equally important influence of her father, on how Sunni Ali’s political involvement from the grassroots level evolved into her becoming a Black Panther and eventually a Republic of New Africa citizen. As conditions in a number of black communities were unchanged, community workers tried to work within the
dominant socio-political system, while others attempted to make changes through forms of cultural and revolutionary nationalism. Sunni Ali, trying these difficult approaches at different times, encountered tough situations and learned many invaluable lessons about liberation struggle. Her mind stayed on freedom, embarking on a path that led her to many trials and triumphs.

3.3 Working with the “Man,” Cultural Nationalism, or Revolutionary Nationalism

As Sunni Ali matured throughout the 1960’s and emerged from the kitchen, she and other black Americans witnessed the increasing radicalization of the Civil Rights Movement, leading to what eventually became known as the Black Power and Black Nationalist movements. African Americans throughout the U.S. were dealing with the material contradictions in their communities brought on by the recurring violence against them by governmental forces (Klinkner 278; Churchill and Vander Wall 106; Deburg 19; Geschwender 68). In countless American cities, the process of implementing desegregation and civil rights, according to Manning Marable, took a toll on the lives of African Americans, and police officers and racist white citizens used many forms of brutality against them, from electric cattle prods, tear gas, billy clubs, and arrest to murder (70). Black resistance grew in response to the unfair treatment and lack of protection from harm, and African American rebellions continued to increase in different cities, such as Harlem, Cambridge, Rochester, Jersey City, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Watts (Kerner Commission 42-107). After 1960, revolts in some cities recurred every summer in a number of black communities. While police officers continued to brutalize and not protect blacks, there was also no intervention from the federal government, and officers were not reprimanded for their actions (164). Throughout the early 1960’s, countless media stories narrated the senseless deaths of African
Americans at the hands of police officers. In one scenario told in *Life* magazine entitled “The Killing of Billy Furr, Caught in the Act of Looting Beer,” a young man was shot and killed point blank, while the same shotgun seriously wounded a twelve-year-old black boy.

In the 1950’s and 1960’s, black communities continued to undergo increasingly difficult socio-political and institutional challenges. As these changes occurred, Sunni Ali and other soon-to-be revolutionary black female nationalists adapted and were transformed. In one mirror, they saw the reflection of racial integration, and, in another mirror, they saw the reflection of racial radicalization. Civil rights legislation had no tangible meaning in their daily lives and urban plantations, where they and their communities gradually felt the limitations of gendered institutional racism. As black radicalism increased, activists soon started questioning the effectiveness of civil rights.

By 1966, the Civil Rights Movement was infused with mounting tensions that developed from organizational strains and repression from federal, state, and local government forces. The leadership at the grassroots level became most divisive when Stokely Carmichael and Martin Luther King, Jr. endured constant violence from white Southern mobs and received no protection from law enforcement. Eventually, at one of the local rallies in Lowndes County, Alabama, after civil rights activists spent countless hours mobilizing for voter registration using non-violent tactics, Carmichael and King were at odds when considering the most practical strategies for stopping the persistent attacks (Joseph 123-131). King, a proponent of non-violence, could not deny the threat of danger and eventually decided to allow the Deacons for Defense and Justice to keep him safe. The civil rights leaders, however, were split between non-violence, self-defense, and militancy.
As tension steadily increased, civil rights organizations needed redirection and stability but were slowly losing their effectiveness. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) voted Stokely Carmichael as the Chairman, which fundamentally changed the course of the organization’s activism from non-violence to self-defense. A militancy-non-violent dichotomy of activism further pushed the limits of effective civil rights strategies, and leaders and activists within the NAACP, CORE, SNCC, and SCLC struggled with similar internal conflicts.

The seeds of Black Power, planted June 16, 1966 in Greenwood, Mississippi by Stokely Carmichael, grew to restructure commitments to black liberation (Joseph 142). As noted earlier, though many Americans firmly believed equality and democracy prevailed and existed for everyone, the day-to-day experiences of African Americans was not only unchanged but increasingly strained. Forced integration caused white flight to the suburbs, which also meant the flight of resources, jobs, and opportunity. The Kerner Commission reported that in these consistently oppressive conditions the outcome was inevitable, because people of African descent were pushed into ghettoized locales while “segregation and poverty… intersected to destroy opportunity and hope and to enforce failure” (204).

The year of 1967 proved to be a time not just to demonstrate and hope to achieve equality and rights, but also a time for blatant in-your-face proclamations. Rebellious currents of black power surged and stimulated other segments of the black populace to take charge of inadequate and depressed conditions in their communities (Joseph 12). Even as the Civil Rights Movement developed, there were critiques of the movement from the religious black organization known as the Nation of Islam (NOI) and Malcolm X. Starting in the late 1950s, Malcolm’s influence spread like wild fire throughout Harlem, igniting an alternative perspective on black liberation. As proof of his powerful significance as a recruiter for the NOI, his ability to persuade onlookers
with his rhetoric, as well as his ability to build inner and inter-community-based support, the NOI membership experienced astronomical growth. Malcolm’s influence quickly helped the NOI expand from four to twenty-seven Temples of Islam across the nation (Ogbar 20).

Even though Malcolm eventually split from the NOI, his influence reached far and wide throughout the country and around the world. Since the 1950s, Malcolm had tirelessly worked to politicize black people, to raise consciousness about the detrimental effects of the internalization of whiteness, and to empower African Americans (Joseph 101). He had a unique ability to use “sacred and profane traditions of street speaking, turning old-fashioned rituals into state-of-the-art displays of rhetorical genius and political mobilization” (13). Capitalizing on opportunity and a dire need for rapprochement between blacks and whites that tenuously revolved around the urban uprisings, Malcolm connected to people from the streets of Harlem to the hallways of Washington and “practiced his own brand of coalition politics in Detroit as he would in cities around the nation” (57). For many of his supporters, as William Deburg observed, he was a “Black Power paradigm” (2).

If the Civil Rights Movement was about the attainment of basic American democratic privileges for blacks, one could say the Black Power Movement was about the indomitability of basic human rights, and Malcolm explicitly provided the legitimate justification to move from non-violent demonstrations to a by-any-means-necessary self-determination. His fiery rhetoric and parallel success at enlightening and mobilizing disenfranchised blacks, without white or black bourgeois support, catalyzed direct social action. “Before his assassination, Malcolm constantly urged his constituency to question the validity of their schoolbook-and media-inspired faith in an integrated American Dream” (Deburg 2). As early as 1963 in Detroit at the Grassroots Leadership Conference, with notable “civil rights renegades” such as Milton Henry (who invited
his friend Malcolm), Gloria Richardson (Stokely Carmichael’s mentor), and Jimmy and Grace Lee Boggs, attendees easily accepted the black power paradigm presented in Malcolm’s speech “Message to the Grassroots,” which espoused goals for black nationalism, opposition to colonialism, and armed defense (Joseph 88-92). His approach was grounded in a social and political history of radicalism that was built with black Muslims, nationalists, trade unionists, civil rights leaders, and socialists. Detroit, to which we will return in chapter four, was a welcoming environment for Malcolm and Sunni Ali’s father Alajo Adegbalola (Joseph 57).

In fact, the connection between more militant blacks and Sunni Ali’s family were quite close. As Detroit and the rest of the nation dealt with the confrontational style of Black Power activists, Sunni Ali, along with Miriam Makeba (who Stokely Carmichael married in 1968), toured the world, politicizing the international community through song. When I interviewed Sunni Ali, she told me that her mother taught her the “etiquette of singing,” and she credited her mother with helping her develop stage presence. Her voice, as a political performance, was “to uplift others and to touch people.” Sunni Ali and Makeba raised consciousness throughout the world about the atrocities in South Africa and in America, traveling to Stockholm, Sweden, Paris, Switzerland, Denmark, and Finland.

While Sunni Ali politicized the international arena through song, her father, a well-known community activist in Roxbury, a then mostly black populated area of Boston, Massachusetts, and through Malcolm’s influence, was introducing blacks in the northeast to the concept of black nationhood. A highly respected and disciplined community organizer, Adegbalola “was a tough-minded veteran of World War II, having served the crack black Ninety-Ninth Pursuit Squadron [the first all-black group of men in the previously all-white U.S. Air Force],” “trained
blacks for jobs in such fields as business machines and electronics” and was “deeply involved in the radical work of [the black community]” (Obadele, *Free the Land* 7).

Similar to Sunni Ali’s mother, her father was a significant factor in her political career. As “a founding officer of the Boston Black United Front” and host of “two popular radio shows,” Adegbalola eventually came to be one of the most instrumental Republic of New Africa citizens in the overall development of the nation’s military strategies and training (Obadele, *Free the Land* 7). Sunni Ali told me in one of our interview sessions that her father was also integrally connected to the Black Power conferences in the late 1960s. She added:

In 1968, my father was in the Black Guards [a black militaristic defense group], and he had been very instrumental in the development of the process of organizing and participating in the Black Power conferences. A number of them took place in Philadelphia. I really learned his depth of involvement and his own growth in the nationalist arena. All those things contributed to the fact that I was really impressed with my father. Early on, I had so much faith in my father, and, as I talk about my childhood, my father was my idol. I just felt drawn to my father, and I trusted him. Whatever he was directing, I had to have faith in him enough so that I could follow him.

The radicalized Black Power activists’ emergence contradicted the mainstream American ideology of racial harmony and equal opportunity. Basically, black Americans believed they had to unite as a community to have control over their opportunities and resources, without the white influence. A central concern of the more militant community organizers was how to structure the movement, maintaining collective cohesion and resisting structural and government sanctioned violence. After several decades of persistent activism, black communities were mostly unchanged, if not worse, and many African American’s experiences were systemically similar to
the lives of enslaved Africans and African Americans. “The urban plantation is an extension and refinement of antebellum plantation life, where the slave quarters have been supplanted by urban ghettos. Cities are nothing more than plantations controlled by whites who dictate order to the black overseers” (Staples 3).

The repressive tactics of law enforcement agencies only exacerbated the tensions between black activists on whether to stay non-violent or become more radical. Despite the civil rights legislation and protest activities, there was not an abundance of real-life evidence to prove black communities were better off. In light of the increasing repression against blacks, black activists increasingly sought out and implemented strategies that relatively countered government forces and journeyed towards black power.

Some radicalized Black Power activists reframed their socio-political critiques of the dominant order and characterized the conditions and experiences of black people as colonized subjects. In lieu of the stark reality facing many black Americans, the conditions in black communities, they argued, greatly paralleled colonialism, a state of domination where blacks had no or extremely limited control over resources, institutions, and industries (R. L. Allen 2-20; Staples 16; Nkrumah 25; Ture and Hamilton 5). Black Power was premised on the notion that black Americans were a colonized group of people, similar to the Third World colonies. As colonized people, black Americans, even with legal citizenship in America, had no control over resources and life opportunities because white America dominated every institution. When I interviewed Sunni Ali, she said that people of African descent had to understand that they were “captives” in America. Ture and Hamilton associated colonialism with institutional racism, or “the active and pervasive operation of anti-black attitudes and practices,” which still provided whites with “a sense of superior group position,” suggesting that “whites [we]re ‘better’ than blacks; therefore
blacks should be subordinated to whites” (5). This kind of institutional racism was deemed “covert racism” instead of “overt racism.” As a colonized people, black Americans still continued to have “their political decisions made for them by the colonial masters,” and when a large number of black people gathered, especially to oppose white America, the dominant majority united as a front to repress the black community (6). In this colonial situation, white people naturalized their positions of dominance, and dissenters were ideologically situated as “out of order.”

Expanding the colonial argument, parallels were drawn between the indirect rule in African colonies and African-American communities. Though black people in Africa appeared to be in positions of power, many believed they were only “puppets” working in the interests of the white power structure. “In other words, the white power structure rules the black community through local blacks who are responsive to the white leaders, the downtown, white machine, not to the black populace” (Ture and Hamilton 10).

After major rebellions swept across the U.S. in 1967, white corporate elites and various government organizations joined together to repress more militant black activists. Robert L. Allen, in *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*, asserted that “the creation of capitalists and corporate managers within the black community…would ease ghetto tensions by providing living proof to black dissidents that they [could] assimilate into the system if only they discipline[d] themselves and work[ed] at it tirelessly” (212). Various black leaders were “hand-picked” and were “showpieces out front,” but black presence in positions of power did not mean black power (Blauner 34; Ture and Hamilton 11). Essentially, the blacks, working for white power, usually had no more power than granted to them by the dominant order. In effect, this only created a “process of co-optation and a subsequent widening of the gap between the black elites and the masses,” which is also a common situation in colonial states (13). Acting as “colonial puppets,”
the so-called black leaders not only depleted the power and resources of the black community, they also received material compensation and status in exchange for accepting their subordinate positions (R. L. Allen 223). Consequently, these actions produced the demeaning thought that black leaders sanctioned the subjugation of black people in white America.

Another aspect of colonialism that was prevalent in black America, activists argued, was the “manipulation of political boundaries and the devising of restrictive electoral systems” (Newton, “A Functional Definition” 148; Staples 169). To maintain political power, gerrymandering was instituted to lessen the amount of electoral control black people could garner. District lines were drawn in such a way that black communities were doomed to be the minority in white districts. As a result, there could not be majority black districts, which also meant there would not be enough black votes to elect black representation.

Political colonial control was also evident in the economic power harnessed by white America. Social welfare agencies, though presented as supporting and enriching black communities, were “creating a system which dehumanize[d] the individual and perpetuate[d] his [her] dependency” (Ladner 69). The discrimination blacks encountered when seeking employment, especially when African-Americans with more college education made less than white people with less education, further strengthened white economic control. The economic disadvantages were also coupled with the high prices of cheap goods and housing in black communities, while in white communities the prices were much less. In urban centers, according to the research of Professor David Caplovitz of Columbia University, “The high markup of low-quality goods [was] thus a major device used by merchants to protect themselves against the risks of their credit business” (18). Another study by Harry Gottsfeld and Gerterlyn Dozier reported that East Harlem local businesses actually increased the prices of goods around the time welfare recipients
were given their monthly checks (978). Fundamentally, activists argued that the white power structure, conceived as the colonizer, produced a society where black people were relegated to a subordinate status politically, socially, and economically. Harold Cruse noted, “The only factor which differentiates the Negro’s status from that of a pure colonial status is that his position is maintained in the home country in close proximity to the dominant racial group” (76). The Black Power Movement participants questioned the inherent assumptions of white power that oppressed black communities. Black Power activists rejected the notion that freedom for black people must come through integration, and they also proclaimed that integration, for the black community, only reinforced and justified white hegemony.

Another major proposition of Black Power was the historical fact that there were numerous examples of the futility of black people attempting to work with and within the white power structure, particularly given the manner in which the white power structure suppressed and denied black people liberation. After years of working with the American government, white liberals, and older more established black organizations like the NAACP, it had become increasingly obvious that the only viable option for a progressive and functioning black America would be when they were “autonomous” (Newton, “Crisis” 74). On two occasions, black organizations like SNCC and the Lowndes County Freedom Organization worked with white activist organizations, but the black people were not only denied access to decision-making circles but also were more often placed in subordinate or insignificant roles in grassroots communities. Black Power challenged the insurmountable institutional racism pervading the entire American society, and without this challenge, any attempt at progress and equality was thought to be futile.

Black Power activists could potentially build coalitions with white organizations, but activists tended to be cautious about the ultimate outcome for blacks. Ture and, Hamilton’s anal-
yses examined several different cooperative attempts to secure racial justice and concluded that the need to work with other groups was a “myth of coalition” (58). The “myth of coalition” questioned the idea that black people needed to work with other groups of people, particularly white groups like the Democratic Party, to access the privileges of American society. James A. Geschwender’s critical investigation of the United Auto Workers union, for example, proved that blacks were refused membership because of the union’s racist organizational practices (206).

Black activists, therefore, believed that there should be a critical reexamination of who to build coalitions with, the terms of coalitional work, and the objectives of that work. In a number of instances, the coalitions developed not only did not meet the interests of the black community, but the coalitions functioned to reinforce the white dominant order, hence further subjugating black people.

For many Black Power activists, therefore, the contending interests of the black and white groups were basically irreconcilable. Each time attempts were made at compromise the white community either reneged on agreements and/or colluded with white racists to uphold the oppressive American system. The only solution for black people, so it was thought, was to gain direct control over the resources, opportunities, and institutions within their communities. As final proof, as if one were needed, was provided in the case of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), where SNCC began a voter registration project to increase the number of black voters. The group’s goal was to pressure the national Democratic Party to seat some of its delegates instead of the “regulars” who were senior, white racist, male politicians. Where blacks were denied access to precincts for voting and meetings, the MFDP had open meetings and allowed full participation. When pressure came from the Johnson-Humphrey camp in the White House to not support the MFDP organizers, many allies discontinued their support. MFDP lead-
ers submitted a report about the unfair treatment, and a “compromise” was reached “allowing” the MFDP to seat only two of their delegates, who would be chosen for them by the larger racist party. Instead of challenging the white supremacists who pervaded the party, the MFDP agreed to the compromise. In return for the group’s acceptance of the agreement with the larger party, the Democrats still passed a resolution that “deplored” and “condemned” the Civil Rights laws (Ture and Hamilton 96). Supporters of the MFDP were “humiliated and robbed of the franchise in the middle of the presidential nominating convention” (Joseph 129). The outcome was a stark reminder that black activists alone had to shoulder all the responsibility for their freedom.

The Black Power Movement initiatives, therefore, aimed to place power, decision-making, and resources directly in the hands of blacks. Even in the face of working in predominantly white institutions, attempting to build coalitions, and efficaciously enacting their American democratic rights, people of color endured countless dehumanizing monstrosities when whites were at the helm of power. By giving particular attention to the ways the white power structure reorganized itself when black masses resisted, one clearly understood the hypocritical reality that existed in American democracy. As citizens in a democratic society, one might assume that the privileges of the country were bestowed on all citizens, but the ideas of sovereignty only materially existed for the white majority (Ladner xvi). Black people living as a colonized people, in a purportedly free and democratic society, exhibited how power and control was in the hands of the white power structure, even though racism and discrimination were “illegal,” according to the newly enacted civil rights laws. Movement leaders undoubtedly understood the relationships among white privilege and power, the black middle-class, and oppression, and their efforts revealed irrefutable evidence of the particular forms of white oppression that arose when blacks engaged in more aggressive social justice work.
In the next section, I examine how, as a result of this growing conviction, community-organizing activism gradually shifted into the Black Power Movement. Sunni Ali and other black female activists had to decide what was the best avenue for racial uplift, choosing between working inside or outside “the system.” I detail the different modes of activism by black female activists and demonstrate how Sunni Ali’s involvement initially gravitated towards local community activism. Eventually, however, she redirected her community-organizing efforts into revolutionary nationalism, becoming an increasingly militant nationalist first as a member of the BPP and then as a citizen in the Republic of New Africa.

3.4 Black Women Activists Working in “The System”

Some black women attempted reform by working in “the system,” and others worked at the grassroots level in the community. However, the limitations of these approaches soon drove many black female activists to more militant activities.

While never attracted to mainstream politics, early in her life, Sunni Ali engaged in various forms of community activism. In 1967, at seventeen years of age, one of Sunni Ali’s earliest positions was as a youth organizer liaison between the youth and adults working with New England Grassroots Community Organization (NEGRO) for welfare education and tenants’ rights in Boston. This was her first introduction to speaking with and representing youth at discussions in order to learn about the issues they all faced as welfare recipients. She was selected as the leader because she displayed leadership skills and was articulate. Mentored by one of the community activists, Mrs. Barbara Landrine, she and her co-organizers strategically launched a community campaign to challenge the “welfare department’s rules, their authority and authoritarian rules,”
which were “violating the privacy and human rights of mothers on welfare.” Illustrating the power of womanist activism through “kitchen” discourse, they held private sessions to obtain information about the women’s experiences and strategized to acquire more humane welfare.

After working with NEGRO, she found herself continuing to seek out more opportunities to widen the scope of her activism, understanding that she could be an agent of community transformation. NEGRO, like many other Boston community organizations, was located on Blue Hill Avenue in Grove Hall. The area housed other groups that Fulani joined, such as the National Black Anti-war Anti-Draft Union (NBAADU) and then the Boston chapter of the BPP. After working with NEGRO, she gravitated to NBAADU and continued to evolve as a community organizer. At this stage of her early revolutionary development, she became increasingly involved in more militant and direct action as a means to actualize her protest. She knew that community organizing, while effective in some ways, left many of the conditions in black communities unchanged. Her father, who was already deeply involved with other black activists in Detroit and Boston, helped guide her activism. Fulani viewed herself as “a work in progress,” and she aimed to “continue to develop and learn and carry forward every bit of what was necessary from one period to the next.”

While her father Adegbalola, according to Sunni Ali in our interviews, gave black history presentations to black and white Bostonians, her politicization with NBAADU was heightened as she started to participate in other forms of activism more closely aligned with testifying. As a draft counselor, she not only held workshops with students who received draft notices, but she and other members of the organization held demonstrations. NBAADU members went to the Selective Service Board and blocked the doorway because they wanted to stop people from joining. Five or six of them obstructed the building by laying their bodies on the ground. She explained in
our interview that the strategy was also intended to raise awareness about the organization’s purpose and display public opposition to the draft. Even though most of the people they spoke to did not turn away from enlisting, the mere fact that the person had the ideas to ponder was equally important, because if the enlistee was in the Vietnam War, then the soldier was given an alternative framework for understanding his/her participation. Her role as a draft counselor included sharing information that expanded their minds as citizens, soldiers, and possibly politicized activists.

Another rhetorical strategy for publicly testifying against the draft was to try and radicalize potential black recruits through the use of comments by prominent people such as Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, and Martin Luther King, Jr. The goal was to have the recruits understand that the war in Vietnam was a direct parallel to the racial problems in America for black people. After studying the ideas of several black leaders, they also handed out flyers and position papers with similar information and “put something on their minds.”

Even though Sunni Ali’s political development, at this stage, was enmeshed in the fabric of the increased radical activism throughout the 1960s, her activism did not, she came to believe, effectively rectify the disparities and the disparaging conditions in her community. Raised in the urbanized kitchen, she organically knew the needs of her people and was well equipped to champion their causes. Chisholm, Tillmon, Hamer, and later Sunni Ali took on different roles in attempting to change “the system” from within, but many became quickly disillusioned. As a result, many black women found it more effective to participate in alternative modes of resistance, organizing outside mainstream politics and community activism.

So far, I have discussed the conditions and experiences of African Americans in the inner cities and touched on the limitations and failures of the Civil Rights Movement, creating the exi-
gency for the Black Power Movement. Now, I turn my focus to the next stage of Sunni Ali’s womanist activism in both the Black Power and Black Nationalist movements. However, to place her increasingly militant activism in context, first I examine how black women started working in different Black Nationalists’ organizations and analyze how each woman used their activism to transform their individual lives and the lives of other African Americans. Most of the women, at this time, were barely seventeen years old and participated in the Black Power Movement to craft a better quality of life.

3.5 Cultural Nationalism

While the Black Power Movement had a variety of expressions, Black Nationalism ultimately became a potent stimulus that catalyzed black provocateurs. As a result of the felt limitations of more direct political engagement and community organizing, and in light of developments in the Black Power Movement, Black Nationalism emerged in three forms: cultural nationalism, revolutionary nationalism, and separatism. Each type of Black Nationalism basically had the same goal: black liberation. However, the priorities and implementation of black liberation varied, especially between the cultural and revolutionary nationalists. Once the various aspects of Black Nationalism are clarified, I can then discuss how and why Sunni Ali moved from community activism to separatist nationalism.

Black Nationalists fundamentally supported the fact that, given their “colonized” status, blacks needed to work as one. Alphonso Pinkney’s Red, Black, and Green: Black Nationalism in the United States discusses how Black Nationalism was comprised of three interdependent elements: “unity, pride in cultural heritage, and autonomy” (7). Unity, according to Pinkney, ex-
explored the means through which black people developed cohesion and collectivism, instead of focusing on individual needs, and how a unified black community would result in broader support and more shared resources. The second element of Black Nationalism, black cultural pride, was designed to develop black consciousness in people of African descent, and since African Americans suffered for hundreds of years in a white supremacist state, aesthetically healing and nurturing all things black was a viable solution to the “widespread American practice of deprecating African cultural elements” (7). As for autonomy, the third element of Black Nationalism, black people unequivocally must wield a degree of power over their communities, including resources, institutions, employment, and fair opportunities for success. In lieu of the suffering blacks experienced from white control, such as dehumanizing treatment and brute force through repression, a commonsensical outlook suggested the crucial importance of self-determination.

The variation of Black Nationalist expression was contingent on how each group of organized participants defined their roles in the Black Power Movement and in the black community. While the organizing principles were fundamentally the same, the priority of the organizations differed based on the groups’ overall goals. Some groups placed a priority on revolution for the entire country or even the world, while other Black Nationalists focused in a more limited way on revolutionizing black culture.

Cultural nationalists in the Black Power Movement, unlike the revolutionaries, placed the highest priority on “first reaffirming the beauty and uniqueness of black culture,” since “black culture was Black Power” (Deburg 170-171). In the mid-1960s, as described in Komozi Woodard’s *A Nation within a Nation*, cultural nationalism was a bridge to “identity transformation” for people of African descent, and, in this regard, “the road traveled by students and revolutionary intellectuals.” More fully developing black artistic expression would help to “con-
struct a radical black identity, purpose, and direction” (51). As a result, black people would “imagine black nationhood in White America” (51). Malcolm X’s impact in cultural nationalism was also pertinent. Paralleling Malcolm’s agenda for an “ethical reconstruction and cultural vitalization” of black people, Amiri Baraka, in Harlem and later Newark, from 1965-1969, developed a number of different programs, such as teaching drama and black studies to people in the black community. Demonstrating a political and philosophical position, cultural nationalism was implemented through symbolic gestures, such as wearing African garb and natural hairstyles (non-chemical hair). The assumption was that people of African descent necessarily had to heal and redirect the mind and their consciousness in order to direct the body for a black revolution.

Cultural nationalists, such as Baraka, were major players in organizing Black Power conferences, such as those regularly attended by Sunni Ali’s father, where thousands of black people attempted to create a unified black front. The conference participants struggled over the direction of black America and viewed the conferences as political training grounds for new leadership among young adults. Cultural nationalists linked their growth, leadership development, and political training with the national problems of underemployment, the black mortality rate, job discrimination, and police brutality that hindered black America. They built institutions, under the guidance of Baraka’s leadership, such as black newspapers, black schools, black youth programs, black community development programs, and black female collectives (Deburg 177). Like the revolutionary nationalists allying with Third World people, cultural nationalists agreed to a pact between the Committee for United Newark (CFUN) and a Puerto Rican gang called the Young Lords. As a result, they held a Black and Puerto Rican Convention, meant to build a more formidable and representative base for blacks and Puerto Ricans to oppose the white power structure in Newark. After choosing delegates at the convention, the CFUN began a campaign, as
suggested by Baraka, that stressed identity, a progressive platform, positions on controversial issues, and the importance of registering black voters. Raising campaign funds with celebrities and other well-known black people, such as Jesse Jackson, the group held poetry readings and dramatic performances to acquire money. Though there were attempts by the dominant white order to disenfranchise black and Puerto Rican voters, the CFUN campaign for political representation was successful. Earl Harris, a black Newark resident, won a City Council seat, and Kenneth Gibson, another African American, won the mayoral candidacy. This joint effort symbolized the socio-political potential, however limited, of employing mainstream political alliances to achieve power for blacks and other minorities.

Black cultural nationalism effected numerous national and local changes. Throughout the country, as an offshoot of the Modern Black Conference Movement, several black groups formed, such as the Congress of African People (CAP), the African Liberation Support Committee, the Black Women’s United Front, and the National Assembly. CAP, an outgrowth of the Newark Black Power conference, addressed the colonial situation of people of African descent around the world, introducing Pan-Africanism as a major priority for black national formation. CAP members “would become knowledgeable of the struggles against racism and colonialism in South Africa during the 1970s and assume what it considered its international responsibility to end white minority rule” (Woodard 167). Additionally, Pan-African activists raised “funds for combat boots to send to liberation forces fighting in Africa and to help establish an ‘African Liberation Front’” to work with “various national liberation fronts throughout Africa, the Caribbean, South and Central America as well as the U.S.A.” (67). Baraka, however, disagreed with the idea of repatriating black people to the African continent. For Baraka, Pan-Africanism “insisted on
black cultural revolution, one separating the hearers and minds of African-Americans from white hegemony,” regardless of location (171).

Some cultural nationalists in the Black Power Movement understood that collective action could potentially consolidate more power and yield greater gains for blacks; therefore, developing strategies such as “agenda building” was another important approach instituted by Baraka to develop and incorporate a cohesive united front within the ranks of black elected officials, grassroots community leaders, civil rights workers, Black Power activists, women and men. “Agenda building stressed mutual respect among the various leaders of the black community for their different concerns and emphasized the principle of proportional representation. Furthermore, at a deeper level, agenda building meant that in the Modern Black Convention Movement the priorities would come from below” (Woodard 196). The agenda-building initiative “was rooted in demands of the urban social movement that gripped big-city politics,” and this kind of political organizing would systematically connect local and national priorities (197). To push the initiatives of the Modern Black Conference Movement at the 1972 National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana, the group drafted a National Black Agenda, a 55-page document designed to inspire accountability in the black attendees to black America.

Using black cultural nationalism as a means to alleviate and liberate people of African descent was one measure of opposition to combat white institutional racism. As the Modern Black Conference Movement continued to spread its influence, Baraka and other cultural nationalists diligently worked to transform black communities with efforts towards urban renewal in the city of Newark. The prospective Newark developments included the construction of Kawaida Towers and the creation of the Kawaida Community Development Center for housing and economic development. However, successes were short lived, because “the system” remained fun-
damentally unchanged, leaving blacks and other people of color communities depressed. After dealing with constant setbacks by the racist city government and police, the plans for urban renewal were defeated, and officials, elected by the United Brothers, Baraka’s organization, were, in the end, loyal to the white dominant order (Woodard 230).

In general, and because of the regularity of such setbacks, revolutionary nationalism was based on the premise that the most viable option for black liberation existed, not through active participation in the “colonial system,” but through a complete overhaul of the American political and economic system. Instead of a democratic capitalistic state, revolutionary nationalism proclaimed a socialist transformation was the best way to provide an equal playing field for whites and non-whites. Through such a change, societal inequalities would be remedied and institutions transfigured (Deburg 153). Revolutionary nationalists understood the inherent connectedness of the socio-economic, historio-cultural, and political problems of all people of African descent throughout the world. Similar to the exploitative labor and community-resource practices in the African American communities, African countries after colonialism faced similar challenges from Europeans over control of continental resources, government positions, and institutional power. The historical record indubitably demonstrated black suffering at the hands of white oppressors (Obadele, Free the Land 45). Black people, in and outside the United States of America, developed alliances with Third World countries and some radical whites, and the potential outcome was to create a global movement for the betterment of all of humanity (Deburg 153). “Freedom from external domination, that is, self-determination” they believed, was “the essence of liberation” (Pinkney 97). Ideas from Frantz Fanon, Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Mao Tse Tung, Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. DuBois, Kwame Nkrumah, and Malcolm X informed revolutionary nationalist’s ideology and situated the struggle in terms of race and class. These revolutionar-
ies understood the inextricable link between racism and classism, and, if almost a decade of activism was to be effectual, capitalistic America would have to be completely overhauled completely through a socialist revolution.

From a revolutionary nationalist’s perspective, activists committed themselves to systemic change, not just civil rights. The eradication of racial discrimination, political disenfranchisement, voter intimidation, and labor exploitation was not, in and of itself, enough to undo the dehumanizing effects of white capitalism and liberate black people from the imperialistic strings. Studying revolutionary activity in China, Vietnam, and Russia, revolutionary black nationalists accepted and planned for an all-out war in order to accomplish their goals. “Aggression was the order of the day,” and they imbued their activism with a sense of urgency and mental fortitude, realizing that executing the revolution would be no easy feat (Deburg 155). They were willing to die as an outcome of engaging in political struggle, and they were willing to commit “revolutionary suicide” (Newton, “Revolutionary Suicide” 56).

Black revolutionary nationalists influenced thousands of African Americans to join the struggle for black liberation. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) was one of the most preeminent revolutionary Black Nationalist organizations during the Black Power Movement. Established in 1966 in Oakland, California, the Panthers initially mobilized to protect black citizens from ongoing police brutality inflicted on its residents. Practicing revolutionary nationalism, the BPP implemented community programs, such as providing free breakfasts, offering healthcare, tutoring, revising educational curriculum, overhauling schools, and training for self-defense and firearm usage. They also created international alliances with Third World countries from China, Cuba, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Korea, and Algeria (Cleaver, “Back to Africa” 223-227). Their brand of revolutionary activism spread rapidly throughout the country, because
the BPP reached out to galvanize diverse groups of people. If social, political, and economic transformation was possible, recruitment would necessarily have to be open to individuals from all walks of life. Chris Booker’s research estimates that the Party grew to about five thousand, with thirty-two chapters in fifteen states (342). Keenly aware of the issues facing most black Americans, the organization exercised consciousness-raising activities through political education classes (also known as P.E. courses), and the group’s newspaper was called *The Black Panther*, which during its highest distribution (1968-72) sold more than a hundred thousand copies in one week (Jones and Jeffries 29).

Black women’s participation in the BPP, including Sunni Ali’s was, of course, a complicated phenomenon. While struggling on behalf of the black community, they simultaneously dealt with sexist standards, attitudes, and behaviors from black men. One of the most stringent critiques comes from Michele Wallace’s text *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. The book contends that the Black Power initiatives failed primarily because black men relegated black women to subordinate positions (62). *Black Macho*, acknowledging the shortcomings of the Black Power Movement, insightfully notes how black males aggressively attempted to take their place in the black community, and, in order for this to happen, black women needed to be subjugated to their “rightful place” in a space circumscribed by the cult of true womanhood. Of course, a number of female activists, like Wallace, chose not to follow suit. Benita Roth concurs that black women openly questioned the “traditional gender ideology that Black Liberationists were espousing as revolutionary. Black feminists agree that Black Liberation sexism was “rooted in [black men’s] unquestioning adoption of middle-class values, alien to the Black community” (96). However, as Mumia Abu-Jamal highlights, most feminist attention focused on the misogyny and sexism in the Black Power Movement and did not more thoroughly investigate or com-
plicate the role, activities, and influence of the women in Black Power (160). Abu-Jamal critically emphasizes, “it is also proper to give credit where credit is due” (131). And, in a number of instances, the movement was a fertile and nurturing ground for some black women to gain a better understanding of themselves and their histories as black women, which, prior to their involvement, was not as clear. Patricia Brush, for examples, notes that black women’s movement participation often “raised black women’s race consciousness, enabling them to understand that and how the personal is political, enabling them to articulate their personal experiences of oppression, as political issues that should be opposed and could be resisted” (171).

Sunni Ali’s radicalism as a member of the BPP emerged in the late sixties. With a number of competing interests groups from pluralists to nationalists, and countless people rallying for racial uplift and better treatment, the conditions, she increasingly came to believe, warranted a more collectivistic approach. Still guided by her father’s activism in the black community, listening to him on the radio, watching him on television, and directly learning from him, after her early years as a community activist in Boston, Sunni Ali’s initiation into the BPP was a challenging new experience. In our interviews, she explained how her background, reared in the urbanized kitchen plantation, prepared her for her Panther training. She was used to wearing and liked uniforms because she went to a Catholic school for most of her grade-school years. The Panther uniforms, similar to her childhood experiences, symbolized unity. She saw “on a small scale what unity looked like.” Learning valuable skills from her blind mother Geneva, Sunni Ali also easily adapted to the paramilitary training and quickly excelled at being blindfolded and breaking down and cleaning the M1 carbine rifle. She said, “That was a biggie for everybody. So this is again a past lesson in life and my experience that was a plus for me, but again, it also made me stand out and look different.” Breaking and cleaning the rifle did, according to Sunni Ali, “freak out a lot
of people.” Regardless, Sunni Ali’s childhood experience was an automatic plus for her organizational duties.

Sunni Ali, as with other black women in the sixties and their foremothers, grew to easily identify with even the more militant movement initiatives intended to help people of African descent. She explained to me during our interviews that she naturally agreed with the BPP’s purpose and practices. “The militancy,” she commented, “was what drew me to the Party. I just gravitated towards what felt comfortable.” She saw herself growing and reaching her potential, studying the ten-point platform and other materials of the Party (see Appendix). She said, “I love to read. That love of learning and the challenge of new things were always an attraction to me.”

She was one of the first Panthers to wear full uniform, along with two other sisters. She also remembered her initial attraction to the working style of the Panther Party and took a different approach to community organizing:

The work style was very firm, non-apologetic. This was the first time that I ever heard encouragement. I felt encouraged, and I felt that there was a group of people who were saying, “Black people, we’re black people, and we’re not going to apologize anymore. We will not be called Negroes or colored people.” So for me, it was such an exciting time and so many exciting things happening.

Paralleling Sunni Ali’s experiences, revolutionary Black Nationalist females stayed the course. Assata Shakur, Afeni Shakur, and Elaine Brown were among a significant number of black women who chose to continue their association with Black Power. Each woman, however, initially joined for different reasons. Afeni overheard Bobby Seale on the corner of Seventh Avenue and 125th Street in Harlem reciting the BPP Ten Point Program. Hearing his recitation of
the platform, Afeni was positively overwhelmed by Seale’s discourse and decided to join the party. Her experience was like a new calling for her life. She reflected:

So there I was wrapped in my Africanness. For the first time, loving myself and loving, now that there was something I could do with my life. There was something I could do with all this aggression, and all this fear. Because up until this point, I wasn’t shit...[b]efore I joined the Party, I was fucked up. I would slap a motherfucker in a minute. I cussed my mama out, disrespected her, left her crying on the kitchen floor, [s]o, the Panther Party for me, at that time, clarified my situation. (Guy 61)

Afeni’s life was drastically changed for the better when she became more involved in the Black Power Movement because her activism channeled her rage, educated her about herself, her society, and her world, and gave direction to her life, when prior to her involvement there was none. She became a member to use her voice to deliver speeches, raising money for the Panthers, and she would do “whatever was necessary to keep the party alive” (Guy 64). In a nutshell, Afeni said, “I joined because the Panthers answered the needs of the people in my community” (64). Patricia Collins, discussing African American females’ politicization, informs us that “all individual and group actions that directly challenge the legal and customary rules governing African American women’s subordination can be seen as part of the struggle for institutional transformation” (142). Afeni’s personal transformation and growth, when she became a member of the BPP, offered her a platform where she was empowered, directed, and made aware of her importance as a Black woman. Her racial consciousness was heightened, and her self-valuation and identification were crystallized as she continued her involvement in Black Power.

E. Brown’s initial affiliation with the movement was triggered when she volunteered to offer piano lessons to black girls in the inner city. Working with the girls, she began to under-
stand the social, political, and economic issues she faced in her own childhood, which primarily stemmed from her being black and female. Teaching the young black girls, she better understood, felt, and articulated the problems from her own youthful years. E. Brown saw her own pain and her own “nothing-little-nigger girl expression lingering on their faces and in their eyes” (100). Later the same day, conversing with her white ex-lover Jay, she realized the “ultimate source of our suffering—the white man and his greed” (103). E. Brown, by teaching the young black girls, enlightened and taught herself about the pain and oppression she struggled against in her own childhood. As noted previously by Brush, through activism, black women gained significant insights into the meaning of race in white America and better understood their locations in regard to the dominant society.

Assata’s introduction to Black Nationalism was a dramatic alteration of her political consciousness. Before allying herself with Black Power, Assata “wanted to be an amerikan,” wanted “freedom by appealing to the conscience of white people,” believed that the North was really interested in integration and civil rights and equal rights,” and “used to go around saying “our country,” “our president,” and “our government” (Shakur 139). Assata believed she too sang America and thought blacks were really making progress to be equal to white Americans. Assata came to believe, however, that she was mentally bamboozled and led astray by believing in the American Dream, but she gained political awareness from her activism. After talking with her African friends and reading more books, she found herself wanting to help people in black communities. Soon, Assata was “learning and changing everyday” (174). Her self-image, along with her understanding of beauty, politics, war, history, and economics were transformed. She added:

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. 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 gained knowledge not only by reading but by participating in the struggle, who talked about Denmark Vessey, Gabriel Prosser, Cinque, as well as Nat Turner, because they had gone out of their way to learn about our history and our struggle. (175)

Assata, at this point in her life, found herself enmeshed in a community of black people who inspired her to become more and more active in the resistance struggle. She met and worked with people from every type of organization such as the Black Muslims, Garveyites, Malcolm X’s Organization of Afro-American Unity, and a few from the NAACP (180). At this stage of her life, Assata engaged discussions dealing with taking control of the institutions in black communities and also building institutional structures to support black communities. She found herself:

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 endured at the hands of amerika. I imagined everything from cities called Malcolmville and New Lumumba to a reception for revolutionary leaders around the world at the Black House. (Shakur 184)

Assata’s mind and body were now, more than ever, ready to help uplift and revolutionize the black community and build a black nation.

Sunni Ali, similar to comrades like Elaine Brown, Assata Shakur and Afeni Shakur, was also immersed in revolutionary transformation as a new Black Panther. As a 17-year-old in 1967,
she took Political Education classes while working in the Boston community. After a couple of months, she was selected as a political education instructor, which meant she had developed her political understanding and community activism to the point where she was able to teach and guide others in their growth as Panthers. In our interviews, she emphasized how members went through a rigorous process of studying and community involvement before they could be considered an “official member” of the Party. One of the requirements was to study consistently and actively demonstrate a clear understanding of The Little Red Book, which was a text by China’s Marxist leader Mao Tse Tung about the praxis of revolutionary consciousness. Sunni Ali descriptively outlined how she and other BPP members actualized the community-building tools of organization, simultaneously developing a testifying discourse. She articulated how Panthers practiced consciousness-raising in the organization and in the community. She described how materials about developing a revolution, such as The Little Red Book, were studied and implemented to develop revolutionary praxis. One day, after working in the community with other Panthers, they gathered and reflected on their mobilization efforts. She explained:

Criticisms begin with self-criticism. So I have an issue with something you did when we were out there. First, I have to start with myself and say, “Well, I will criticize myself, if it’s due.” Of course, for whatever, whatever, whatever, your part. And I need to raise criticism about your behavior and your action, and that was always difficult in the early days. It was difficult in the early days. It was difficult. Some people get up and leave, run. Some girls and women would cry, but we just kept going. And finally, it happens that one day. Well, it does just happen, but you finally get to a point where you say, “Okay, my back is stronger, and now, I can take this. I’m not crying today. I’m going to listen to it. I’m going to hear it. I’m going to be quiet.” And that was a very very im-
important thing, because those sessions taught us to be disciplined. Enough so that even though I might be criticizing you for something [and the other person] sitting there thinking, “This woman and she gonna be criticizing me. When I saw she left dirty socks over in the corner. She did this. She did that!” Well, it takes a while in the process for you to grow beyond that kind of feeling, so that you can hear me. Because you’re already pissed off over the fact I have the nerve to be criticizing you, when there’s a long list of stuff that I should be criticized for. And so step-by-step, it was like child rearing, the incubation phase.

Sunni Ali and other Panthers developed rhetorical strategies that best fit the needs of the community, the organization, and each Panther. They structured their activism and discourses with the communities they helped. Emblematic of the black women’s tradition of resistance and womanist mode of activism, the members of the Boston BPP blended their own voice with their organizational voice to speak to the needs and problems in black communities.

The Panthers also exhibited a combination of liberatory and testifying modes of activism by readapting movement initiatives to liberate effectively themselves and those they helped. The Black Power and Black Nationalist movements, even with sexist problems, offered these and other women new spaces to better understand themselves, each other, and their communities. As they gained more insight about community building, each revolutionary black female nationalist gained an inner sight to self and organizational dynamics, learning how to problem-solve and how to critically articulate the “voice” of their communities.

The organizational relationships and community relationships worked as one complete unit, uniting the individual and the collective. The publicized “voice” of one BPP member was a voice that had gone through a rigorous process of consciousness raising, inside and outside the
organization. Each woman instituted a checks-and-balances system for what they said and what they did. As a result, the rhetorical strategies of revolutionary black female nationalists, as discussed through the Black Panther revolutionary nationalism of Sunni Ali, E. Brown, and the Shakur sisters, were interconnected with the community’s priorities.

### 3.6 Black Nationalists’ Struggles with Black Power

As a vanguard movement, revolutionary Black Nationalism, particularly as it was practiced by the BPP, was also fraught with challenges. In the process of amassing enough support to achieve its revolutionary goals, internal and external factors strained the organization’s ability to transform the dominant socio-economic and political ideology that extended throughout the world. Confronting racially structured classism was a rather impossible task because, while some recruitment activities strategically focused on enlisting “brother-on-the-corner” individuals, the Party had to contend with providing long-term financial, social, and political support for recruits.

The effective handling of these matters was further confounded by internal leadership changes, U. S. government repression through pre-dawn raids, assassinations, undercover Party infiltration by paid U. S. informants, and political imprisonment of BPP leaders (Booker 338). Assata Shakur noted, “One of the Party’s major weaknesses, I thought, was the failure to clearly differentiate between above ground political struggle and underground, clandestine military struggle” (227). She insightfully conveyed the difficulty of attempting to wage guerilla war above ground and underground. To make revolution a reality, the two would need to be completely separated into different structures. “Educating the people about the necessity for self-defense and for armed struggle was one thing. But maintaining a policy of defending Party offic-
es against insurmountable odds was another” (227). Shakur highlighted the pragmatic need for revolutionary nationalists to practically plan a revolution and consider the costs of overthrowing any government and effectively counteracting structural impediments. Shakur’s admonishment for revolutionary black nationalists was as follows: adequate preparation was absolutely necessary for the revolution to occur, and resistance, without a clear structure of operation and training, was a fleeting exercise of will and ill-wasted might.

Within the BPP, revolutionary nationalism was a formidable mechanism for galvanizing the black community and energizing Black Power Movement activists. Nevertheless, the ideal goal was to replace the capitalistic values and institutions with a socialist agenda, yet the practical obstacles of sustaining a revolution, training and recruiting for a revolution, and building a different type of social and economic structure was almost impossibly far-reaching. Revolutionary Black Panthers envisioned, as George Jackson notes, pitting “the proletariat against the ruling class” (145). However, revolutionary Black Nationalists unsurprisingly encountered constant harassment from government officials, organizational infighting, and inter-organizational conflicts with groups such as the cultural nationalists.

A critically significant fault line of the Black Power Movement, therefore, was the lack of agreement on movement priorities and how to establish better black communities. With various types of Black Nationalism, there were clearly divergent approaches and priorities regarding black liberation. Cultural and revolutionary nationalists both wanted to support the black community; however, they could not productively manage their differences and consistently support each other’s efforts. For example, the BPP’s critique of the cultural nationalist organization “US” (meaning “us” blacks, versus “them” whites)—founded by Maulana Karenga in the 1960’s in California—was that the group engaged in ineffective revolutionary strategies, primarily because
the Panthers found that enhanced cultural pride and civic organization did not automatically transform institutional oppression in white American society (S. Brown 78). Though both cultural and revolutionary nationalists agreed on the need for Black Nationalist liberation, they differently prioritized the means of achieving that goal. Where revolutionaries prioritized class over race, the culturalists saw race as paramount for a transformative movement to occur. Huey Newton claimed, “Cultural nationalism, or pork-chop nationalism as I sometimes call it, is basically a problem of having the wrong political perspective. It seems to be a reaction to, instead of an action against, political oppression. The cultural nationalists are concerned with returning to the old African culture and thereby regaining their identity and freedom. In other words, they feel that assuming the African culture is enough to bring political freedom. Many cultural nationalists fall into line as reactionary nationalists” (Newton 92). Conversely, cultural nationalists well understood that after centuries of oppressive assimilation to white values, black Americans needed to be reprogrammed with a different set of cultural norms that would lead to new behaviors.

Revolutionizing the mind, the cultural nationalists believed, would automatically transform black consciousness, and, once the mind was liberated, the black body could independently unlock the internalized chains of oppression and struggle toward freedom. Until the African mind was unfettered, according to the cultural nationalist perspective, the revolutionaries’ attempts to effectively oppose the dominant system were a moot point. “Cultural reconversion begins on the individual level, because the first step toward national unity is individual unity. Individual reconversion then leads to group solidarity in which Afro-Americans put forth unified responses to oppression” (Pinkney 141).

The Panthers counter-argued that cultural nationalists were more talk and less action, but Scot Brown’s *Fighting for US* somewhat disproved their allegations by pointing out that the
“US” organization activated their paramilitary group Simba, which was involved in armed struggle (96). The Panthers nevertheless critiqued culturalists because, according to some Party members, Karenga held meetings with white policemen and Governor Reagan. Nonetheless, Karenga and other culturalists were generally assumed to be in opposition to government forces (92-93). Complicating the tension between the groups, “US” “was notorious for using violent strong-arm tactics against dissenting individuals and organizations that disagreed with the ‘US’ position within the congress’s internal deliberations” (96). In one instance, there was a major shootout where two people were shot dead at the University of California-Los Angeles (Joseph 242). The divergent nationalist’s agendas were further complicated by the United States government’s use of misinformation, stirring agitation between both groups.

With so much movement activity happening, the organizations’ infighting made it virtually impossible to develop intergroup cohesion and to work towards a common goal of empowerment for all black people. Though the revolutionary and cultural nationalists had, on one level, competing ideological perspectives and divergent priorities of race and class, both groups nonetheless earnestly invested in Black Power to captivate the black masses for what they believed was the coming revolution. William Deburg underscored similar sentiments, concluding that “both sides might have recognized that territorial and ideological disputes within the nationalist camp had a tendency to obscure underlying commonalities” (175). Even with dissimilar priorities, they all used culture as a means to harness Black Power.

Even as Sunni Ali and others were engaging in their Black Panther activities, leaving behind less militant forms of community activism, Black Nationalist organizations encountered ever-growing problems due to the repressive tactics orchestrated by the American government’s counterintelligence program against Black Power activists (COINTELPRO) (Churchill and
Vander Wall 20; O’Reilly 48-51; Deburg 302). Publicly, the federal government announced support for civil rights initiatives but was clandestinely undermining the activists’ goals.

The overall goal of the COINTELPRO was to dismantle and destabilize black grassroots organizations. One method was using undercover FBI agents to videotape, edit, and air broadcasts to television viewers that negatively represented various activists. COINTELPRO was an FBI counterintelligence program that secretly manipulated different dissident groups, slowly dismantled their effectiveness, and eventually halted their actions. With the goal of obstructing Black Nationalism, the American government engaged in specific and strategic methods to achieve its objective. The goal would be achieved by incorporating five preventive goals: 1) prevent the building of a coalition among militant black nationalist groups; 2) prevent the rise of a “messiah” who could unify, and electrify, the militant black nationalist movement; 3) prevent violence on the part of black nationalist groups; 4) prevent militant black nationalist groups and leaders from gaining respectability, by discrediting them to three separate segments of the community [i.e., the “responsible Negro community,” the white community, including sympathetic liberals, and “Negro radicals;” and 5) prevent the long-range growth of militant black nationalist organizations, especially among youth (Churchill and Vander Wall 110). The FBI clandestinely constructed false documents, infiltrated activist groups with agents, and imprisoned a number of activists.

Another method employed by COINTELPRO was the effective manipulation of the media to discredit dissenters. Discussing the effectiveness of media usage to dissuade the public about black radicals, a COINTELPRO officer sent a letter describing how they should be depicted as “rats trapped under scientific observation” (119). At the end of the memo, the FBI agent specified, “Especially important was the choice of individuals interviewed as they did not have
the ability to stand up to a professional newsman. The fine job of interviewing and editing done by the news people involved was also important” (119). By carefully and deliberately constructing mainstream broadcast programs, COINTELPRO influenced and controlled the public’s understanding of the black radicals. In this negative frame, radicals were presented unfavorably to the viewers, and this portrayal worked to also invalidate the activists’ agendas. Such tactics, as we shall see, eventually came to haunt Sunni Ali as she moved into a leadership role in the black secessionist movement.

3.7 Conclusion

Sunni Ali’s activism continued to develop in the wake of the Black Power and Black Nationalist movements, gaining momentum when she and other community organizers realized most of their activism did not effectively challenge the structural oppression in their communities. As they become more radical, the American government countered radicalized activism with repression, while simultaneously promoting a discourse of racial harmony and equality. The Black Power activists’ political activity, however, increasingly contradicted the mainstream American ideology of racial harmony and equal opportunity for blacks and whites, and, in this political atmosphere, movement participants revolted in over one hundred cities throughout the country.

Black female activists certainly participated in the Black Power Movement. Sunni Ali and other women, especially those who became involved with the Black Panthers, became increasingly radical and used various modes of resistance to transform black urban communities. Black Power participants saw it was incumbent on them to provide protection and support for the
people in their communities, especially since forced integration was primarily the cause for indecent housing, high unemployment, and inadequate education. Despite the passage of civil rights legislation, conditions in the vast majority of black communities resembled colonization, where white dominant groups controlled the resources and institutions in black subordinated locales.

Some Black Power Movement activists became nationalists, promoting an agenda of racial unity, black cultural pride, and autonomy for people of African descent. Working as culturalists or revolutionaries, Black Nationalists fundamentally agreed that black liberation was the highest priority and believed that black America must unite as a solidified community before African-Americans could participate effectively in white America. Reframing their conditions as neo-colonial, Black Nationalists wanted to control the resources and institutions in their communities. Influenced by these trends, Sunni Ali and other black women gradually transitioned from community activists to Black Nationalists. Eventually engaging in cultural nationalism by singing with Miriam Makeba, Sunni Ali became a Black Panther at a very young age and easily adapted to the Party’s call for militancy, uniformity, and community-building.

Black nationalists’ conflicts hindered the effectiveness of each organization, allowing COINTELPRO tactics to further exasperate the inter-organizational, pre-existing tensions, especially as black militancy increased. Cross-organizational problems strained community resources and made the different groups appear unstable and counter-effective, which was particularly problematic given that the nationalists’ goal was to unify black people. Also, Woodard notes that Black Nationalists, like Baraka, disagreed with more militant black separatists, such as Sunni Ali, who would eventually become involved in the secessionist-minded Republic of New Africa, which wanted to annex several southern states for a black nation. Nevertheless, as we shall see, Sunni Ali, similar to other activists in the Black Power and Black Nationalist movements, was
ready for the next phase of her revolutionary activism and openly accepted the development of a black nation with the Republic of New Africa. Having experienced the limited effectiveness of community organizing and other Black Nationalist approaches, she sought other ways to liberate black Americans.

Over the next several years, Sunni Ali’s political trajectory expanded, especially as she worked as a member of the BPP and traveled with Carmichael and Makeba in Europe. Soon, however, she would come to believe that even the Black Panthers were limited in their scope and range of activism. The inner-organizational and intra-organizational issues, such as leadership changes, ideological differences, and government repression, steadily made the BPP appear less than effective. Sunni Ali’s political consciousness was heightened, however, and so she gradually sought other ways to grow as an activist. In one of our interview sessions, she told me she had grown as much as possible working as a Black Panther. The next phase of her evolution only made sense: to become a citizen of a separatist black nation, taking the oath of nationhood to be a citizen in the Republic of New Africa.

In the next chapter, I illustrate how the rebellions in black communities and the Black Nationalist groups’ organizational challenges opened the pathway for the Republic of New Africa. I also contextualize Sunni Ali’s transition from the BPP to the Republic of New Africa, which in turn prepares us for a close look at her communication strategies as a Republic of Africa citizen in chapter five.
RACE, REBELLION, RIOT, AND THE FOUNDING OF A SEPARATIST BLACK NATION

Sunni Ali’s political consciousness grew in proportion to her participation in the Black Power and Black Nationalist movements in the 1960’s. Her revolutionary activism was molded by the radicalization of the Civil Rights Movement, creating the exigency for Black Power and Black Nationalism. Sunni Ali, along with other black female activists, decisively committed themselves, willing to do whatever was necessary for black liberation. The spontaneous uprisings in over a hundred black cities were key indicators that the only choice for freedom was black power, and the city of Detroit, in 1967, was no exception. Accepting the limitations of their attempts to work in “the system,” through community organizing, cultural nationalism, and revolutionary nationalism, the increased militancy among black activists was now taking on a new form: separatist nationalism.

In 1967, while Sunni Ali, at nineteen years old, sang on international stages, her father Adegbalola in Boston and other blacks in Detroit, through Black Nationalism, were self-determined activists ready to assume a more militant form of community-building. Adegbalola’s community organizing in Boston, paralleling the increasingly radicalized black activists in Detroit, led him to network with other Black Nationalists around the country, in particular with the Henry brothers in Detroit. To advance the struggle, they started envisioning an alternative nation, where people of African descent had not second-class but full citizenship. According to Anthony D. Smith in “Dating a Nation,” people seek to build a nation “when a sufficient number of people feel threatened by intergroup contact and become aware of their ethnic identity, and when they seek to participate in national politics to redress the situation” (58). A black nation, there-
fore, for many oppressed blacks, was the logical solution. Their nationalism, similar to other nationalist developments, was birthed as a “doctrine of popular freedom and sovereignty,” and black activists sought to take their political destiny into their own hands (A. D. Smith 4).

In this chapter, after discussing how Sunni Ali transitioned from the Black Panther Party to the Republic of New Africa (PGRNA), and showing the gradual increase in militancy in the Black Power Movement, I interpret how the PGRNA sought to constitute a nation and how the New African national identity was understood and accepted by Republic of New Africa citizens. First, I discuss the Detroit 1967 black rebellion and lay out the historical context of race relations between blacks and whites. I pay particular attention to the development of black militancy and how black activists effectively resisted during the inner cities revolts. Next, I discuss how the Republic of New Africa was a response to the Detroit 1967 inner-city uprisings, attempting to organize black activism. I also discuss the perceived benefits of the PGRNA. After discussing Sunni Ali’s father’s role in the creation of the black nation and detailing the founding of the Republic of New Africa, I evaluate the black nation’s political structure and evaluate the process of people attaining black nationhood citizenship. Then, I analyze Sunni Ali’s enactment of citizenship in the Republic of New Africa. Finally, I illustrate how womanism is a useful way of evaluating Sunni Ali’s rhetorical strategies as the Minister of Information for the Republic of New Africa.

4.1 Ending Oppression Through An Independent Black Nation

In 1967, Black Power in the Motown city Detroit was gaining momentum in the wake of the rebellions throughout the United States. After the Supreme Court ruled that segregation was
unconstitutional with the 1954 decision in Brown v. Board of Education, the process of implementing integration was slow and met with resistance from both blacks and whites. Similar to other American urban centers, the blacks in Detroit faced obstacles from inadequate and unaffordable housing, police brutality, unfair labor practices, lack of employment and urban revitalization programs, and a rapidly shifting demographic landscape (Geschwender 68). As the black population of the city increased, white Detroiters fled to suburban confines, leading to the evaporation of resources and structural decline. As a result, many of these besieged locales inadvertently fomented the rise of black disenchantment.

Blacks in Detroit decidedly channeled their frustrations into mobilized action. They realized that direct and immediate action was necessary to challenge and transform unjust conditions, and that a more significant and impactful blow to the prevailing power structure was possible. In the midst of the social and urban unrest, rebellion engulfed the city. Prior to the revolt, white Detroit police officers were involved in several racial incidents that resulted in a number of black people being killed. The 1968 report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders investigated the urban rebellion in Detroit, and the commission’s findings showed there was exceptional racial hostility between blacks and whites (85). Foreseeing such fatal consequences and recognizing the underpinnings of the city’s problems, Judge George Edwards, in 1965, claimed the local police forces in black communities viewed “each person on the streets as a potential criminal or enemy” (Advisory Commission 85). According to the Kerner Commission Report, the high rate of police brutality was directly instrumental in creating an “overwhelming” feeling of dissatisfaction among residents (85).

Discontent suffused Detroit’s populace and suffocated any hopes of avoiding rebellion. Outright, people were killed, and no one was held accountable: 1) a black female prostitute was
rumored to have been killed by a white member of the vice squad; and 2) Danny Thomas, a 27-year-old black veteran, was killed by a gang of white youth (Advisory Commission 85). After each death was considered “justifiable,” many African Americans’ frustration and rage came to a head. On Saturday night, July 22, 1967, the Detroit Police Department planned and executed five “blind pig” raids. A “blind pig” was an illegally operated social nightclub in black communities. After the fifth raid ended with 82 people being transported to the station, there were approximately 200 people gathered outside the United Community and Civic League, which was at the corner of 12th Street and Clairmount (84). Onlookers decided to throw items at the officers, sparking the rebellion, and a six-day insurrection ensued. Over 5,000 National Guardsmen, 2,700 Army troops, and 800 police officers brought in 201 rounds of ammunition, in the first few hours. There were initially 7,200 arrests (some held as long as 30 hours on buses and others spent days in an underground garage without toilet facilities). The Detroit rebellion caused the deaths of 43 people, with 347 injured. Approximately 5,000 people were left homeless (97-107). With the city having an estimated $500 million in damages, there were also about 1,300 buildings demolished and 2,700 buildings looted (Geschwender 72).

Though chaos consumed the city, at the center of the revolt was a contingent of black Detroiters functioning as an organized component in the community’s opposition. What appeared to be a spontaneous gathering of people after the raid was actually planned by local black leaders. The intention was to demonstrate the power, capability, commitment, and political mobilization of non-whites and to make the white community cognizant of foreseeable dangers if black communities continued to suffer (Obadele 7). There was a formulated cadre of individuals, safe houses, and abundant ammunition, functioning to support snipers. They shot and killed police officers and Task Force officers, and they barricaded themselves so as not to be overpowered by
officers. In an environment of killing, as police officers removed their badges and covered their license plates, Detroit “was saturated with fear” (Advisory Commission 99).

Immediately following the 1967 Detroit rebellion, a group of Black Power activists called the Citywide Citizens Action Committee (CCAC) was formed, and membership included a number of people from the Central United Church of Christ. Chaired by Reverend Albert Cleage, leaders and residents in Detroit’s black community, such as Milton and Richard Henry, Detroit local chapter NAACP president Rev. James E. Wadsworth, and Max Stanford, sought vindication for what they considered crimes against black people by white America, especially the beatings and murders suffered during the rebellion (Lee 2). CCAC was an all-black organization and not open to whites for membership or meeting attendance.

Six weeks after the Detroit uprising, a “People’s Tribunal” was held at Central United Church of Christ by the CCAC, which was located on Detroit’s Westside (later renamed the Shrine of the Black Madonna). The case accused three white Detroit police officers and one black security guard of “executing” three black residents: Carl Cooper, Aubrey Pollard, and Fred Temple. The black victims were killed on July, 26, 1967, the fourth day of the insurrection, at the Manor House annex off Woodward Avenue, and the presumed executions occurred because the men were with two white women (Lee 1). As co-prosecutor with Solomon A. Plapkin, a white attorney, Milton Henry presented his case, which was heard by an audience of about 400 people. Other notable participants demonstrated how most black Detroiter understood what was at stake. The Tribunal included people such as Rosa Parks (a juror), Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick (the court stenographer and chair of the Congressional Black Caucus), John O. Killens (a juror and novelist), and Kenneth V. Cockrel (the judge, moderator and co-founder of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and Detroit City Council member). The verdict found the officers guilty
of “coldly assassinating” the three young men (Lee 1). As demonstrated, there was definitely a need for Detroit black activists to engage in self-defense.

After witnessing the onslaught of constant brutality and government repression, Black Power activists in Detroit continued to defend and to liberate black communities from the dominant white power structure, community-building under black unity. On October 12, 1967, approximately 250-300 people gathered for a CCAC meeting at Southwest Baptist Church and listened to Cleage spell out his philosophical perspective on black unity, black control, and black power. Community residents were urged to join any of the twelve committees that dealt with a range of issues from housing, labor, employment, finances, redevelopment, and communications. The primary goal was to promote collective action and harness resources for community development. “The theme constantly reiterated by Reverend Cleage and other speakers was black identity, black unity, and preparedness [for] transfer of power to the black community from the white power structure” (Lee 1). Members and attendees were militants and non-militants, but the CCAC had clearly emerged as an organization leveraging black power to counter the Detroit white power structure.

A number of Black Power participants in Detroit and around the country quickly began to see themselves as separatists, yet another variation of Black Nationalism. Black Nationalism in what was eventually to become the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Africa (PGRNA) was demonstrated through both a revolutionary and a cultural nationalist perspective, while the brand of nationalism was explicitly regarded as separatist. Separatist nationalists believed black America’s liberation required the creation of a sovereign state, and self-government was deemed the most viable solution, particularly given black people’s tragic experiences in white-controlled systems. In his work on developments in Detroit, William Van Deburg high-
lights the fact that, to some extent, most nationalists incorporated some form of separatist ideology, and most acknowledged a similar set of beliefs.

(1) Separatism differed greatly from segregation. The former was far more ennobling. Its motive force came from within black America and was not imposed by an external power. (2) Both separatism and nationalism were well adapted for use in the black freedom struggle because they were grounded in social reality. Each recognized the essential racial dichotomy of American institutional and cultural life and sought to turn it to black advantage. (3) Since there was little reciprocity of interest or expectation between black and white America, accepted channels for inducing societal change were heavily biased toward maintenance of the status quo. (4) Majoritarian interests almost always were inimical to the welfare of blacks. (5) To survive as people, Afro-Americans first had to establish a corporate consciousness and sense of collective responsibility. Then, informed by shared group values, they would attempt to chart their own destiny. This was to be accomplished through the formation, preservation, and control of their own institutions and means of expression, independent of white influence. (6) Although strengthened by the geographic consolidation of the black community, their nationalism was not to be defined solely in terms of a struggle over land, but also was to be seen as a struggle for natural resources, social justice, and human dignity. (7) Whatever their preexisting political beliefs, all blacks were to be considered potential members of the black nation.

(131)

Summarily, therefore, at the most basic level, revolutionary and cultural nationalists were actually more similar than different. The nationalists’ aims were to allow black people autonomy to direct their own lives. Even though each group articulated diverging points of view for priori-
ties, cross-organizational commitment to Black Nationalism tacitly presupposed adherence to some aspects of separatism.

By far the most important Black Nationalist separatist group that emerged out of the chaos of Detroit was the aforementioned Republic of New Africa. In March 1968 at the Black Government Conference convened by the Malcolm X Society and Group on Advanced Leadership, the PGRNA was founded in Detroit at New Bethel Church. After two days of deliberations held at Detroit’s Shrine of the Black Madonna, the black-owned Twenty Grand Hotel, and Wayne State University, a Declaration of Independence was hashed out and set forth as the first proclamation for blacks to become “free, independent, and successful (“Birth of Our Nation” 1). At the founding, hundreds of black activists attended and over two hundred people signed the document, which signified their presumed right to claim independence from the United States. Sunni Ali’s father Adegbalola was among the attendees for this event, while she toured with Makeba and Carmichael. Only three categories of individuals were allowed to attend: participants who were black nationalists and ready to separate from America, observers who were “genuinely” interested, and technical advisers (people who had something to add to the emergent black nation, such as lawyers, doctors, economists, scientists, or industrialists) (Senate Hearing Document 4352). As founders of the black government, participants were at once “the conquerors of history but the conquered of history. This [was] the surest sign of their success” (Norton 125).

The Black Government Conference agenda, created by the Malcolm X Society, outlined working sessions to have inclusive discussion about the nature of black nationhood. To help facilitate productive conversation, the agenda spelled out activities that hindered working towards progress. For instance, possible attendees were forewarned to “spare” anything deemed unproductive:
“Great Leaping Legba, Brothers, Spare Us!

This is a working conference, brothers and sisters: we came to get something done. So please spare us—

a. Your swinging “I’m blacker than you are” speech.

b. Your passionate “Let’s get guns and undo our castration” speech.

c. Your matchless “Black is Beautiful” speech.

d. Your throbbing “If you’re over thirty, forget it baby” speech.

Honestly, we’ve already heard it.

YOUR HOSTS,
(For your brothers and sisters in pain.) (Senate Hearings 4354)

In 1968, Sunni Ali arrived back in the U.S., while her father was helping to organize the founding convention in Detroit, planning the government and eventually becoming the Minister of Defense. Sunni Ali, trusting her father’s guidance, was finally ready to embark on her New African experience. Supported by her father, she enthusiastically embarked on the path toward Republic of New Africa citizenship.

As we will see later, the New African citizenship process was geared towards developing black nationalists who were mentally, politically, socially, and culturally revolutionized. Nationhood building was constant and called for Republic of Africa citizens to be ready for revolution at any moment. Sunni Ali and other revolutionary black female nationalists committed themselves to consciousness-raising activities inside and outside their respective communities.

After her singing tour ended with Makeba and with continued faith in her father, Sunni Ali found herself in a Republic of New Africa self-defense training class.
In the Roxbury section of Boston, my father introduced me to some people. I wasn’t really clear who they were. I found out pretty quickly that they were men and women that my father had developed a relationship with in the Republic of New Africa. [This was] the first time of hearing about the Republic of New Africa, and I hadn’t read anything about it. It wasn’t really popular. I’m coming out of my little whirlwind of travel and this is the first thing that I’m hearing. My father says, “I need you to come to this training class on self-defense. I believe, in retrospect, this was his strategy for bringing me into the Republic of New Africa. He never was comfortable with me being in the Panther Party. He didn’t really have a good feeling about the Panther Party because he felt that it was not moving in the right direction.

After she was introduced to the Republic of New Africa and taking several more classes, she took the oath of allegiance in 1969 in Boston under her father, officially becoming a New African citizen. When we talked in our interviews, she related how her work with the Black Panther Party had plateaued. She was ready for her next stage of revolutionary evolution with the PGRNA. Interviewing her, she commented, “It was an opportunity to move from the Black Panther Party rhetoric. I saw it as not a lateral move but a move forward in my development of nationalism. I really hadn’t understood what nationalism was, and I’m not saying the Black Panther Party didn’t have a nationalist leaning. I saw it as a move from one level to the next level.” Sunni Ali told me that, in agreement with her father, she was ready for a deeper engagement with Black Nationalism and had grown as much as she could as a Panther. She had a “better and clearer understanding of [her] experience,” and the Republic of New Africa, she said, “just spoke to me.”

The Republic of New Africa was “home” for Sunni Ali’s burgeoning revolutionary nationalism. Her return from touring with Makeba was a decisive moment, leading her to believe
that she needed more as a political activist. As a citizen of the Republic of New Africa, she was, once again, advancing her political consciousness to the next level and, she thought, better serving her people. While her involvement in the Black Panther Party was a necessary step in her development as an activist, she had barely touched the broader implications of Black Nationalism. In 1969, taking the oath of allegiance to the black nation, she, along with hundreds of other Black Nationalists, were advancing the black liberation struggle, by any means necessary.

Gaidi Obadele ascertained that nationhood for black Americans was fundamentally necessary to support and develop communities that fostered a healthily balanced black experience. "[A]s descendants of the enslaved African, we try importantly to regain our spiritual and psychological balance because we live in the time of the resurrection--i.e., the time when a people awake from their deaf, dumb, and blinded state, emerge from their spiritual tombs, and come forth to the fullness of life" (33). Under an alternative ideological and epistemological paradigm that stemmed from an African historio-cultural perspective, African Americans would finally be able to exercise their full potential as first-class citizens with inalienable rights and privileges bestowed on their own country's citizenry. The development of a nation, as Ernest Gellner notes, emerges out of a specifically defined historical context (55). For the PGRNA, black folks would not have to struggle against white supremacist capitalistic oppression, and, as PGRNA citizens, they would have a safe space to explore their cultural heritage and raise their consciousness above that of the captured and enslaved African. Living as second-class citizens in white America, especially after the brutalizing effects of chattel slavery, people of African descent would now engage in a dialectical reality of oppression and liberation, working through negative internalization of Eurocentric ideas and behavior and simultaneously crafting a new black-nation reality. According to Gellner, nations are not pre-existing and bound as objective sites, but, more
importantly, nations, national identities, and the manner in which individuals identify themselves and their national boundaries are only temporally fixed (56). Even in its provisional state, the Republic of New Africa, as an exigency for black liberation amid countless other social movements, was obviously and seriously constrained by the timing of its emergence, particularly in lieu of the American government’s implementation of law-and-order doctrine.

The Republic of New Africa’s national identity, responding to the call for the liberation of blacks, was the first time most New Africans, especially Sunni Ali and her father Adegbalola, felt as if they were “real” citizens. After the PGRNA citizens learned about nation-building, it was then time for them to practice and build the Republic of New Africa. As we will see, through Sunni Ali’s interviews and archival collection, the separatist Black Nationalist identity was fundamentally similar to cultural and revolutionary Black Nationalist principles of self-determination, unity, and cultural pride.

4.2 “I Define Myself as A Black Nationalist”

The construction of national identity in the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Africa was congruent with the tendencies of national identity construction in general. Benedict Anderson contends that a nation “is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). Similar to other nations, the PGRNA was “imagined,” because, though all citizens would never actually know each other, they nonetheless had an “image of their communion,” locating them in “finite” yet “elastic boundaries” and dreaming of “being free.” Furthermore, the nation was imagined as a “community,” a “horizontal comradeship” (6-7). Some African Americans, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, had long recognized that most
black communities in the United States were, in fact, “a world,” and “so isolation made it” (120). Through this structural isolation, African Americans commonly knew and experienced collective disenfranchisement, disappointment, and dissatisfaction with American politics.

In the case of the PGRNA national identity, which is best considered as ethnic nationalism, New African nationhood was “based on narratives that emphasize[d] shared historical memories, myths of common ancestry, rule by law, and a sense of ethnic and cultural solidarity” (Bruner 6). For the analytical purposes of my study, there must also be an understanding that national identity discursively circulates, meaning that the very notion of one’s identity is vested in language. Stuart Hall notes, “identity is within discourse,” and, thus, the construction of nationhood, as perceived by its citizens, is both made possible and is constrained by the manner in which the nation articulates itself.

The New African national identity was articulated as the basis upon which people of African descent could construct a shared sense of political community, helping each oppressed black individual to identify commonalities with other oppressed blacks. A New African, according to Dexter Gordon, was “presented as united in such a way as to allow for the transcendence of divisions such as interests, age, and class” (33). Citizenship in the Republic of New Africa meant accepting that the exigency for establishing the PGRNA manifested from the many years of resistance occurring throughout the country, for such resistance was viewed as a means to productively engage the four-hundred-year war against black Americans. From Gellner’s perspective, individuals associated with the PGRNA willfully submitted themselves to accept, to adhere to, and to assert their claims for establishing nationhood.

In constituting the Republic of New Africa national identity, participants freely discussed and discursively negotiated the meaning of black nationhood. Hall emphasizes that “identity is
within discourse,” and, after listening to Imari Obadele deliver the keynote remarks on Saturday morning, March 30, 1968, the Black Government Conference attendees immediately began to plan their prospective nation (16). They participated in session conversations related to nation-building development politics: citizenship, sovereignty, the Declaration of Independence, the creation of government, the opening of diplomatic relations, the opening of reparations and land negotiations, taxing, finance, the creation of industries, foreign policy, the creation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and policies related to guerillas, self-defense, retaliation, youth, a military draft, and required types of government officials (Senate Hearings 4355).

The genesis of black nationhood status was cemented with the newly imagined Republic of New Africa citizens signing their Declaration of Independence. Their signatures were an enactment of the first black nation on U.S. soil and a sign of their commitment to the black liberation struggle. Anne Norton claimed, similar to the original signers of the American Constitution, the PGRNA’s Declaration of Independence was at once text and nation. It [wa]s an act that founded the nation and the sign that marked it. It [wa]s the expression and annunciation of collective identity, at once the people’s advent and their epiphany. It [wa]s an effort to represent what the people [we]re and to record what they ha[d] been. It reconstruct[ed], as all such representations do, the present and the past it record[ed]. It reveal[ed], as all such representations do, that those who it represent[ed] rema[de] themselves. (123)

And remake themselves they did as the first citizens of the Republic of New Africa. For the first time in the provisionally identified imagined community, voters selected their PGRNA leaders, not candidates that supported white America.

Their identities were based on how they defined themselves to others, including white Americans, other Black Nationalists, civil rights activists, and other black Americans. As Hall
contends, “there is no identity that is without the dialogic relationship to the Other. The Other is not outside, but also inside the Self, the identity” (16). So, what the PGRNA citizens envisioned and materially accepted as their New African national identity was largely based on what a New African was not, circumscribing the lines of inclusion and exclusion and positioning the recognizable Other. In the process of black nationhood development, Republic of New Africa citizens were always simultaneously producing a “constitutive outside,” a “them” and a validating “we” (Mouffe 36).

Their actions, including conference participation, nation-building input, and the choice of citizenship, created boundaries to demarcate their national identity from the hegemonic white American national identity. Anthony D. Smith points out that “a sense of national identity provides a powerful means of defining and locating individual selves in the world, through the prism of collective identity and its distinctive culture” (17). In this historical event of founding the black nation, the Republic of New Africa citizens were politically self-defined and institutionally located, and, this process, as A. D. Smith duly notes, is the “key to national identity” (17).

Molding themselves into their national identity, citizens were expected to accomplish the following tasks:

(a) Be informed, studying Republic of New Africa materials and keeping abreast of local, national and world events.
(b) Study the New African Creed and put it into practice in one’s life.
(c) Pay taxes, to support the operations of the Government and the liberation of the land.
(d) Sell newspapers and distribute literature to aid in recruiting citizens, creating mass support, and lifting the political consciousness of the community.
(e) Take out petitions, as they are used, to support the national and international objectives of the Republic.

(f) Prepare oneself and search out others, for service and/or resistance in Mississippi and the rest of the national territory. (Administration Handbook 19-20)

To work on behalf of the Republic of New Africa, to be a citizen in the black nation, and to be a black activist, was to be a student of an evolving revolutionary mindset. Sunni Ali’s Republic of New Africa activities were predicated on her committed role to be a student, and the accepted New African identity was framed in an ongoing historical war in America against people of African descent (Lumumba 36). Frantz Fanon, with a similar examination of developing and implementing national culture and political transformation, emphasized how revolutionaries should utilize historical accounts of struggle against oppressive forces “with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope” (232). Community collaboration and citizen education were centrally coordinated in unity to achieve one goal: black liberation. And both community and citizen education were to be equally significant, if there was to be perpetually effective resistance.

Sunni Ali diligently studied and learned from her mentors, which were some of the founding members of the PGRNA. People such as Imari Obadele, Alajo Adegbalola, Gaidi Obadele, and Queen “Mother” Moore were founders and signers of the nation’s Declaration of Independence. All of the leaders were well-seasoned black activists, and on average each person had about forty years of activist experience. With this wealth of collected knowledge and experience in black resistance, Republic of New Africa recruits found an immense store of keen insights, tenacity, and wisdom, and a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be trained as black revolutionary nationalists. Through observation, Republic of New Africa courses, and mentorship,
black nation recruits, such as Sunni Ali, were carefully guided and trained to develop sustaining and trustworthy relationships for sisterhood, brotherhood, and family- hood to further promote an agenda for black nation liberation.

For Sunni Ali and other Black Nationalists, they knew their nation, their “imagined community,” through shared commonalities. Asking Sunni Ali how she defined Black Nationalism, she said:

I saw nationalism as a clear understanding of who we are. Nationalism gave me a connection, rather than just saying I was black. I had an understanding of my people and me included, not as an individual but as a nation of people who had all experienced the same things in their lives. We were all living in a society that had repressed and subjugated us, so that we were disconnected from our nation. Nation means, to me, that we include all of our people and their experiences as one experience of our people. Nationalism meant having consciousness that, first, we had come from a nation of people. This means you have a commonality in language, which is very often a geographical location, culture, and spirituality. These are the three fundamental elements that make a nation. With my understanding, at that time, as a nationalist, you had to accept these basic fundamental necessities that could comprise a nation. Without those elements, then you wouldn’t consider yourself being a nation. I accepted and understood that nationalism meant that we accepted and were willing to become a part of representing that and fighting for the right to develop our nation. I define myself as a black nationalist, which is not any different from what I learned about an Italian nationalist or a French nationalist. Sunni Ali’s individual national identity was interconnected and only identifiable within the collective framework of the PGRNA.
In *National Identities*, Anthony D. Smith recognizes that a nation has several fundamental aspects: “an historic territory, or homeland,” “common myths and historical memories,” “a common, mass public culture,” “common legal rights and duties for all members,” and “a common economy with territorial mobility for members” (14). A New African national identity, as Sunni Ali pointed out, was based on how they “accepted” and “understood” that they were personally responsible for representing the collective identity of the Republic of New Africa. Commonalities based on people of African descent’s cultural, political, and historical experiences were the bonds that linked them as a nation; it also meant they would need a homeland.

The PGRNA leadership structure also reflected its emerging national identity, supporting the black nation’s goals and functioning to fundamentally sustain “the state” and its various institutions. Elected citizens serving as the political personnel personified the triumph of instituting the Republic of New Africa. Understanding the criteria for each position and each person’s activist qualifications, PGRNA government officials reflected the “national will and national identity of the inclusive population” (A. D. Smith 17). These leaders would serve for a four-year term from 1968 to 1972. Elected officials were Queen Mother Moore (Minister without Portfolio), Robert Williams (President), Raymond E. Willis (Minister of Finance), Baba Oseijeman Adefunmi (Minister of Culture and Education), Imari Obadele (the first Minister of Information), Betty Shabazz (Second Vice President), Joan Franklin (Minister of Justice), Gaidi Obadele (First Vice President), Obaboa Alowo (Treasurer), Wilbur Grattan Sr. (Deputy Minister of State and Foreign Affairs), and Mwesi Chui (Deputy Minister of Defense).

In a fifteen-page *Esquire* article in January 1969, author Robert Sherrill interviewed Imari Obadele, the Minister of Information, while discussing the overall goals and leadership of the PGRNA. Sherrill’s examination also offered first-person descriptions provided by the new
Queen Mother Moore was charged with educating the youth and agitating “to forge stronger links with the continent [Africa].” Willis was in charge of distributing hoped for reparations, and Adefunmi was “to see that false and alien ideas and institutions [we]re discar-ded” through “re-Africanization,” which is “the taking of African names and learning African languages.” Imari Obadele’s objectives were “engineering consent among all black people living in the U.S.” and the “creation of an atmosphere of support and toleration of the Republic among the white as well as the black population of the U.S. and the world.” Betty Shabazz held jurisdiction over accepting citizenship applications and administering the Republic of New Africa oath of allegiance to newly recruited citizens. Franklin, as Minister of Justice, would present the PGRNA proposition to an international tribunal that claimed the “U.S. is exercising an illegal trusteeship over us [African people]; is imposing systematic tyranny; has failed to incorporate us [black people] into the U.S. as citizens; and reparations are due us as a result of past and continuing oppressions” (Sherrill 78). Gaidi Obadele was “the executive officer” that carried out the orders of Robert Williams, the president. Alowo handled the financial bookkeeping, and Grattan worked to safeguard New Africans and develop amicable foreign relations. Chui’s responsibilities as Minister of Defense included protecting all citizens, Ministers, and Republic of New Africa land, wherever it might be secured, and he was also in charge of establishing an officer’s candidate school (74).

Similar to the United States’ government structure, the PGRNA was structured with three branches: executive, legislative, and judicial. Additionally, there was the civil service commission, which was responsible for hiring “all government employees under the rank of Minister, Deputy Minister, or Corporation Head,” and the constitutional commission was responsible for
creating the Constitution and conducting the vote (Senate Hearing Document 4358). Unlike their experiences as American citizens, New Africans would have their nation’s legal structure “protect local and provincial liberties,” expressing a “common will and common political sentiments” (A. D. Smith 10). In one of our interviews about their national government organization, Sunni Ali told me, “You could see the difference between us and the white government structures, and, in the Republic of New Africa, everything came from the bottom up. It didn’t come from the top down.” The leaders in the PGRNA conceived of a nation for blacks where they would organically develop how the government would exist and directly support the citizenry.

Another important element of establishing a black nation was the use of black “guerillas” to protect and secure the livelihood and planned for property of Republic of New Africa citizens. They were to be armed black men who would provide the nation with “second-strike power,” and, as the United States government might wage war against them, Republic of New Africa guerillas in metropolitan communities would engage in battle until Republic of New Africa citizens took “possession of the physical land” (Sherrill 72). Documents from the founding convention relevant to such tasks also stated that

Blacks who go into the street, fight for freedom, and fall into the hands of American authorities, should, if they then say they have allegiance to our nation, be treated as prisoners of war, rather than common criminals. This proposition must be discussed by the delegates. It seems clear, that even without a declaration of war against the U.S. (and we recommend no declaration of war), members of our military forces would have rights under the Geneva Conventions. The U.S. claims [such] rights for U.S. military personnel now held in North Vietnam even though the U.S. has no declaration of war against North Vietnam. Our situation would be parallel. (Senate Hearing Document 4359)
Republic of New Africa citizens, including Sunni Ali, accepted and planned for a long and tumultuous journey towards internationally recognized nationhood. Learning from historical separatist movements, New Africans were extremely cognizant of the brutally torturous measures the white American government would likely inflict, and, if there was remotely any possibility of a black provisional government, New Africans had to take up arms and be well-prepared for the inevitability of war.

The Republic of New Africa national identity, therefore, was concretized by the leaders of the PGRNA who controversially claimed literally rights to actual land, despite the fact that the United States owned and controlled the territory they sought to possess. The claimed land would serve as a homeland, anchoring their identities and communities.

A ‘historic land’ is one where terrain and people have exerted mutual, and beneficial, influence over several generations. The homeland becomes a repository of historic memories and associations, the place where ‘our’ sages, saints and heroes lived, worked, prayed and fought. All this makes the homeland unique. Its rivers, coasts, lakes, mountains and cities become ‘sacred’ – places of veneration and exaltation whose inner meanings can be fathomed only by the initiated, that is, the self-aware members of the nation. The land’s resources also become exclusive to the people; they are not for ‘alien’ use and exploitation. The national territory must become self-sufficient. (A. D. Smith 9)

Not only did New Africans share common myths, cultural practices, and historical memories as an oppressed people, they also assumed responsibility for living on the land and developing the national territory.

Securing the land would only be possible with the securing of finances. As a gesture of solidarity and to accomplish this goal, several funding avenues were explored. Starting off, at the
Black Government Conference, one dollar was collected from approximately two to three thousand people. At a rate of two percent, however citizens’ taxes would eventually support substantial nation-building ventures. A hundred-dollar bond, which was also called a Malcolm X certificate, would also be sold to at least one thousand people to raise $100,000, and Republic of New Africa nationhood support could also come from foreign countries. One of the most immediate and primary ways of increasing capital was through the entertainment industry publishing records, books, magazines, pictures, movies, and African clothes. Funds could also be acquired by the establishment of a “small commercial/industrial complex in the south,” which would house various forms of commerce from book stores, theaters, schools, hospitals, banks, manufacturing facilities, and a resort area (Senate Hearing Document 4359).

The development of the Republic of New Africa came at a pivotal time in the movement for various groups of Black Nationalists. The Republic of New Africa’s governmental structure and principles were the actualization of a Black Power Movement that already existed across the country. Building on the beneficial characteristics and ideas of both revolutionary and cultural nationalism, Republic of New Africa citizens molded their activism from both strands of Black Nationalism. A New African utilized what was necessary to nation-build and followed the governmental structure and guidelines to promote a productive black citizenry. Where the United States of America consistently failed to eradicate permanently a more than four-hundred-year system of oppression, the promise of black nationhood alternatively provided blacks with compensatory citizenship and the embodiment of first-class governance, and New African statehood was to be a sovereign liberation to counter white capitalistic hegemony.
4.3 The Independent New African State Shall Serve The People

Nationhood, as developed in the Republic of New Africa literature, was not merely a theory, but a praxis of black liberation. After the dream of American democracy was historically unrealized and consistently kept from black American citizens through violence and discrimination, an added value to become a citizen of the black provisional government was that each person, regardless of sex or class, had the right to help construct the political philosophy and the integrity of the new political institutions. To make the ideal of equally privileged nationhood a reality, Republic of New Africa citizens developed their political philosophy from the Tanzanian principles of Ujamaa, which actualized the aligning of a political, social, and cultural perspective. Focusing on “cooperative economics and community self-sufficiency,” the principles, according to DeBurg, were basically built on “a system based on the concept of familyhood and fashioned from Ethel practice[s] in traditional African societies” (Mississippi Old and New”). New Africans did “more in writing their constitution than inscribing their nationality. They include[d] in this inscription a sign that they d[id] so mindfully, in full recognition of the power of inscription to transform identity” (Norton 124).

The establishment of the PGRNA, inasmuch as its citizens were self-actualized to exist in liberated bodies, materialized, even provisionally, a “homeland” for the captive African subject. Known as The Code of Umoja, the constitution helped to define the PGRNA’s legal structure. “The Constitution represent[ed] a collective, conscious, willful entry into the symbolic order. In it [New Africans] bec[ame] a people of the text,” and the Constitution was the “creation of a new world order” (Norton 9). After a four-hundred-year battle, blacks now had an emergent govern-
ment designed to be responsive to their needs and responsible for their political agendas. According to the PGRNA constitutional preamble:

The Provisional Government and the independent New Afrikan State, once established, shall serve the people. In such service the Provisional Government and the Government of the independent New Afrikan Nation State, once established, shall not only seek to guarantee the individual full opportunity for personal dignity. The government of the independent New Afrikan State, once established, shall assure protection of the individual’s person and personal possessions, freedom of conscience, thought, speech, and association, equal access to and application of all laws and regulations, and justice for the individual. There may be no invidious discrimination based upon sex, color, natural or fortuitous disability, or creed—so long as such creed, in operation, does not violate the fundamental rights of others. (*The Code of Umoja* 3)

The PGRNA government structure, therefore, aimed to do several things. The most critical concern, and overwhelming obstacle, was to “free the land.” At the local level, “Government Centers” were to be located in the “National Territory” (which were the five states in the Black Belt—Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, and Florida—that had a significant majority population of black people), and locations outside the “National Territory” were to be known as “Consulates.” Consulates were located in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Baltimore, Cleveland, and Washington, D.C. (Cunnigen 71). Sunni Ali, as we will see, moving from the Boston consulate to the proposed national territory, was a part of establishing the New African presence in the south.

The People’s Center Council (PCC) that served as the national legislature made the law and policy, and the PCC held “precedence over the legislation, acts, directives, resolutions, and
orders of all officers and Governmental bodies of the Republic of New Africa” (*The Code of Umoja* 11). The President, the Vice Presidents, the national Ministers, and Representatives elected from “New African population districts” had to be members of the PCC. All members were citizens of the Republic of New Africa. Following the PCC, the People’s Revolutionary Leadership Council (PRLC) consisted of the PCC’s chairperson, the President that served as chair, the Vice Presidents, and the national Ministers, and it “operate[d] on the principle of collective leadership.” Everyone was required to adhere to the PRLC decisions, but the PCC had the authority to overrule or change PRLC decisions. In descending order after the PRLC, the President “ha[d] the duty to ensure that all PCC and PRLC decisions [we]re communicated to, followed by, and implemented by all national officers and unit leaders” and to “coordinate all Ministries when the PCC and PRLC [we]re out of session” (*The Code of Umoja* 16-19). And proceeding the President’s authority, the Vice Presidents were to “assist the President in the implementation of Presidential duties” (*The Code of Umoja* 43-44).

Ministers were also an important aspect of Republic of New Africa governance at both the national and local levels. For example, to protect and support the Republic of New Africa citizens’ goals, the Minister of Defense, which was Sunni Ali’s father starting in 1970, was responsible for recruits, providing their proper training to secure the “National Territory” and otherwise supporting the “Security Forces.” This person was the commander of all regular, over-ground, defense and security forces of the Republic and “directly responsible to the President. Adegbalola, according to Sunni Ali, who was preparing to move from Boston to New Orleans in the proposed national territory, in our interview, oftentimes accompanied the Republic of New Africa president Imari Obadele, and he protected the president from potentially dangerous threats. The Minister of Justice presided over all litigation regarding any PGRNA matter and
worked closely with judges to structure the people’s court system, counseling the President and other Ministers with legal concerns. The Minister of Information, as was Sunni Ali at one point, was obligated to create and disseminate internal and external information about the black nation, and this Minister also worked to secure paid and non-paid speaking engagements for Republic of New Africa government workers. Additionally, to secure revenue, Sunni Ali and other Ministers of Information created other Republic of New Africa materials for information-campaigning, developing a range of items from flyers to buttons, and flags (The Code of Umoja 46).

After the leadership of the Republic of New Africa solidified its nationhood status and created its government, the next phase was to have citizens engage in nation-building. The following section, therefore, explores how people became citizens of the Republic of New Africa and how citizens of the black nation worked to build and to sustain themselves in “New Communities” in the “National Territory” and in “Consulates.” At a time when American governmental forces held countless black communities under siege, the organized revolutionary development of the Republic of New Africa was a major oppositional force. At a time when various activists’ efforts in organizations such as the SCLC, SNCC, and the Black Panther Party, were destabilized and infiltrated by American FBI agents, citizens of the provisional government brazenly carried out the Black Nationalists’ goals and stayed committed to revolutionary change (Obadele 3). Citizens worked daily, either through nation-building classes, community outreach (such as information-campaigning in black communities, organizational meetings, or selling newspapers), or assigned nation tasks (“Administration Handbook” 18). Though citizenship status was granted to all qualified persons who took the oath, one’s actions as an active participant in the PGRNA demonstrated one’s commitment to and support for the black nation. The substan-
tive meaning of a citizen’s oath was predicated on how each one diligently and consistently worked for the Republic of New Africa.

Fulani Sunni Ali’s role as a revolutionary activist, as a citizen of the Republic of New Africa’s Boston Consulate, was to actualize the full potential of her citizenship. She dutifully studied the “Administrative Handbook,” which laid out the structure, function, and goals of the black nation. She learned how to “administrate a government” and “describe and prescribe a way” for citizens to develop community networks.

4.4 What All Republic of New Africa Citizens Must Do

To become a New African citizen was to experience a true sense of having inalienable rights, protection, and a black culture of respectability. By becoming a citizen, oppressed blacks not only altered their national state of allegiance, but also instituted a new “state” of reality. What was a dream deferred became a dream realized in black nationhood. “The citizens’ conceptions of their identities, individual as well as collective, [we]re irretrievably altered by the process of constituting themselves as a nation” (Norton 128). In accordance with the constitutional mandate, moreover, Republic of New Africa citizens would “claim no rights from the United States” (The Code of Umoja 3). Their enactments, adhering to the law of the black nation, continually constituted and reinforced their self-determined approach to sovereignty. Abiding by the Code of Umoja, Norton surmised:

The realization of the text in the lives of the people—the establishment of the institutions it describe[d], the accordance (and evasion) of the procedures it set forth, the assimilation of its vision of the nation’s ends, as well as its design by the people and their
posterity—reveal[ed] much what was hidden in the text. The unanticipated consequences that follow the text’s realization prompt[ed] realizations of another sort. They endow[ed] the people with greater capacity to comprehend the significance of their consumption.

The establishment, the realization in the material world, of each institution and set of procedures that the Constitution describe[d] g[ave] each a certain independence. (129)

New Africans mentally separated themselves from the United States and freely surrendered themselves to their new nation. To be a citizen of the PGRNA, one disavowed allegiance to the United States and proclaimed to be a New African. All black people would be free from oppression and, if necessary, provide support for an international war, freeing all other oppressed people. After building a new and better society, each citizen would have equal access to “promote industriousness, responsibility, scholarship, and service,” and, along with ending human exploitation of others and the environment, members of varying religious sects would not be subversive or undermine the goals of the new society. Trade and resources for production would be placed in the hands of the state, but only with the understanding that the people would receive maximum benefits and rewards granted to those tirelessly working on behalf of the revolution (The Code of Umoja 5).

Working under the PGRNA’s structure, Republic of New Africa citizens had to “prepare for exodus,” leaving the north, and “prepare the land” in the south for citizens arriving in the “National Territory” (“Administrative Handbook” 1-2). Citizens that prepared to leave the north had to do recruitment, train new recruits in skills and the ideology of nation-building, and locate transferrable resources to the “National Territory.” Citizens who prepared the land in the south were to develop “political allegiance [to] the New Community,” participate in building the institutional infrastructure of the PGRNA through community work, and provide support for “satel-
lite” communities. The Republic of New Africa citizens housed in a “New Community” needed to further develop “a Scheme of Life,” guidelines for national defense, and create an economic framework to sustain the territory (“Administrative Handbook” 2).

Any person of African descent was considered a potential citizen of the nation, unless an individual’s actions or written statement said otherwise. There was, however, a formal process if a person wanted to become a “citizen of record.” To be officially added to the black nation as a “citizen of record,” one had to complete courses, such as a nation-building and an orientation class, at one of the Government Centers or Consulates. A potential candidate could participate in Republic of New Africa local activities, but they could not take the “Oath of Allegiance” and could not state the Creed’s last paragraph (the nation’s pledge). Sunni Ali, as we will see, eventually went through the citizenship process. In doing so, she learned the meaning of black nationhood, the process of nationhood-building, and the overwhelming challenges of a New African nation attempting to secede from white America.

Interviewing Sunni Ali, I intently listened as she recounted the moment she took the oath, pledging commitment to black nationhood. She emphasized:

Pledges of allegiance are very serious commitments. So for me, when I raised my hand and took the oath of allegiance to the Republic of New Africa, I was clear that I was making an oath to my nation and to committing myself to be a part of the development work that it would take to develop a consciousness of my people. I committed myself to people, which is a nation. I was aware that this was a whole new concept to my people, as it was to me. Through my pledge, I committed my entire life to the development of a black nation through the processes that were laid out in the PGRNA [governmental structure]. I was committed to my own self-development first, and, then, a part of that was al-
so pledging to interact and to connect with people in my community and various communities. I pledged to always represent that philosophy, that perspective and concept of independent nationhood. We have to talk about what nationhood is, what is our objective, what we intend to achieve in our goals, as we declare nationhood status.

To support the black nation, Sunni Ali and other Republic of New Africa citizens had several obligations: consciousness-raising activities, nationhood work, and training. Sunni Ali, in one of our interviews, told me that from 1969 to 1972, she and other New Africans intensely trained and studied. No longer a Black Panther, a failed attempt at politics by working in “the system,” she was now politically involved, working outside “the system,” as a New African.

Fulfilling one’s responsibility to recruit citizens for the Republic of New Africa, the citizenry attended classes on nation-building and paramilitary training, and went from door-to-door in black communities educating people about the right to black self-government. New African consciousness-raising activities centered on several areas: “(1) Orientation; (2) Republic of New Africa Doctrine and Philosophy; (3) A Clear Understanding of What All Citizens Must Do; and (4) A Clear Understanding of What the Individual Must Do” (see Appendix). Orientation focused on teaching Republic of New Africa history, the Declaration of Independence, The Code of Umoja, the New African Creed, the New African Oath, and the PGRNA national structure and procedures. In nation-building classes, citizens learned about many historical black struggles and how black people were constantly brutalized and exploited in America. Studying W.E.B. DuBois, Herbert Aptheker, and Imari Obadele’s War in America, new recruits developed a New African mindset that was necessary to understand and accept their Republic of New Africa responsibilities.
Sunny Ali, as she appreciatively told me about her new experiences in nation-building, discussed how the founding leaders and mentors developed course materials to “develop a new consciousness”:

[We learned] about the Gabriel Prosser story, Nat Turner, and Harriet Tubman. All those stories, those true experiences of those people had not been known to us before. The sixties [was] when all of that was now being brought out to the forefront of developing new consciousness. We began to see these people as heroes and sheroes. We never had that in this country as a people, until that point. There was no documentation before that time. There were books written about these people, during their lifetimes or up until the late fifties and sixties. We began to learn more about the real purpose of Gabriel Prosser, the real purpose of Nat Turner, and we understood what it meant for people to raid Harper’s Ferry. For the first time in our lives, we were hearing this information from a black perspective and accepted that it was time for us to have pride in what they did.

Citizens also had to learn the Republic of New Africa doctrine and philosophy taught in a course entitled “Revolution and Nation Building.” Imari Obadele’s texts, Malcolm X’s speech “Message to the Grassroots,” and materials from nations such as Algeria, Ghana, Guinea, Tanzania, the Congo-Kinshasa, Australia, Cypress, Israel, Rhodesia, Union of South Africa, Canada, India, China, and Cuba, were gathered to teach the course. Along with taking courses, all citizens needed to study the materials and stay abreast of local, national, and international issues.

Becoming a Black Nationalist was process-oriented, not an automatic transference of black nationhood consciousness. After completing her courses under the tutelage of various Republic of New Africa leaders, Sunny Ali told me she would “always stand in such gratitude to them for carrying it on, connecting the dots and realizing what struggle was about. They gave us
gifts of understanding something.” She continued explaining in one of our interview sessions that she used the information about nationhood building to widen her angle of vision concerning the pervasive problems that historically plagued black communities. Explaining further, she articulated how the inhumane condition of most black communities was “not happening in a vacuum and that the old pattern of thought was because a person assumed it was because she was black, not measuring up to be smarter or to have financial stability.” Through the process of becoming a Black Nationalist, the internal and external process of decolonization, she eagerly attained insight into how the historical legacy of white supremacy and capitalism fostered the continual festering reality in many black communities. Learning and listening to her in our interview, I understood when she explained to me that Boston’s housing issues in the black communities were basically irresolvable if and only if the problems were narrowly defined and confined to one historical moment. She further told me that, in her nation-building classes and daily citizen duties, and in acquiring new terminology to discursively resituate herself and her people, she could now “see” that people of African descent in the United States were forced to live as a “subjugated nation,” meaning African Americans first had to know that they lived in a perpetual cycle of white domination. Furthermore, she emphasized that she and other New Africans, at that time, worked with the people in the community to help everyone understand what a “subjugated nation” was and what needed to be done to start liberating the people.

There were so many challenges. We had to rise to these challenges, because our people needed to develop to a level, where we [New Africans] were not blacked out or isolated from our people misunderstanding the terminology of our activism. We look back again, and we see clear lines of distinction between the so-called civil rights movement and human rights movement. We made the distinction, because someone else was
able to define those things. We learned the truth: there is only one movement that looks towards seeking the objective of redefining our people as human beings, which is the human rights movement. [Black people] as human beings was taken from us, when defined by the Bill of Rights as three-fifths human. So in the beginning, for us to bring back the humanity to our people, where our people no longer consider themselves [defined through the Bill of Rights] was the starting point.

New Africans had to revolutionize both the PGRNA’s “National Territory,” their minds, and their bodies. Removing the “mental and physical shackles” of “Negroisms,” Republic of New Africa citizens underwent a process of New African orientation to undo their socialization into materialism, individualism, and imperialism, and, undergoing this journey, a New African would be liberated from desires for “Cadillacs, dope, liquor, bowing, snuffing, and smoking” (“Republic of New Africa Nation Building Class” 5). The internal revolution was guided by the seven-principled nationalist value system of the Nguzu Saba (an African-American holiday created by Maulana Karenga during the Black Power Movement) and the New African Creed, and citizens experientially embodied this decolonized revolution. The external revolution consisted of eight strategic elements: skills (brains), labor, natural resources, internal support, international support, internal military viability, second strike capacity, and limited objectives (“Republic of New Africa Nation Building Class” 2). Sunni Ali, during one of our interviews, mentioned that she understood the consciousness-raising within black communities was an on-going process, and she also, undergoing internal and external decolonization, was individually raising her own consciousness, even if this led to increased militancy.
4.5 Black People Black Power Equals Black Nationhood

Black Americans who resisted had historically been met with counter-opposition from the white power structure. Members of the local communities needed protection from impending threats, and the organizations could not ignore the communities’ need for self-defense. The Republic of New Africa, similar to groups such as SNCC and CORE, instituted training for citizens, preparing them for outside attacks. PGRNA political thought emphasized this historical and contemporary fact of black struggle, therefore legitimizing the need for blacks to incorporate self-defense and armed resistance into their movements (Obadele 16). Obadele urged people of African descent to understand that the situation “under American government can only be explained in terms of incompetence, unwillingness, and/or unconcern on the part of the American government” (37). New Africans believed that the best prospects for survival, freedom, and prosperity was for blacks to govern themselves (Obadele 38).

Interestingly enough, to date, there is no national identity scholarship that examines the Republic of New Africa national identity construction or nationhood (Norton 13; Gellner 55; B. Anderson 23; Gordon 24). Moreover, there are barely a handful of articles about the PGRNA, and most of those conversations primarily focus on the founding of the black nation in 1968, not providing information about the black nation’s transformations and nationhood challenges (Deburg, Modern Black Nationalism 198; Deburg, A New Day in Babylon 145; Joseph 55). Most commonly, in discussions about the PGRNA, attention is given to the first citizens of the Republic of New Africa. Another shortcoming of research on the overall development of the black nation is the reprinting of speeches and other documents without analysis. Here and there, one might find a speech, article, or book written by Imari Obadele but no additional insights.
Clearly, there is a need to increase and expand our knowledge about secessionist black national identity, especially in the Republic of New Africa. Further analysis will provide several opportunities. First, historicizing the complexity and uniqueness of the PGRNA, a womanist framework helpfully repositions Black Nationalism, national identity formation, and its character. Like Africana womanism, one of the most important goals of PGRNA citizens was collective action. Applying the ideas formulated in *The Code of Umoja*, Republic of New Africa citizens worked “to strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation, and race” (Karenga 276). The first PGRNA president, Robert F. Williams, in the November 1968 “The Crusader Newsletter,” wrote, “A united front for our overall collective goal of Black liberation and self-determination is not a thing of petty individual beliefs. The dynamics of our most significant consensus must flow from our common desire to throw off the yoke of racist tyranny” (Senate Hearing Document 4198). Similar to other initiatives of the Black Power Movement, Republic of New Africa activists developed a community-centered focus, not individualism. They knew that without unity in numbers the goal of any revolution was in vain. Moreover, a unified front to de-colonize within and outside the United States fundamentally provided a network of skills, resources, energies, and support.

New Africans and womanists were equally concerned with transformative politics to end oppression. A womanist’s vision of liberation focuses on alleviating domination in all forms in a way that is accessible to people of diverse backgrounds (Phillips xxiv; O. Davis “In the Kitchen,” 365; Weems 42). The Republic of New Africa black nationalists developed alliances with a range of activists within and outside the U.S. borders, planning to decolonize the world.

Scholarly discussions about the PGRNA are most often related to the scope of Black Nationalism and the Black Power Movement (Deburg, *Modern Black Nationalism* 198; Deburg,
New Day in Babylon 145; Joseph 55). While these perspectives are generally accurate, the information does not explicitly detail the ongoing rhetorical challenges the PGRNA citizens faced. Broadening the conceptual range by locating and rhetorically analyzing the public discourse of a major Republic of New Africa activist can provide another angle of vision and further open the pathway to a more complexly rich and deeper meaning about Black Nationalist women’s resistance.

Therefore, to further explore more intriguing dynamics of intermingling Africana womanism and Black Nationalism, the next and penultimate chapter moves to a critical evaluation of Fulani Sunni Ali’s experiences as a New African citizen. This analysis does several things. First, the historical legacy of the Republic of New Africa is extended beyond the timeline of the late sixties and situates it across several decades, demonstrating the continuation of the New African struggle and the self-efficacy of its citizens. Second, through Sunni Ali’s firsthand-account and her archival materials, there is the opportunity to more fully comprehend how the theory of black nationhood was understood and practiced from a female Republic of New Africa citizen perspective. Her experiences offer an eye-opening opportunity to survey key crises faced by the PGRNA citizenry. Third, because there exists a paucity of knowledge about black women’s lives, especially regarding revolutionary black nationalists, Sunni Ali’s activist experiences widens and deepens the history of black women’s experiences in America and throughout the world. Fourth, her life, as a citizen and Republic of New Africa government worker, adds a complementary narrative to the only other biographical account of the black nation by Imari Obadele in Free the Land, and, as a womanist revolutionary black female nationalist, Sunni Ali provides additional insight to the PGRNA legacy and enlarges the terrain of black social movements and nationalist discourse.
One of the most striking similarities between Africana womanism and Black Nationalism is the overarching commitment to heal people who have been forced to struggle through dehumanization, exploitation, and disinheritance of culture and history. Living in depressed conditions, or, as Robert Williams said, “relegated to the destitution of the outhouse,” some individuals internalized a lack of hope, despair, and negative, self-destructive behavior, which only worsened their lives. Womanist and Black Nationalist activists have the propensity to create alternative sites for locating one’s subjectivity and experiences, providing positive self-identification, affirming differences, and celebrating alternative representations and ways of knowing (Phillips xxviii; Obadele, *Foundations* 2).

Considering the black feminist perspective that oftentimes denies the agency and complexity of female black nationalists, Africana womanism and Black Nationalism actually support male-female complementarity. Not ignoring patriarchal oppression, Hudson-Weems, from an Africana womanist perspective, acknowledges that sexism “plays its part in dividing our [black] community, as this menacing factor wreak[ed] havoc on the sanctity and harmony of the Africana family” (81). However, the problems that plague black communities, whether it is sexism, capitalism, or white supremacy, do not interfere with black men and women collectively confronting these issues and continuing to struggle for black liberation.

While womanism brings additional insights about racially gendered activism in the Republic of New Africa, the practice of Black Nationalism, from a revolutionary stance, also expands the margins of a womanist method. When Phillips characterized womanism as anti-oppressionist, she, like other scholars, did not explore the practicality of developing an anti-oppressionist womanist agenda in a radical secessionist setting. In other words, if people are actively engaged in effectively transforming politics, they must be equipped mentally, socially, and
especially physically. A history of struggle, which is assumed if one is opposed to oppression, should clearly include concrete problem-solving tactics and resistive strategies to domination and repressive forces. Studying more closely how Sunni Ali attempted to achieve the seemingly insurmountable task of building a national citizenry and “freeing the land” is an excellent opportunity for studying such tactics and strategies. There must be an internal and external revolution, as noted in “Republic of New Africa Nation Building Classes.” By adapting some of the Black Nationalist’s revolutionary tactics, there is the conceivable possibility of expanding the practical boundaries of womanism.

After preparing for her exodus from Boston into the PGRNA national territory in the south in 1971, only two years after taking the oath, a twenty-one-year old Sunni Ali, working side-by-side with her comrades, would be tested, pushing against the formidable challenges of the American government. She committedly continued evolving in her practice and in her discipline of enacting her New African national identity, and, in 1973, Sunni Ali came into a leadership position in the Republic of New Africa. In the next chapter, her political development and influence greatly increase. Sunni Ali’s revolutionary understanding evolves as a New African, informing her rhetorical strategies both prior to and after becoming the Minister of Information for the PGRNA.
5  FULANI SUNNI ALI’S RHETORICAL STRATEGIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF NEW AFRICA

After taking the Republic of New Africa oath in 1969, a nineteen-year-old Sunni Ali was immersed in her next stage of revolutionary development. With all her movement activity towards the end of the 1960’s, Sunni Ali quickly adapted and self-identified with the goal, the practice, and the political structure of the black nation, adopting and adapting to her New African national identity. For the first time, she proudly claimed a national identity that related to her history, culture, and revolutionary purpose. The PGRNA became an umbrella organization for the Black Power Movement activists, helped them centralize leadership, and allowed them to share more resources. After dealing with the depressing conditions in most black communities and with the brutal repression from American government forces, the seemingly only viable solution for people of African descent was a new black nation.

Of course, the process of instituting a black nation, materially or immaterially in white America, was not without inherent challenges, which the leadership and citizens of the Republic of New Africa understood and prepared to engage. Undergoing the internal and external decolonization process, even while they worked on their daily tasks, was expected in consciousness-raising activities, either among fellow comrades, within self, or with community people. For Republic of New Africa citizens to secure liberation, meaning without interference and control from white oppression, there was an imminent danger of war, which necessarily meant a commitment to revolutionary practice. New Africans, similar to Black Panther George Jackson, viewed the subjugated locations of black communities as a “Black Colony,” and black Americans as enslaved captive Africans (9). “To the slave, revolution [wa]s an imperative, a love-inspired, con-
scious act of desperation. It [wa]s aggressive. It [wa]sn’t ‘cool’ or cautious. It [was] bold, auda-
cious, violent, an expression of icy, disdainful hatred!” (9). The citizens of the PGRNA accepted,
embodying the New African national identity, that their plight was fatefullly clear, including the
possibility of losing one’s life. For them, “[i]f revolution, and especially revolution in Amerika,
[wa]s anything less than an effective defense/attack weapon and a charger for the people to
mount now, it [wa]s meaningless to the great majority of the slaves. If revolution [wa]s tied to
dependence on the inscrutabilities of ‘long-range politics,’ it [could] not be made relevant to the
person who expect[ed] to die tomorrow” (10). As the PGRNA citizens learned in nation-building
classes, black people were engaged in a secret war against white supremacist capitalistic logic.

New Africans decisively undertook their revolutionary responsibilities to build a New
World for people of African descent. Guided by the mentorship of the leaders of the Republic of
New Africa and course materials, Sunni Ali, in our interviews, told me that they had a “wonder-
ful opportunity to reeducate people and reorient thinking around what war really [wa]s, what it
looked like, and what happen[ed] in war. There [we]re casualties, and what happened with the
casualties.” Consciousness-raising activities and the Republic of New Africa citizens’ daily re-
sponsibilities were one and the same. New African self-training fundamentally included commu-
nity-training awareness, reframing the history of the black liberation struggle.

Continuing to advance their movement for independence, the PGRNA leadership eventu-
ally decided to move into “national territory” after a constitutional crisis ended in late spring
1970. The constitutional crisis, as Obadele explained in Free the Land!, occurring from Novem-
ber 1969 to March 1970, was about what direction the newly founded black nation would take,
whether to exist as a provisionally “imagined” community or moving into the proposed “real”
community in the South, their claimed “national territory.” Gaidi Obadele and Imari Obadele
disagreed about the next steps to further make the idea of black nationhood concrete. At the same
time, Adegbalola, Sunni Ali’s father and then Boston Minister of Defense, became the PGRNA
Minister of Defense, decided in favor of securing territory and helped to reestablish unity among
New Africans. In 1971, Sunni Ali, selected with several other Republic of New Africa citizens as
a chosen cadre from the Boston consulate, began the exodus into the national territory in the
South, moving to New Orleans. Explaining this phase of the PGRNA nationhood development,
in our interview, Sunni Ali said:

   In 1970, I had my second child, my first son Chaka who was born in February
1970, and, at that time, the PGRNA was still experiencing the first constitutional crisis.
The [PGRNA] court decided the case, in favor of Brother Imari rather than his sibling
Brother Gaidi. The nation was split right down the middle. In the first government struc-
ture, Brother Gaidi Obadele, the First Vice President, and his younger sibling Brother
Imari Obadele, the first Minister of Information, were split, because Brother Imari be-
lieved we needed to act on the decision to identify the five southern states as the national
territory, not paying lip service. So, we moved to the next stage of action and moved
forces into the national territory, setting up a government office.

   Shortly thereafter, establishing herself and her New African family in New Orleans, Sun-
ni Ali continued her citizen duties on a daily basis. Everyday, she participated in early morning
military formation and training, organizing community-building plans, disseminating the
PGRNA literature, debriefing with other citizens, and attending meetings.

   The New Orleans’s move was one of several large en-mass decisions made by the
PGRNA leaders to secure the planned five-southern-state national territory for the Republic of
New Africa. Reestabishing themselves and attempting to secure their claim to the land, all New
Africans underwent a process of military training, which was developed by Sunni Ali’s father. All citizens were a part of the military and ready for mobilization to ward off outside attacks.

“Thus, Alajo [came up with] the concept of the People’s Army, re-submerging the military as such back into the people, so that, although some citizens would technically be New African Security Forcemen and have some military training, there would be no military elitism and no question of civilian control” (Obadele, *Free the Land* 9). As all citizens had the right to be protected by their country, New Africans were reciprocally responsible for the protecting “national territory.”

Sunni Ali, speaking to me about her citizen training, explained that their goal, garnering the support of the broader black community, was to demonstrate publicly that New Africans were disciplined and committed to people of African descent, regardless of the outcome. All of the training, including the militarization of the PGRNA citizenry, included several steps and different levels of training, helping the Republic of New Africa achieve the objective of the five-state liberation. Of course, Adegbalola, as the Minister of Defense, was one of the primary leaders, laying down the plans to obtain and protect the black nation.

After moving to the hoped for national territory, the PGRNA leaders planned to conduct a plebiscite. According to international law, as outlined by Obadele, black people were guaranteed citizenship in America; however, understanding that the rule was “incorporated into the Fourteenth Amendment,” “those Africans voting in the plebiscite for the New African nation must be understood to be speaking for themselves as a group ONLY for themselves” (*Free the Land!*, 11). The vote would be an indication that African Americans, identifying themselves as captives in a “foreign” U.S. nation, wanted sovereignty. The Republic of New Africa leaders hoped that the plebiscite would be “proof” that black Americans desired to be a sovereign group,
and that the United Nations would agree and force the U.S. to give in to the PGRNA leaders’ demands.

Going forward with the plebiscite vote, the New African liberation project was predicated on the PGRNA citizens implementing several key strategies. The first strategy to secure the land, as expressed by Imari Obadele in *Foundations of the Black Nation*, was “to array enough power (as in jui-jitsu, with a concentration of karate strength at key moments) to force the greatest power, the United States, to abide by international law, to recognize and accept [their] claims to independence and land” (4). The second strategy was to obtain international support “inside and outside of the United Nations,” and so the Republic of New Africa leaders also sought support from other people of color throughout Asia and Africa. And finally, the third strategy was the “winning of Internal Domestic Support, the winning of the understanding and support of those Africans in America who d[id] not choose for themselves to come to New Africa” (Obadele, *Free the Land* 10).

One important point of concern, while interviewing Sunni Ali, she said, was to also prepare the people in the South to receive and understand their purpose in coming into the planned national territory. What they did not want to do was assume that black people would automatically open PGRNA’s communities, receiving their nation-building goals. In this process, as New Africans moved into the intended national territory in the South, they had to focus their efforts to ensure the transition went as smoothly as possible. “No New African was simply allowed to sign up” to go to the proposed national territory. Interviewing Sunni Ali, I learned that there were some Republic of New Africa citizens who, from the socialization and representation of Northerners and Southerners, had to first undo their preconceived notions, believing that black Southerners were “simpleminded” and black Northerners would be their “saviors.”
So we had all these prejudices that many people in our cadre had to get over. While there were a lot of opportunities to come to the South, some people didn’t really jump on it. Those whose consciousness had evolved from their nation-building development process and the rest of the training really did want to move south. They knew that this was a barrier that had to be broken down. You cannot be the New Africans working in the provisional government on behalf of the people if you feel social division. You know this is poisonous.

New Africans, establishing their “New Community” in the South, first developed relationships with the local black communities and conscientiously negotiated community networking. In order to raise consciousness, Black Nationalists, like Sunni Ali, used what they had learned in their classes to institute a form of black nationhood that was necessarily adapted. Even though they “ha[d] guidelines only to help [them] grow with its growth, this mean[t] that after [they] [we]re done with [their] books, [the readings had to] be put aside; and the search for method depend[ed] on observations, correct analyses, creativity and seizing the time” (Jackson 23). The daily obligations of New Africans were structured to allow citizens negotiability when raising the black community’s awareness about the black liberation struggle and the PGRNA’s role. Undoubtedly, with the United States government’s plan for law and order and in a climate of “racial peace and harmony,” there were seemingly insuperable challenges and setbacks to building a black nation.

In this chapter I analyze Sunni Ali’s various modes of womanist activism on behalf of the Republic of New Africa and evaluate how she and other New Africans enacted their understanding of national identity, especially during their attempts to secure the “national territory.” First, I briefly review the various modes of womanist activism discussed in earlier chapters. Then, after
that review, I evaluate Sunni Ali’s womanist activism in three different representative events, specifically looking for similar, dissimilar, and emerging forms of community-building. These three events, which all took place in Mississippi, are from the archival materials she shared with me and which constitute the bulk of her archives: the RNA-11 case (when eleven Republic of New Africa citizens were arrested after a U.S. government predawn raid on two houses), the PGRNA’s International African Prisoner of War Solidarity Day (which was held in March 1973 to amass public support for the release of the RNA-11), and the 1981 predawn raid (when Sunni Ali, four of her children, myself, and my family were arrested). The three cases demonstrate Sunni Ali’s role as a revolutionary black female nationalist and complicate characterizations of the black women’s resistance tradition in the Black Power Movement.

5.1 Sunni Ali’s New African Enactment of Womanist Modes of Resistance

Temporarily relocated to Jackson, Mississippi from New Orleans, in 1971, Sunni Ali again enacted revolutionary Black Nationalism, following through with her citizen responsibilities and continuing the black women’s resistance tradition. This year was the first of many critical junctures and tests for the Republic of New Africa. Her focus was to bring cohesion to the Jackson New African community, raise community awareness about the PGRNA, and build support for what came to be known as the RNA-11 case. Before continuing a discussion about Sunni Ali and her communication activities with the PGRNA, however, it is helpful to briefly recall the three basic modes of womanist activism. Only then can we compare womanist resistance strategies with those of Sunni Ali.
Womanist activism, as discussed earlier, is primarily concerned with the ways in which people of color, particularly black women, daily employ problem-solving methods to resist, to challenge, and to transform any and all forms of oppression, seeking to build unity, even amid controversy. Looking at the black women’s resistance tradition, a womanist perspective fundamentally deals with three major categories: kitchen discourse, testifying discourse, and liberatory emergence discourse. A kitchen discourse explores the manner in which black women resourcefully transform subjugated sites into productively resistive locales, privately and affirmatively self-naming black womanhood and supporting community networks. The kitchen discourse is dialogue circulated within groups and internal audiences and can sometimes “bleed” into the public sphere. However, the primary location of the shared ideas is within the audience of people who already agree with the speaker’s position. Primarily speaking to external audiences, testifying discourse demonstrates that an individual’s voice can speak publicly as the voice of many in the black community, substantiating the group’s identity and dignifying their plight as American citizens. And a discourse of liberatory emergence recognizes how black women’s lives exist in a dialectical reality of activism and oppression, artfully resisting gendered and raced limitations and strategically doing whatever is necessary to change societal conditions. Despite material and discursive oppression, black women craft modes of resistance and directly and openly challenge subordination, telling their stories of “how I got ovah,” striving for freedom. Teaching strategies and lessons of resistance, a discourse of liberatory emergence acknowledges how black women resourcefully use their agency to make political, social, and institutional change happen.

In step with her foremothers of resistance, Sunni Ali, emboldened to carry out her revolutionary cause, carried forward the womanist tradition of activism. The black nation was set against white America in the Deep South, and no sooner than they started setting up their head-
quarters in Jackson, Mississippi did the citizens of the Republic of New Africa came face to face with a formidable challenge: establishing a PGRNA presence in Louisiana and Mississippi. While the leaders of the Republic of New Africa moved to the hoped for “national territory” with carefully laid out plans, the local and federal government forces also had their calculated methods, such as planting informants, obstructing the Republic of New Africa’s activities, influencing some local blacks to disassociate with New Africans, and generally disrupt the PGRNA leaders’ revolutionary cause.

New African publications, which were all handled and passed through the Minister of Information, which eventually was to become Sunni Ali’s job, attempting to manage the discursive and possibly physically dangerous environment, circulated information that had motivational appeals, primarily targeting citizens and potential citizens. One of the Republic of New Africa’s main instruments of information dissemination was their national paper *The New African*. One article published in that outlet was Sunni Ali’s poem “Separation,” an attempt to reinforce the dire need for blacks to separate from white America and to join forces with the Republic of New Africa.

Black, Black, will you ever be happy
Black, Black, will you ever have peace
Black, Black, go get your piece

**LAND and FREEDOM** cry the Masses
Don’t care what Law the cracker passes
We need a **NEW NATION** in order to survive
My people stop listen’ to that white boy’s jive.
We tried integration, that didn’t work
They grinned in our faces and treated us like DIRT
Now we want “SEPARATION” to start our OWN NATION
White boy’s scared to death wants to try integration.

“Separation” my people is our best bet
Cause we ain’t got along under this system yet
Get it together or we’ll all be dead
One more time “Separation” is what I said.

Black, Black, you will be free
Black, Black, you will survive
Black, Black, you will have peace
Only stop listen’ to that white boy’s jive…

LIBERATE BLACK TERRITORIES!
LAND AND FREEDOM
BUILD, BUILD, BUILD

The poem, like other articles in the paper, encourages “Blacks” to seek liberation with the Republic of New Africa or face oppression with white America, creating a stark dichotomy between freedom and subjugation. The title, directly intended for African Americans, immediately builds a sense of black unity through “separation from whites,” asking blacks if they will “ever be happy” or “ever have peace.” In every stanza, Sunni Ali, referencing the historical failure to
reconcile racial tensions, makes the point to remind her readers that all options, except joining a black nation, are futile “cause we ain’t got along under this system yet.” Her stylistic choices, such as capitalization, underlining, and quotation-marked words, re-emphasize what she and the leaders of the Republic of New Africa offer as the formula for black liberation: separation equals land plus freedom. This poem was just the beginning of her discursive strategizing for the black nation.

No sooner than Sunni Ali arrived in the projected “national territory” in New Orleans, she was headed to Jackson, Mississippi, working on the RNA-11 case. The RNA-11 case was one of the earliest moments of crisis for the PGRNA in the Deep South, attempting to set up a provisionally functioning government. After U.S. government officials launched a predawn raid on two Republic of New Africa houses (1148 Lewis Street and 1320 Lynch Street) in Jackson, Mississippi on August 18, 1971, eleven citizens, mostly in government positions, were arrested: Delta Interior Minister Offoga Quaddus (Wayne Maurice James), Tamu Sana (Ann Lockhart), Chuma (Robert Charles Stalling), Njeri Quaddus (Toni Renee Austin), Vice President of the Midwest Region Hekima Ana (Thomas Edward Norma), Addis Ababa (Denis Paul Shillingford), skilled writer for the PGRNA Information Ministry Tawab Nkrumah (George Matthews), Minister of Information Aisha Salim (Brenda Blount), and President Imari Obadele (Richard Henry). Since most of the government leaders were taken to jail, other citizens, such as Sunni Ali, went to Jackson to work on their behalf and fill necessary PGRNA leadership vacancies.

Sunni Ali enacted her form of womanist activism as a New African to help with the RNA-11 case. Discursively circulating and affirming the Republic of New Africa’s purpose and goals within the broader black community, she arrived in Jackson and hit the ground running. As a mode of womanist activism, she immediately started to engage in kitchen dialogue with her
fellow citizens and community people to build support for their cause, to kindle a resistive spirit for opposition, and to raise the consciousness of her comrades and other black Mississippians. Amid the turmoil of the RNA-11 trial, including heavy government surveillance and harassment, she committedly forged ahead with her duties. She, like Ida B. Wells, also used her testifying discourse as a rhetorical strategy, “negotiating the space of otherness through the public act of storytelling” (O. Davis, “I Rose and Found My Voice” 310). In sum, engaging in testifying, Sunni Ali oppositionally crafted a “way out of no way” from New Orleans to Jackson, Mississippi.

Her archival materials, which I carefully reviewed, included about twenty different stories, flyers, a signature petition, a court petition “Requesting Rehearing before the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in the RNA-11 Cases” filed April 1976, and mainstream broadcast news stories about the attack. After the pre-dawn raid on the PGRNA headquarters, she immediately started working to not only “Free the Land” but to also free her fellow New Africans.

Her revolutionary training and discipline, from Boston to New Orleans, had well prepared her to take on such tasks, and she was more than willing to do whatever she could to support and sustain the black nation. To her surprise, however, upon her arrival in Mississippi, she had to implement a few changes, according to what she was taught about nation-building. Under the tutelage of the Minister of Defense, her father Adegbalola, she learned the importance of consistently practicing discipline and training, and she exceptionally exemplified these behaviors as a New African. Now, in Jackson, Mississippi, where the New Africans’ discipline and training were less than what she expected, she made immediate organizational changes. She knew that the PGRNA work, staying disciplined and committed to training, was a pivotal key to saving the lives of herself, other citizens, and eventually obtaining the release of the RNA-11. Time was of the essence, and they had no time to waste. Moreover, the circumstances required that she take
on the role of the Minister of Information for the Republic of New Africa, which was an appointment by the Republic of New Africa’s President Imari Obadele (“Fulani Is Free”).

Talking to Sunni Ali, in one of our interview sessions, she briefly described the situation in Jackson and the differences she saw between the Republic of New Africa community in New Orleans and in Jackson.

The average day in Jackson turned out to be very different from New Orleans, because in New Orleans we would be awakened at five o’clock or by 5:30 in the morning. Everyone was washed up and was outside in formation ready to go through inspection. When I got to Mississippi, I was surprised to find there was not that type of discipline in terms of established programs. I continued to get up at five in the morning and had been doing this for years, at this point. I realized that a part of me being there was because the females that were present were not actively involved. They were more or less married to the brothers. When I arrived in Jackson, people were getting up as they felt. Citizens went to the office to report for work around nine or so, and then work would ensue. In my capacity as Minister of Information, I was constantly writing press releases and interviewing people for the paper [The New African]. In developing my skills as an information specialist, I didn’t like the schedule in Jackson, because I was used to having structure. I was very frustrated in my first couple of weeks there. I reported my findings to my father in New Orleans.

She continued telling me how she strategized to organize the Republic of New Africa citizens in Jackson, bringing more cohesion and unity. She called and invited people to dialogue with other citizens when they had meetings and assessed their weekly plan of action. She sched-
uled daily training at 5:30 in the morning, and, while some people struggled for the first couple of days, they adjusted eventually, even though a few fell off.

The following broadcast news story, which was in Sunni Ali’s personal archive, detailed the events surrounding the RNA-11 raid. On August 18, 1971, the PGRNA activists learned firsthand the repercussions for dissenting against the dominant American establishment. The broadcast news story reported:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video</th>
<th>Audio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Reporter in studio</td>
<td>(Reporter in studio) Three law officers were wounded in a shoot-out with black militants in Jackson, Miss. Del Vaughn reports.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Two police officers with guns around house</td>
<td>The shooting started just after dawn. Before it ended 20 minutes later, two Jackson policemen and a FBI agent were wounded. One policeman is in critical condition. Police allegedly came to the residence to serve warrants to four of the occupants. Officers say they knocked on the door, and without warning, shooting started from inside. One officer fell at the door. Another police officer and a FBI agent were wounded as they exchanged shots with someone in a side window.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Officers searching citizen car</td>
<td>Police poured tear gas into the building driving the seven occupants outside. They were charged with assault with an intent to kill. FBI agent Elmer Lindebergh talked to news reporter Jack Hobbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Blood on ground</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 RNA citizens on curb in night clothes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The visuals, along with the audio, presented a story replete with unexplained violence. Moreover, the story was evincive of how extreme measures were necessary to control “black militants.” Not one PGRNA citizen spoke in the story to provide information about what happened, and there was no mention of the PGRNA, further silencing their voice. Supporting the government actions against the group, the story presented the event as if there was a gun battle that ensued because shooting started from one of the “militants” inside the house: “Officers say they knocked on the door, and without warning, shooting started from inside.” The story depict-
ed an uncontrollable and dangerous group that not only threatened themselves, but also the community in which they resided and the “racially harmonious” national community.

The “without warning” phrase added a certain twist, suggesting how unstable the PGRNA citizens were, how they were dangerous for everyone and anything surrounding them. The phrase positioned them as irrational “militants” without any cause or justification for their existence or actions. The story implied PGRNA citizens were “happy gun-toting” blacks whose aim was to disrupt civility by any means possible. If they would shoot at a police officer at dawn for no reason, who might they shoot or harm in another situation? The message to the viewing audience: contain, by any means necessary, the militant black nationalists, and all actions were necessary and justifiable to deal with such extremism.

The story details produced incriminating depictions of how to deal with un-American, “irrational” individuals. The visual of the blood on the ground, along with the PGRNA citizens sitting on the sidewalk curb with their hair uncombed, shirtless, and in nightclothes, showed them as wild and uncontainable people who were careless and uncivil. Additionally, the white mainstream broadcast news stories served to discredit the group in the community and the entire viewing audience, because the perspective, without any statements from the citizens, was only described through the prism of the white mainstream broadcast news stories. The newscasts were repeatedly negative, and, with this as the only information provided to the broadcast viewers about the PGRNA, the repetitive and unsupportive depictions suppressed alternative ways of understanding the group. This created “the repetitive framing of particular images being seen as the definitive statement on ‘those’ people and the groups to which ‘they’ belong. Images thus become transformed over time, from being merely symbolic to connoting reality” (Ross 4).
The “repetitive framing” of the citizens of the Republic of New Africa as volatile and destructive became the only way for the viewing public to know the group, and, if there were no other references in the broadcast news, except those provided by the broadcaster and the government officers, the “reality” constructed through the white mainstream broadcast news stories was a fearful reality of the black nation. As a result, the PGRNA became analogous with irrational violence, and this representation was buttressed in the story with references to shooting guns, triggered bombs, and a readied military demolition team. To maintain the order and stability of the nation, the PGRNA had to be dealt with by using extreme force.

The RNA-11 also became examples of how the United States government would control and handle militant dissent against America, and how the consequence of such dissent could more than likely lead to militaristic actions and loss of life. Militant dissent opposing the U.S. was a matter of life or death, and there was no in between. Freedom was granted to all U.S. citizens, and agreement and compliance to maintain harmony were the only things allowed.

In the midst of the communication crisis, where the mainstream news and the Republic of New Africa account were drastically different, citizens, especially Sunni Ali in the position as the Minister of Information, worked tirelessly to manage the discourse about the raid. Hekima Ana, one of the imprisoned RNA-11 said:

You remember in the film the reporter says that when they knocked on the door, shots emerged from inside. They never knocked on the door. They got on the bullhorn, from their testimony, to try and get us to come out, and when we didn’t emerge after 75 seconds, at dawn, then they began to fire on us. Now we don’t know what all they fired, but they admitted firing tear gas projectiles missiles; and when we emerged from the house, nobody was clothed. The women were in nightgowns. I and the others, no shoes, no tops,
we were undressed. We were in bed. That was not depicted. And the notion that the moment when the police knocked on the door, shots emerged from the house. That’s what was said in that. That was totally erroneous. (37)

Contrasting Hekima’s statement of the event to the mainstream broadcast news story, it was clear that the news story, without input from any PGRNA citizens or community neighbors, was an incomplete representation of the pre-dawn raid on the PGRNA house. Without the details regarding why the officers were wounded and why the group felt forced to defend themselves, the group appeared in the white mainstream broadcast as aggressively shooting at law enforcement for no purpose.

Clearly, with the dueling accounts of the predawn raid, the Minister of Information, which was now Sunni Ali, had to manage the Republic of New Africa image, the citizens’ accounts of the arrests, and the mainstream news stories. For example, an image of the PGRNA citizens from the scene described by Hekima Ana was actually used differently by the mainstream press and The New African newspaper, for which Sunni Ali was responsible (see Appendix). Even though both the PGRNA Minister of Information and the mainstream press used the same image, the accompanying text and placement of the depiction left different readers with very different contrasting representations of the Republic of New Africa.

Most of the mainstream press, including the newspapers, published the same story and caption from the Associated Press wire feed, on Thursday, August 19, 1971. The picture showed five New African men with no shirts or shoes and connected to a long silver chain, and each person was chain-handcuffed at the wrist, walking in a procession on the street. Pictured beneath the title “Black Militants in Chains After Arraignment,” the hegemonic newspaper image caption read:
FIVE MEN and two women (one hidden), purported members of the Republic of New Africa (RNA), walk in a chained procession across a Jackson, Miss., street Wednesday after they were arraigned before a federal magistrate in connection with their arrests Wednesday following a shootout in which two Jackson policemen and an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation were wounded. The blacks were among 11 persons arrested following the gun battle with police at the RNA headquarters.

Similar to the mainstream broadcast news story, the PGRNA citizens, called “black militants” in this photograph, were visibly construed as a very serious threat to the rest of the world, especially showing them wildly unkempt. One could say that the New Africans, not wearing shirts or shoes, look rather savage, portraying them to be unfit for a “normal” society. Not only do the Republic of New Africa citizens look like savages, they can also be understood as in need of white America’s law and order, helping to straighten out their uncivilized ways. This portrayal, eerily close to the imagery of enslaved captive Africans, evokes, as a possible subtext, a white supremacist logic that supported the slave trade, further implicitly illustrating the backwardness of establishing a black nation in white America.

Conversely, under the supervision of Sunni Ali, the PGRNA, from the archival materials I reviewed, used information-campaigning to counter this representation in several ways. First and probably most importantly, Sunni Ali selected the same image as the mainstream press to rhetorically counteract the portrayal of the New African nation, attempting to manage the confidence and motivation of other New Africans. While the mainstream press only had the one visual, the Republic of New Africa flyer entitled “MISSISSIPPI…old and new” placed two images of equal proportion side by side (see Appendix). On the right side of the top of the page, one of the depictions was the New Africans in the chained procession, and, on the left side of the visual,
there was an image of enslaved Africans and an overseer. Between the two images, which took up roughly one-third of the page, were numbers, denoting years. The year 1821 was vertically placed on the right side of the left image, and the year 1971 was vertically placed on the left side of the right image, portraying the arrest of the PGRNA citizens. Using such imagery, instead of explicitly recognizing the clear militancy of the PGRNA nation, the story implicitly invoked a justification for militancy. Identifying with the intended audience of present and future PGRNA citizens, the images attempt to persuade the readers to continue with their revolutionary efforts or even to ignite black militancy among other potentially empathetic supporters.

With their own resources and nation-building efforts, built from their community organizing among blacks, the flyer, as a representation of Sunni Ali’s Black Nationalist discourse, resisted the discursive domination in the white mainstream stories and was as an example of kitchen dialogue in the black women’s resistance tradition in several ways. Distributing the information by hand, the flyer’s “story” altered the context of the predawn raid, favoring a justification for the goal of black nationhood and extending the temporality of the event. Where the mainstream story presented the narrative as an anomaly in 1971, disconnecting the event to anything else, the Republic of New Africa Information Ministry visually and textually made a direct connection to the treatment of the arrested citizens and the historical continuity of black oppression: the uninterrupted legacy of black enslavement in “old” colonial and “new” neocolonial America.

Sunni Ali’s kitchen activism was also shown in the flyer, similar to the plantation kitchen dynamics, by dialogically expressing the New African position and opening the otherwise closed down discussion about the PGRNA activities. The flyer’s first several paragraphs read:
Much has been written in the national press about the New South—how the tradition of racist terror is being abandoned by a new breed of public officials who are ushering in a new era. Discrimination is out; lynching is a distant memory. And Jackson, Mississippi, is supposed to be a model New South city. [Second paragraph] But on August 18, 1971, Jackson police and Special Agents of the FBI made an armed, pre-dawn attack on the Republic of New Africa (RNA) Center at 1148 Lewis Street, and a short while later raided another RNA headquarters at 1320 Lynch Street. A shootout at Lewis Street resulted in the death of Lieutenant William Skinner, and the wounding of another policeman and an FBI agent. [Third paragraph] City and State public officials indicated their support of the raid. Lt. Governor Charles Sullivan, Mississippi Attorney General A. F. Summer, and prosecutor Jack Travis all made statements to newsmen indicating a program to “rid the state” of the Republic of New Africa. Mayor Russell Davis, one of the so-called “New South” politicians said, “Every legal possibility for forcing the RNA out of Jackson has been explored, but that Wednesday was the first chance law-enforcement officers had to move in on the headquarters.”

The flyer directly refuted the U.S. government officials’ public pronouncements about the raid and openly called the event an “attack,” situating the Republic of New Africa citizens as victims of overly aggressive white law enforcement. Not mentioning the militant nature of the PGRNA and playing up the “attack” on the houses, the story of unnecessary violence and brute force against the black nation seemingly disputed the notion of the “New South,” where there was supposedly no racism but racial equality and equal opportunity. The images contextualized in this manner render visible the same architecture of power as the “Old South,” which supported white domination and black subordination. Showing the systematic oppression and collusion of a
place that was “supposed to be a model New South city,” the flyer used quotations from public
and law officials, who ideally were supporting a free and equal democratic society, to “prove”
the “Old South” of 1821 was the same “New South” of 1971, just with different people in a dif-
ferent time.

If the reader, with little questioning, yielded his or her comprehension to assume Sunni
Ali’s account was true, through a rhetoric of strategic omission (the decision to exclude certain
significant pieces of information, such as the PGRNA’s military training and how and why the
citizens had guns in the house), the flyer could easily convince someone that the PGRNA was
wrongfully victimized and unnecessarily faced an unjust encounter. The flyer’s depiction of the
Republic of New Africa citizens showed them to be almost innocent and non-provocative. By
only mentioning that people were in houses and a shootout ensued, the reader was not given
enough information to clearly know what happened. In a paradoxical fashion, the PGRNA flyer
made a similar discursive maneuver as the mainstream white media: obscuring critical facts and
skewing the plot to fit their respective agendas. Therefore, one could say, both stories provided
factually incorrect stories about the August 18th predawn raid on the Republic of New Africa.

Hekima’s analysis of the government actions offered additional insight into the ideologi-
cal effects of the competing broadcast representations:

Here’s what I’m saying. Consider a residential neighborhood. Because the house is just a
house sandwiched in a family community, small wood frame house. Now, if they had
wanted simply to arrest people, there was no place we could go. They could have stayed
out there for a month. Totally surrounded. They had a small army with them with ar-
mored personnel carriers and everything else. So there was no compulsion to get us out of
that house in 75 seconds. If that was just an arrest, they would try to secure. So they
wanted a shoot-out. Obviously they did. So after the shoot out, for them to then say that when the police knocked on the door, we fired on them, is tainting the jury pool. Because everybody in the city had a chance to view that…. Now when that didn’t work, the next thing was to put them to death, the electric chair. So the lies we heard on the film about them knocking on the door and us shooting and an officer being wounded on the porch, that’s totally not true. Nobody was wounded on the porch there. All of them were wounded away from the house. And so again they failed. Because the truth came out on the stand. I mean there were a bunch of lies on the stand as well, but at least what we saw on the film was not confirmed at the trial.  (Ana 37)

From Hekima’s point of view, the footage was a valuable tool to persuade the jury that nevertheless later convicted them. Ideologically, the white mainstream broadcast news story, supporting a dominant mainstream position of legal racial equality, gave a “preferred reading” of an uncontrollable black separatist group. Since “everyone in the city had a chance to view that [broadcast story],” the jury, selected from the viewing audience, was “tainted,” and the group, before the trial began, was already presented as guilty.

As Hekima stated, the next thing was for the convictions, based on dominant representations, to result in death sentences. Elaborating on the purpose of the raid, he added:

We were convinced all along, that if they had known that none of us in the house were dead, they would not have allowed us to escape unharmed. When we came out, see from their perspective, we’re in a small wood frame house, and they’re on all sides, and the house was just riddled with bullets, my car and everything. They couldn’t conceive that somebody in that house was not mortally wounded. And so when we came out, their concern was who else is in the house. We kept telling them that no one was in the house.
They continued firing tear gas into the house even after we came out. And then they waited 15 to 20 minutes before they dared to even go into the house. The fact is they chose the raid at a time shortly after I left Wisconsin. My wife and I we were going to North Carolina to visit my mother. We stopped in Jackson. And it was at that point that the number one and number two person were believed to be in that house. And they decided to raid it. None of us were wanted for anything. So it wasn’t to arrest us for any outside warrant. It was to kill us. (Ana 37)

In the above passage, Hekima drew a clear distinction between the individuals that were attacking and defending in a violent situation. “They [government officers] decided to raid” the house, because the number one and number two PGRNA citizens, president and vice president, were thought to be in the house. Considering no one in the house had an outstanding warrant, the raid was not designed to arrest them; it was intended to kill them. Hekima and Sunni Ali’s versions were corroborated when the trial took place. Embedded in the story, at least according to Hekima, was a zero-tolerance message for anyone that was thought to cause dissension. Subduing the black dissenters who wanted to separate from the rest of the country was absolutely necessary, and the white media portrayals fostered an underlying message to the viewing audience: one was either with or against the United States government and mainstream society. As a part of America, one kept the peace and did not bring attention to social, political, or economic ills, and the inverse effect of that message was that discontent was subject to extreme repression.

The discursive sphere pertaining to the unfolding of events on Wednesday, August 18, 1971 was based on two radically divergent perspectives. Explaining how the mainstream media “selected” media interviews, and generally controlled the flow of information, Sunni Ali mentioned:
We learned that the media is not a friend to the movement overall nor to any aspect of it really, when it’s covering events by groups and individuals who are on a more advanced level of struggle. Advanced being people who have very definite views on black people not being Americans. People who stand up and proudly proclaim that we have the right to defend ourselves. So when they can identify that kind of person, they already have a profile in mind of who you are and how that plays out media wise. So when they come to even document an event, they will not interview individuals unless they have some key people picked out already that they know, okay, we can talk to this person.

Discursive challenges, such as communicative access, idea circulation, and reader comprehension of an alternative ideology, already a part of the media environment since the mainstream communication apparatus typically supports the dominant ideology, could not possibly be controlled by the Republic of New Africa’s Information Ministry. One of the main obstacles, therefore, to the development of public support for the PGRNA citizens was the issue of accessibility to garner at least some public support, ensuring that at least other potential New Africans were more fully aware of the larger situation. True, Sunni Ali’s kitchen activism was carried out by her strategically developing and negotiating the intersectional channels of communication within the PGRNA and more militant black activists in the United States and the international community. But Sunni Ali readily acknowledged that the PGRNA could not expect to receive positive media attention, and this was precisely because the PGRNA citizens worked from a political platform that was “a more advanced level of struggle.” But the fact was that the Republic of New Africa’s own story was almost completely dominated by the white media machine that Sunni Ali attempted to discursively counter (Summers 332). Outside of white mainstream civil rights movement ideology, they had no space in the ideological spectrum that supported and
made sense of the group’s militant brand of activism. Even though she opened local and “insider” channels of communication to circulate the PGRNA’s own message, the dominant media control and governmental influences literally drowned out their version of the story.

The white media representations, in other words, served as “strategies of control” (Chomsky 34). As Noam Chomsky notes, hegemonic media reporting acquires and employs certain representations for the benefit of specific groups, supporting the dominant ideology.

Leaders of the media claim that their news choices rest on unbiased professional and objective criteria, and they have support for this contention in the intellectual community.

If, however, the powerful are able to fix the premises of discourse, to decide what the general populace is allowed to see, hear, and think about and to “manage” public opinion by regular propaganda campaigns, the standard view of how the system works is at serious odds with reality. (4)

Chomsky suggests that media representations that appeared and did not appear were supportive of the “special interests,” not of the majority of the suppressed black populace in the south, and so the representations worked to persuade and limit the understanding of the public.

Representations of the RNA-11 case, regardless of whether the white mainstream press or Sunni Ali’s Information Ministry developed the images, were distorted to fit the cause. The PGRNA constructs created from the white mainstream broadcast stories, situated in a black activist rage profile, unequivocally established the parameters for the black nation. As mentioned earlier, there were significant rhetorical constraints limiting the discursive influence of Sunni Ali. She, nonetheless, stridently strategized to open a space to politicize potential citizens and counterbalance the negative media depictions of the group, even if that was extremely difficult. Fulani noted:
There’s nothing that we could say that wouldn’t open up something that we could use to teach who we are and get the word out. This is who we really are. We’re not just a wild bunch of crazy people. We’re well educated people who have a legitimate right to review history and determine where’s our place in history that we should take off from now. Of course, so they won’t interview you. Because we got smart enough to know that if we had two minutes on the mic, we were ready.

You might say well I believe in the Malcolm X doctrine, and say the whole line of creed. I believe in the Malcolm X doctrine that we must organize upon this land and hold a plebiscite to tell the world that we are free and our land is dependent and that after that we must stand ready to defend ourselves. That’s one line in a fifteen-point creed. So as Minister of Information, that’s what I started honing in on, any time they put a microphone in your face, say one of the lines from the creed. Anything that’s going to put out information and say something. And someone says, Oh my goodness, these people they’re saying something sensible. They’re not just crazy and gun-toting and so forth.

With a narrow amount of access and control over the mainstream story portrayal of the PGRNA, Sunni Ali attempted to verbalize a New African response, while not doubting the range of her potential pool of persuadable listeners: New Africans and sympathetic blacks.

Nevertheless, her rhetorical strategy, in the womanist tradition, was to produce and circulate a rhetoric of self-determination for her admittedly limited audience. Such rhetoric acknowledges that “[a]ll peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development” (Obadele, *The International Law Regime* 240). Therefore, a rhetoric of self-determination, as explained by James Summers, “is used to legitimize political activities by presenting those
activities in terms of peoples and their self-actualization” (Summers 325). Not only are the political activities justified but, especially in the case of the Republic of New Africa, the historical precedent, evinced from cultural, social, financial, and institutional oppression, was more than enough “proof,” justifiably advancing a cause for a black nation.

Discursively employing a rhetoric of self-determination, Sunni Ali, in the PGRNA newspaper and mainstream press, believed she knew how to utilize the media and how to motivate her fellow New Africans. One of her goals, as she talked to me in one of our interviews, was to inform readers that the PGRNA had a self-determined right to pursue black nationhood. “Self-determination is not something that is a battle cry or a slogan. Our [the PGRNA] struggle is about self-determination. Self-determination is an inalienable right to assert your desire to however you’re going to achieve your destiny, your path, etc. This is a right. So we don’t ask people for that. We use it, and we demand human rights.” To achieve those rights, Sunni Ali not only selected rhetorical strategies for “insider” audiences such as leaflets and newspaper articles in The New African, she also “testified” in press releases, and mainstream media communication, acknowledging their right to liberation struggle.

Enacting her womanist kitchen activism, speaking to other New Africans in a relatively safe and protected space, as the Minister of Information, in the The New African August 1972, she published President Obadele’s piece “Struggle: Nobody Said It Would Be Easy,” as the lead article, promoting just such a rhetoric of self-determination. The accompanying photograph was an image of the arrested RNA-11 citizens, sitting on the curb outside the Lewis Street house and wearing no shirts and shoes, while their hands were handcuffed behind their backs (see Appendix). Obadele’s article, published a year from the actual raid on August 18, 1971, informed other New Africans that, while the struggle was anything but easy, black nationhood was still on the
horizon and well within their reach. He basically summarized the political struggles of other imprisoned New Africans from the RNA-11 case, such as Hekima Ana and his wife Tamu Sana, briefly explained other national black struggles against white government repression, and positively recognized the Republic of New Africa’s efforts to continue organizing for nationhood creation. After informing the reader about Ana’s recent denial of self-defense plea, regarding the shootout, Obadele told readers that days were “getting better” for the black nation (Obadele, “Struggle” 2). Continuing to narrate a story of liberationist success, he then detailed the repression and depressed conditions in various black communities around the U.S. He told readers, “In Black communities all across Amerikkka the enemy continues his destructive chemical warfare—the heroin traffic—against us, and in places like Detroit and Harlem, where revolutionary brothers have moved on death merchants with arms, these brothers receive low-level-to-no community understanding and support” (2). Seeking to build collective identification within the New African national imaginary, Obadele was sure to explicitly encourage the continued militancy of the PGRNA citizens, reminding them about the ongoing atrocities against them and other African Americans and unifying them in struggle. He, spelling America with an insertion of “kkk,” made a direct connection to the white supremacist history of America, simultaneously implying that the brutality and dispossession of black Americans was and would always be the price paid in white America.

The Republic of New Africa Information Ministry’s selection for the lead article, as an example of Sunni Ali’s strategic deployment of a rhetoric of self-determination, was, as usual, another opportunity to further remind already sympathetic people about the New African struggle, reiterating the purpose of obtaining sovereignty. In the story, Obadele added:
The answer is space and power: space to build and to grow—in our own mold—and the power to control and inspire and nurture that building and growth. The method is relentless struggle. We do not despair. We do not despair because in Mississippi—the only place in amerikkka where large numbers of Black people still occupy a vast segment of land—the provisional Government of the Republic of New Africa, despite the worst of A.F. Summer and Richard Nixon, is at this moment actively raising the question of independence for a quarter-million Black people living on 10,000 square miles along with Mississippi River (an area larger than Israel, Haiti, Gambia, Cypress, or Lebanon). It was not so a year ago…. It is always the duty of the Revolutionary Vanguard to be in front: to see farther, to speak more clearly, and to walk virgin ground—the Valley of the Shadow of Death—first and alone. This explains the presence of Republic of New Africa workers in Mississippi now. It explains why RNA has placed before the U.S. Congress and before Black People an “Anti-Depression Program” requiring the long overdue payment of reparations to be used for building thousands of New Communities and Black industry, and opening the door for peaceful settlement of the land—and—independence question…. Our course, however, is set: North and South, to give, unselfishly and relentlessly, our time, our minds, our strength, and our wealth, to make possible—this year—a successful Reparations Election in Mississippi and, soon afterwards, a successful plebiscite. For this cause, for these achievements, despite fail and the threat of jail, despite death and the threat of death, despite all, we must commit our bodies and our wealth to STRUGGLE! No one ever promised it would be easy. But there is the promise that out of struggle, we shall, without a doubt, FREE THE LAND! (‘Struggle’ 14)
To persuade actual and potential Republic of New Africa citizens to forge ahead with nation-building strategies, the story rhetorically created a dichotomy of choice, leaving no options: black liberation with the PGRNA (“space and power”) or black disenfranchisement with white America. There were no examples of racial harmony, African-American progress, or racial equality. *The New African* story illustrated that black-white reconciliation was impossible, and instead a perpetual cycle of worsening conditions for blacks. Making the “answer” to black oppression a concretely viable solution for black liberation, the reader was provided a territorial vision of the land (“a quarter-million Black people living on 10,000 square miles along the Mississippi River”) to make the New African struggle a reality, vividly mentioning black population numbers and the assumed size of other countries already visible on a map.

Deepening the PGRNA citizens’ commitment to fight, the article inspired New Africans to see their own struggles and activism as their obligations to sacrifice constantly, using words such as “relentless” and “unselfish.” Invoking the Biblical reference of Psalms 23 (“Valley of the Shadow of Death”), the plight of the New African Vanguard became a God-chosen path, spiritually ordaining the PGRNA Black Nationalists to see themselves as more powerfully necessary for the black liberation struggle than any other mechanism, particularly the U.S. justice system. New African activism, one could say, carried the spirit and protection of a God-like omnipotence. The reader, who was more than likely a citizen of the PGRNA, could see the New African revolutionary’s cause as altruistic, bigger than the individual, saving the black collective.

Sunni Ali’s rhetorical strategies, although not shown on white-controlled television screens, illustrated her preparedness for dealing with her sympathetic audiences, even though her New African rhetoric, for non-PGRNA audiences, was basically muzzled. The Republic of New Africa strategically employed various tactics, however, to minimize the influence of white main-
stream news representations, particularly on actual and potential New African citizens, and, incorporating their political cognizance of the power and reach of media, they assumed that “anything that’s going to put out information and say something” about the independent black nation was politically and effectively useful for their cause.

What were the ideological implications for not allowing PGRNA citizens’ to state their views on the dominant white mainstream broadcast news? If the political atmosphere in America were one of racial harmony and equal opportunity for all American citizens, what would be the ramifications for people saying they were not American citizens? The answer: anyone opposing America was unacceptable and intolerable for a supposedly already equitable and peaceful American nation. Identifying themselves not as U. S. citizens, the PGRNA activists worked outside of white American mainstream ideology that was ideally inclusive of all racial and disenfranchised groups. However, even though the Republic of New Africa discourse was almost exclusively aimed at maintaining internal organizational support, identifying with New African goals, if the citizens of the black nation wanted to acquire support from other potential audiences, the communicative texts would need variation, sending different messages to different groups of readers.

Because the PGRNA “kitchen spin” on the RNA-11 case was adapted to internal black audiences, the message was incapable of reaching the hegemonic white society and “mainstream audiences.” Even if the Republic of New Africa citizens’ messages have managed to be presented to external mainstream audiences, such viewers and readers would have been incapable of listening to the PGRNA’s main message. As Obadele pointed out:
But when you talk about hey we gonna have a plebiscite and let the people vote whether they want to leave. They [white mainstream America] don’t want to hear that because they have a difficult problem with the international law. They’re [PGRNA] talking about the covenant of political rights that every people have a right to self-determination. And we are people who have a specific claim that came right out of slavery…they [the U.S. government] don’t want to have to argue that in court. (8)

As Sunni Ali noted:

That’s what the intelligence community says they [broadcast news media] should paint us as young, furious, undisciplined, weapon-toting, white haters, etc. That’s the portrayal and that stuck until COINTELPRO reached its height with all the arrests, killings, just out right smashing organizations by dividing its memberships. It’s all types of approaches to smash the fervor and the momentum of the overall movement in this country and so they did with the black panthers, they did with the PGRNA, they did it with the Nation of Islam, they did it with SNCC, and you know everything. There is not anything that they have not permeated, even the NAACP, to determine its path. They get in and they work their little number. I just know that difference is because the PGRNA took it to the next level. Declared the nationhood status. Declared and named our provisional government and just set it up and started working. I think they were just in awe of it. I think they were just totally astounded. Who do these people think they are? I mean they just think that they are just going to actually do it? Yeah, we’re gonna actually do it.

By excluding the PGRNA political platform, information about precedent law, both national and international, and by including the negative media portrayals of the citizens as “young, furious, undisciplined, weapon-toting, white haters,” the black nation was portrayed to American
audiences as directionless, careless, and dangerous. The images were used as discursive weapons “to smash the fervor and the momentum of the overall movement in the country,” and the broadcast representations also justified the government actions against the PGRNA.

Like her revolutionary forerunners in the black women’s resistance tradition, particularly Harriet Jacob’s publishing of *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl*, Sunni Ali, again, was a storyteller, as O. Davis recognized, “illuminating the liberatory strategies of Black women in their attempts to transcend the essentialist ideologies that neglect their experiences, lives, and critiques from the discourse of human communication” (“A Black Woman as Rhetorical Critic” 80). Her kitchen dialogue, though generally created and circulated in a safe space to sympathetic audiences, could also traverse the boundaries of the kitchen, moving more toward testifying discourse. For example, as the Minister of Information, Sunni Ali also circulated a press release, bringing attention to the physical repression and discursive manipulation of the U.S. government. Addressed to “Fellow Mississippians,” the press release was aimed not just at the PGRNA citizens, but also at other potential black and white supporters (see Appendix). The first three paragraphs read:

Ever since last August 18, when police and FBI agents raided the headquarters of the Republic of New Africa (RNA) in Jackson, there has been a massive propaganda campaign by government and law enforcement officials, and by the media, to prejudice the people of Mississippi against the RNA. [Paragraph 2] In this way, they hope to prevent people from asking questions about what the police and FBI were doing in the first place, which caused the RNA citizens to defend themselves. [Paragraph 3] At first it was only Black people who spoke out. Dr. Aaron Shirley, the head of Black Jacksonians for
Justice, said in a press conference that the police and FBI had gone out to “shoot some niggers,” and that it was this attitude which caused the shootout.

Clearly differing from the article in *The New African*, the press release uses more inclusive rhetoric, attempting to reach those inside and outside the black nation, but still not appealing to most white Americans. However, just by addressing the press release to “fellow Mississippians,” the Information Ministry targeted support from a more diverse group of readers. Notice, where most of the articles in the black nation’s newspaper emphasized the goal of separation, in the press release there was no mention of taking over the five states for the proposed “national territory,” nor was there any mention of anything militaristic or militant regarding the PGRNA. Instead, the focus was “about the fight against injustice throughout the South,” detailing the unjust collusion of the various U.S. government agencies that launched a “massive propaganda campaign.” The PGRNA citizens, in the press release, could possibly have been understood as inclusionists rather than separatists, making their efforts seem unworthy of such treatment by the American justice system.

From this perspective, under Sunni Ali’s Ministry of Information, the black nation exerted, to some extent, control over what representations would be allowed when and if they decided to speak to mainstream media reporters. The group strategically employed various tactics to counteract the white mainstream broadcast news story representations, incorporating their political cognizance of the power and reach of broadcast media. They undoubtedly knew that “anything that’s going to put out information and say something” about the independent black nation might be politically and effectively useful for their cause.

From 1971-1973, Sunni Ali, primarily through different form of kitchen discourse, fulfilled her New African duties, and, in so doing, she was an integral part of building community
support for the PGRNA and the RNA-11. Each day, waking early every morning for military drills, working at one of the PGRNA’s offices to help with office tasks, and raising consciousness in the black community about the black nation and the RNA-11 case, her kitchen discourse, while primarily circulating internally among New African and sympathetic black audiences, convincingly motivated them to continue supporting nation-building.

5.2 Testifying Discourse and Engineering Support for African Prisoners of War

Sunni Ali’s womanist activism was again put to the test when planning the PGRNA’s International African Prisoner of War Solidarity Day, which took place on March 31, 1973. The main purpose of the event was to garner international, national, and local support for the RNA-11 as well as other imprisoned activists, as so she moved out of “the kitchen” and began “testifying.”

The Prisoner of War Solidarity Day was the PGRNA citizens’ political strategy to garner support for the RNA-11 case inter-organizationally, partnering with the Pan African Congress, U.S.A., the Cairo United Front, C.O.R.E., the Congress of African People, and the National Black Political Council. Attendees and participants included notable persons such as Ben Chavis, Albert Cleage, and Amiri Baraka (Thrasher 6). From the fall of 1971 to spring 1973, various PGRNA defendants were embroiled in constant battles with state and federal courts (Obadele, Free the Land 135-255), and so organized defense remained important. In one of Sunni Ali’s archives, I found a press release explaining how the event would dramatize the plight of Africans “seized and/or killed in the arena of struggle” on the African continent or in the U.S (see Appendix).
Purpose—The rapidly accelerating pace of American repression against African Freedom Fighters on this continent and abroad is taking on the International Black Mass. Irreparable damage has been inflicted on the homes, the families, and the friends, as well as the persons of those presently engaged in Black Liberation Struggle. Episodes of political persecutions, such as in the cases of George Jackson, the Attica Massacre, Pres. Imari Obadele and New African Prisoners of War in Jackson, Miss., and Miami, Florida, Private Billy Smith, and thousands unnamed involve the premeditated desecration of Black liberty and Black life on the part of a callous adversary. The Solidarity Day will also be in commemoration of those Africans who have been slain as a consequence of this same lawlessness and it will be a tool to arouse mass resistance against the current reign of repressive terror which acts of genocide in Cairo, Ill. and Tuskegee, Alabama represents. (“International Solidarity Day for African Prisoner’s of War”)

As a testifying discourse, Sunni Ali, who remained the Minister of Information from fall 1972 through 1976, wrote, helped write, or approved all public and internal communication about the Republic of New Africa, and she used this communication to gather support from a wide-range of potential supporters. This New African testimony, which was suppressed and obstructed by the law-and-order discursive environment, was connected to the other experiences of regional, national, and international “freedom fighters,” and was designed to logically and emotionally appeal to other people than new or potential PGRNA citizens. While the mainstream press, in newspaper articles and broadcast news stories, identified the PGRNA citizens as “terrorists,” the PGRNA publicly characterized themselves as “freedom fighters.”

As an “outside agitator,” Sunni Ali’s testifying rhetorical strategies were created to reach a broader audience, characteristically demanding a militant stance against the dominant order.
The PGRNA literature related to the Solidarity Day in her archive linked the RNA-11 cause to the plight of other African people, demonstrating that the defendants’ struggles were not isolated. What happened to Obadele and the ten others was a part of a larger issue of “premeditated desecration.” To further characterize the inhumanity of their imprisonment, the communication spoke about “an ungodly toll on the International Black Mass,” illustrating a moral god-like concern for New African political prisoners. Sunni Ali sought to rhetorically broaden the range of her audience, enlisting support from New Africans and other sympathizers. The aim of her PGRNA communications was to elicit an immediate response and have people move to action, either by sending money or attending the rally. To gain support for their cause, she publicized the testimonial discourse about the RNA-11 case, using demeaning language to describe the American government, such as a “callous adversary,” the “current reign of repressive terror” and “episodes of political persecutions.” She discursively cast a more inclusive net for readers to identify with the plight of the imprisoned New Africans, associating New Africans and other black Americans with “all African persons past and present.” Arthur L. Smith asserts that the aim of such rhetoric was to both terrify white people and unify black people, and, to attain these goals, “the agitator’s rhetorical style is less ordered and elegant, but more caustic and direct” (26). The aim of PGRNA communications was to convince the audience, those potentially sympathetic both inside and outside the PGRNA, that there was urgency to act and to heed the call of the Republic of New Africa, for the citizens’ lives, as well as the lives of other people of African descent and other political prisoners, were at stake.

Sunni Ali, speaking with me in one of our interview sessions, said that the preparation for Solidarity Day required working long hours every day on discursive and organizational strategy.
[We had to] first develop and then maintain the support for our political prisoners. These were our first political prisoners and prisoners of war. This was the first time that the PG [Provisional Government] began to give definition to both of those things. We remembered being a part of the discussions in the PCC [People’s Council Committee] after the raid on Lewis Street house and then on the Lynch Street house, occurring simultaneously. We met and talked about what that meant for our nation and what it could potentially mean in the future. Quickly, we agreed that we needed to establish a support group. We struggled over little things that stressed the defense of the group or support. We established the New African Prison of War Solidarity Conference. Then, we began to develop a plan so that we could go forward and to bring awareness. We began to grapple with the terms of “political prisoner” and what it meant. This was new to everyone, of course, defining and redefining the term prisoner of war, as it relates to us. This was the first time [people were] experiencing participation in the government structure. Even then, some of the citizens weren’t connecting with this term prisoner of war.

In the process of implementing plans for Solidarity Day, Sunni Ali and the planning committee rhetorically strategized their counter-discourse, attempting to retell the RNA-11 story and to “develop and maintain the support for [their] political prisoners.”

In the previously illustrated example from the press release, through redefinition, Sunni Ali provided an alternative frame, re-characterizing the notions of “terrorist” and “freedom fighter.” Her language vilifies the white American government and allows potentially supportive and empathetic readers to gain sympathy for people who are unjustly imprisoned for supporting black solidarity. The Republic of New Africa’s inter-organizational network, like the club movement in the black women’s resistance tradition, was local and national, and all groups were
“expected to directly endorse and co-sponsor this Solidarity Day.” Expecting thousands of blacks to “converge on the infamous attack by F.B.I and Jackson Police on the RNA-11 in a mass show of Solidarity for all African persons,” the International Solidarity Day for African Prisoner’s of War, according to the press release, planned to receive support from “every major Black political organization in North America.”

Sunni Ali’s testifying discourse, redefining the terms of the RNA-11 case, reaffirmed the New Africans’ goal of nation-building, seeking to illustrate the legitimacy of the black nation. It inverts the violation of identifying the PGRNA as a terrorist nation and testifies about the Republic of New Africa’s trials and triumphs. Readers and observers of their plight were reeducated and provided new terms to expand their understanding about the possibility of a black nation and the consequences of not having one. According to the press release, the Solidarity Day would “be a commemoration of those Africans who have been slain as a consequence of this same lawlessness” and “a tool to arouse mass resistance.” The decolonization process for citizens and for observers could continue, as they acquired these terms and understood them. One could say that Sunni Ali’s terminological tools of “political prisoner advocacy” opened a space for New Africans to sustain their liberation struggle, simultaneously critiquing the dominant white order.

Exemplifying her attempts at acquiring public support for the case, Sunni Ali showed me another one of her press releases, written December 1, 1972 (see Appendix). She wrote the document on behalf of President Imari Obadele, vividly constructing him as a freedom fighter. Similar to the testifying discourses of other black women in the resistance tradition, she artfully brought rhetorical presence to his and other political prisoners’ plights while embedding their struggle in the historical legacy of black revolutionary struggle in America. Her voice, speaking for the community as an individual, is the unified voice of all present and past political prisoners.
in the black freedom movement. Confined by prison walls, Obadele’s experiences still reach his people through Sunni Ali’s press release, discursively freeing his voice and bodily experience as a prisoner. Her job as Minister of Information, similarly functioning as the “sister griot” for the regional, national, and international black liberation struggle, is the freedom project for Obadele.

Testifying about Obadele’s public testimony in the press release moved the nation-building purpose forward, raising consciousness about the PGRNA’s experiences and extending the dialogue about their cause. The press release explained:

Fifteen months after the Jackson, Mississippi, police department and the FBI suffered one dead and two wounded in a surprise dawn attack on the Republic of New Africa’s Government house here, RNA President Imari Abubakari Obadele, remains in jail untried. His path to freedom by means of posting $75,000 bond has three times been blocked by Mississippi state and federal courts and the FBI. [Paragraph 2] Although Brother Imari was not at the scene of the August 1971 shootout and was arrested at the RNA office several blocks away, Hinds County Prosecutor Ed Peters and Circuit Judge Russell Moore are hoping to send the 42-year-old political theorist activist to jail for life, they have already visited such sentences upon RNA Vice President Hekima Ana, Delta Interior Minister Offogga Quadduss, and 16-year-old Karim Njabafudi. In the meantime harsh requirements and stringent prison regulations are being used illegally but purposefully to silence and isolate Imari.

Sunni Ali’s five-page press release, sent to various political black organizations, thoroughly covers the history of the RNA-11 case, which was when Obadele was first imprisoned, teaches the public about the PGRNA’s legal claim to the five southern states in the national territory, and explains the theoretical legitimation and practice of the Republic of New Africa’s na-
tionhood endeavor. After describing the location along the Mississippi River, which was called the “Kush District,” the press release explained the “two essential ingredients” for attaining nationhood status. “First, blacks are not legally citizens of the United States because the ex-slave should have been asked if he wanted to be a U.S. citizen (or take some other course) but neither he nor his descendants ever were asked. Second, blacks are entitled to independent land and money and goods as reparations for slavery and for the unjust war waged against [them] by the U.S. during slavery, and because We have been the traditional majority population on the land of the Black belt.”

The press release, in this regard, functions as a “rhetoric of survival,” a liberationist project for all black people (O. Davis, “A Black Woman as Rhetorical Critic” 77). As a rhetoric of survival, Sunni Ali’s discourse encouraged the PGRNA citizens’ collective agency, empowering them to historically understand and accept the black struggle. Her communicative text simultaneously shows self-determination and the Republic of New Africa citizens’ right to forge ahead, warring against the white American government forces. After explaining the historical basis for black nationhood, Sunni Ali provided a historical precedent, legitimating the development of the PGRNA. In 1967, “the United States accepted the Puerto Ricans—who, like us, are classed as U.S. citizens—to hold an independence plebiscite.” Her public storytelling, as a rhetorical act of resistance to the discursive oppression of white domination, is a pedagogical tool of American and New African historical claims to the notion of citizenship.

The press release was a consciousness-raising script, educating potential supporters and reeducating others. Again, in the following paragraph, she reconnected the PGRNA program to the struggle of black Americans, implicitly addressing the rampant racial injustice in America.
stepped-up campaign to ‘bury’ the RNA before the United Nations or the Congressional Black Caucus acts.” Without Sunni Ali’s account, her voice and the other New African voices might have been silenced, a historically deafening experience that was all too familiar. She, in fact, though confronted with rhetorical constraints, took, like Ida B. Wells, her voice back, and her voice “was taken back by her and for her and the community [to which] she [belonged].” She “took back her voice in defiance of a system that endorsed a master narrative that created the heinous crime of silencing voices of the oppressed” (O. Davis, “I Rose and Found My Voice” 315).

Affirming the PGRNA’s citizens’ spirit of perseverance and nation-building, the story in the press release recognizes the unwavering commitment of New Africans. “Despite being jailed, shot at, and generally harassed, RNA workers have continued their efforts to prepare the plebiscite. At the same time, because of a need to assure that the coming black nation has a proper economic base, Brother Imari has personally pushed a 200-million dollar pilot-project, which would bring 20 New Communities to Kush in the next two years.” Facing presumably insurmountable uncertainty, New Africans persisted.

Still, the odds remained overwhelming. While Sunni Ali assumed that the vision of the “20 New Communities in Kush in two years” was an effective rhetorical strategy, in lieu of the repression, given the mainstream ideological domination, and the political prisoner situation, her language selection was less likely effective at fully persuading even black audiences. If the black nation could not overcome constraints, such as the discursive domination, the FBI infiltration, the American government repression, the lack of control over the PGRNA mainstream media depiction, and recruitment options, what was the feasibility of acquiring $200 million, better yet organizing and implementing a $200-million project, particularly by someone imprisoned indefi-
nitive? True, regarding international law, the PGRNA leaders were well in their right to seek sovereignty through self-determination; however, national and international institutions and laws were, in fact, created and controlled by the same people the Republic of New Africa citizens struggled against (Summers 327). How could a system that created the oppression be the same system used for their liberation? If the failures of the Civil Rights Movement were structurally undermined because of systemic constraints in American law, why would there not be parallel systemic constraints in the international realm, which was instituted primarily by the U.S. and other white colonial powers?

Nonetheless, in the press release, the American and international history of black repression served as the PGRNA’s leaders’ justifiable means to their ends, even though theoretically and practically futile.

Promoting a rhetoric of survival despite obstacles, the final two pages of her press release for the International African Prisoner of War Solidarity Day refocus on specific Republic of New Africa citizens and their horrific ordeals in the American justice system, which was a move intended to be rhetorically effective for the New African community and other supportive black political organizations. Bringing cohesion to her rhetorical approach, Sunni Ali reminds her readers that the “Mississippi New Africans insist” on nothing less than black liberation, at any cost. RNA citizens continue to organize for the plebiscite in Mississippi, and Brother Imari continues to give guidance. “Despite all,’ the New Africans say, ‘We shall soon, and without a doubt, FREE THE LAND!”’ Illustratively reframing the story of Obadele and other New Africans, Sunni Ali rhetorically portrayed them as objects of crucifixion and subjects of inhumanity. Imari’s trials become one of many historical anecdotes about the constant repression and oppression against blacks in white America. Towards the end of her communication, she adds:
Consequently the President of the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Africa—now bearded, physically ill, and 25 pounds under the 155 pounds he weighed when he entered jail—waits in an old, cold-water, open-toilet, 8 by 8 perpetually locked cell in maximum security at Hinds County Jail. The bond battle goes on, even as an early-February trial date approaches. Evidently the feeling among white Mississippi leaders and the U.S. Justice Department is that holding Brother Imari in jail—where virtually his only visitors are his lawyers, and where his mail is censored, his voice stilled, and his presence absent from the battlefront—will break the RNA drive for political power and economic strength.

His unjust incarceration leaves him figuratively and literally dwindling away from such inhumane treatment. Sunni Ali’s discursive maneuvers, beginning the story of Imari and the PGRNA predawn raid with a discussion about his degrading jail conditions, attempts to place an invisible shield of protection around Imari and other New African political prisoners.

Despite whatever strategic shortcomings may have been in evidence in Sunni Ali’s otherwise passionate and informative press release, The Solidarity Day event, starting on March 30, 1973, proved highly successful. Over one thousand attendees supported the event. They held six workshops on Friday, March 30th: 1) on the “International Significance of the P.O.W.’s and the Relationship of P.O.W. issues and the African Liberation Movement”; 2) “How to Distribute Information on African P.O.W.’s” (where Sunni Ali was one of the workshop leaders); 3) “Raising Funds for P.O.W.’s”; 4) “The White Government’s Repressive Tactics”; 5) “Black Law (Who is P.O.W. and Who is Criminal)”; and 6) “Building a Permanent African Prisoner of War Structure” (“What Will Happen? Tentative Agenda of Solidarity Day Activities). Day two, Saturday, March 31, 1973, was the “Spiritual Rally” held in Yazoo City, Mississippi.
At the beginning of April in 1973 and after his 20-month imprisonment, President Imari Obadele was freed on a $25,000 bond. “His release,” according to an article by Ken Lawrence in the *Southern Patriot*, “was testimony to the power of protest” (1). Solidarity Day attendees and organizers, such as Sunni Ali, saw Obadele’s release as a success from their community-organizing efforts. For now, the PGRNA, rhetorically guided by the diplomacy and communicative talents of Sunni Ali, triumphed.

From 1973 up through the early 1980s, Sunni Ali continued her work as a citizen in the PGRNA, raising community awareness about the black nation, educating black people about the plebiscite, and constantly training. Eventually, all of the RNA-11 citizens were gradually over the next several years released.

### 5.3 Liberatory Emergence “In the Belly of the Dog”

After serving as the elected chairperson of the People’s Center Council (PCC) for the Republic of New Africa in 1979, by the early 1980’s, Sunni Ali, now a 33-year-old seasoned veteran in community and nation-building and a highly respected New African citizen, had well over a decade of experience as an activist. Her womanist activism was now in full swing, working to fulfill her citizen duties and PCC chairperson obligations for the Republic of New Africa. After moving into the proposed PGRNA “national territory,” she and other New Africans had been nation-building on “their” land for almost a decade. Early fall 1981, she planned, once again, a trip to Mississippi, where she went to visit her father Odegbalola who was living in a small country town. Visiting her father, she also met with her sister (non-blood related kinship among New Africans) Jerry Gaines, a mother of five children and native of Flint, Michigan who had moved
to Gallman, Mississippi (the community in Gallman where Jerry Gaines lived was called Byrdtown) in 1978 to also help nation-build.

Sunni Ali arrived in Gallman on October 26, 1981, staying overnight at Gaines’s home.

The next day, according to *The New African*:

> On October 27, 1981, Fulani was seized in a pre-dawn raid and military attack at the home of Jerry Gaines in Byrdtown, Miss. An FBI terrorist gang of over 200 surrounded the town and country house with four tanks and two helicopters, then illegally took her, Jerry Gaines, Alajo Adegbalola and twelve small children in handcuffs to jail.

Fulani was the only one charged and held for bank robbery conspiracy in connection with the attempted expropriation of 1.6 million dollars in Nyack, N.Y. on October 20, 1981.

Bail was set at $500,000 dollars and she was extradited to N.Y. (“Fulani is Free” 5)

In Nyack, during the attempted robbery, two policemen and a security guard died, further complicating the dynamics of the case. Sunni Ali, according to the federal and state investigators, was one of the co-conspirators who coordinated the plan. Authorities had her under surveillance, because “of her past associations with two fugitive black militants [Assata Shakur (Joanne Chesimard) and Anthony Laborde], officials said” (Roberts 17). “Boston [Sunni Ali] was arrested after the wife of the building superintendent identified her from a photograph as having participated in the apartment [which was a safe house used by the alleged robbers] cleanup,” but, after further investigation, a New Orleans’s car mechanic told authorities that she was, in fact, in New Orleans (Saunders and English 42). Her car repair receipt proved the car was dropped off on October 21 and picked up October 23, so there was no possible way she was anywhere near the New York apartment.
Sunni Ali, nevertheless, found herself embroiled in a federal and state government suspect roundup, including several members of the Black Liberation Army, the Weather Underground, the Black Panther Party, and the Republic of New Africa. The “major figures in the Brink’s cases,” according to the mainstream press, were Kuwesi Balagoon (Donald Weems), Sylvia Pia Baraldini, Kathy Boudin, Samuel Brown, Marilyn Jean Buck, Judith A. Clark, Cheri Laverne Dalton, Bernardine Dohrn, Cecillo Rodrigo Ferguson, David Joseph Gilbert, Edward L. Joseph, Anthony N. LaBorde, Sekou Odinga, Eve Rosahn, Tyrone Rison (later found to be an FBI informant), Iliana Robinson, Susan Rosenberg, Samuel Smith (killed in a police shootout in 1981), and Fulani Sunni Ali’s New African husband Bilal Sunni Ali (William Johnson).

Sunni Ali was immediately extradited to New York. “After nine days in the hole at M.C.C. (Metropolitan Correctional Center) in New York,” and shortly after her innocence was proven in the Brink’s robbery, she was released on November 6, 1981 (“Fulani Is Free” 5). Cleared of all conspiracy charges connected to the Brink’s case on November 6, 1981, walking out the door, the same day of her release, a subpoena was handed to her. She was to appear before a grand jury on November 16, 1981, providing samples of her handwriting and hair. Looking through her archive, I came across the grand jury subpoena. The grand jury appearance, according to a New York Times’s article by Ted Cilwick, was to investigate “links between the RNA, the Weather Underground, and the Black Liberation Army and other militant groups. Three Weather Underground members have been charged in the Brink’s robbery that resulted in the deaths of two policemen and a guard” (3). Several of the articles in her archive communicated that the New York Civil Liberties Union publicly charged that the U.S. government was creating an “atmosphere of hysteria” and postulated the grand jury subpoena was nothing more than a
“political witch hunt,” purposely intending to squash all dissent (Saunders and Rosen 32). As we shall see, her response to this subpoena exemplified womanist liberatory emergence.

Sunni Ali, extending the black women’s resistance tradition, strategically negotiated the public-private sphere during this period, pushing against injustices and expanding the meaning of liberatory emergence. Liberatory emergence, in womanist activism, calls particular attention to the interdependency of thought and action (Hamlet 218). As womanists provide testifying discourses, acknowledging the presence and viability of black people’s experiences and epistemologies, womanists also know their efforts, working to lift as they climb, will eventually yield benefits. A womanist is who she is because of what she thinks and does, denying an either-or reality. “A both/and nondichotomous relationship represents the wholeness and the connectedness of entire people. It does not tear them apart” (Sheared 272). A womanist is, first and foremost, transformative.

Sunni Ali and Jerry Gaines’s eventual prison release, after the time expired for jail ing jury resisters, was only possible because of the collective efforts of the men and women in the PGRNA and other members from different organizations, such as the Black Liberation Army and the Weather Underground. In the remainder of the chapter, I conclude my analysis of Sunni Ali’s modes of womanist activism in the black women’s resistance tradition, evaluating the discourse that surrounded her case. At this time, though physically removed from the New African community, she still found ways to remain influential influence. Looking at her archive, I specifically found examples that would help my analysis of rhetorical strategies, similar to other black women’s rhetoric, such as teaching and sharing strategies of resistance, personal narratives of struggle and triumph, grassroots’ activities, and developing familial relationships. Even though, for this time period, her archive did not include any primary documents that she wrote, such as press re-
leases, articles, or flyers, most of the archival materials were compiled by her father Alajo Adegbalola, spanning from the first mention of the raid in 1981 to her release in 1983. She told me that when she was released her father Adegbalola handed two notebook binders to her, cataloging her liberatory emergence.

A key factor in their releases was the rhetorical strategy of silence. Many New Africans and other 1960s activists learned from their community-organizing efforts in the last couple of decades that one of the most resourcefully valuable tools was information. Activists understood that the COINTELPRO program used various discursive tactics to directly undermine the goals of their community organizing and sway public support. Ahmed Obafemi, Sunni Ali’s first husband and New African comrade, was instrumental in strategically countering the grand jury subpoenas. The predawn raid, in the mainstream press, maintained that she and other people were terrorists, “linked to last week’s [October 20, 1981] $1.6 million Brink’s robbery in Rockland County” (Maitland A1). After describing the Brink’s robbery on the first page, The New York Times’s explained Sunni Ali’s arrest as follows:

The suspect arrested in Mississippi—Cynthia Boston, 33 years old—was identified in arrest papers as the minister of information for the Republic of New Africa, described as a terrorist organization that advocates a separate black nation within the United States. The arrest complaint said William Johnson her common-law husband, who has eluded capture, was believed to be affiliated with the Black Liberation Army and Joanne Chesimard, a leader of the group. Mr. Johnson, 33, is also known as Balil Sunni-Ali, according to the complaint and has an extensive arrest record. (Maitland B6)
The *Standard Star* (a local newspaper in Sunni Ali’s hometown New Rochelle, New York) newspaper article, also a part of her extensive archive, dramatically differed in telling the story of the predawn raid, detailing Sunni Ali’s involvement in the PGRNA:

Cynthia Boston, arrested and later released in connection with last month’s bloody Brink’s robbery, says the law enforcement authorities who tracked her are the real “terrorists” operating in the United States. Ms. Boston, a former New Rochelle civil rights activist who also goes by the name Fulani Sunni-Ali was arrested Oct. 27 when a heavily armed team of federal agents and state police raided a farmhouse near Jackson, Miss. Her arrest followed by one week the arrest of four suspects—including the radical Weather Underground—accused of taking part in the robbery and shootout. (Solomon)

Conveying the same event, the meaning in both accounts obviously varies in important ways. The *New York Times*’s article places a cloak of suspicion around her, her husband, the Republic of New Africa, Joanne Chesimard (also known as Assata Shakur), and the Black Liberation Army. Sunni Ali, identified through these associations, is a “suspect,” leaving readers to question her innocence, the black nation’s position, and virtually anything else the Black Nationalists did or might do. In the above passage, she was a “terrorist,” guiltily associated with the “terrorist organization that advocates a separate black nation within the United States.”

An attorney for political activists, Michael E. Deutsch, in his article “The Improper Use of the Federal Grand Jury: An Instrument for Internment of Political Activists,” claimed, “In the United States, the government imprisons radical political activists, often called terrorists, through the grand jury subpoena power, without a specific criminal charge. This practice deeply offends our basic constitutional principles of due process, presumption of innocence, and trial by jury” (1). Readers of the *New York Times*, unquestioning of the American legal system, could rightful-
ly assume the story was true, not critiquing any aspect of the facts. Even before a trial date had been set, Sunni Ali and those associated with her were placed under suspicion, leaving most to presume she and the other activists were justly treated. Sunni Ali, her husband, and any others associated with them are transitioning the fundamentally good reputation of American democracy, and, as Robert Ivie argues, are “evil” (182). Ivie postulates, “Rather than allying us with democracy, the rhetoric of evil makes us complicit with terrorism, for terrorism is constituted in and sustained by a discourse of evil” (182). The predawn raid, as framed in the *New York Times*, was justified. “[M]asking the politics of terror” and situating Sunni Ali and other New Africans in the “rhetoric of evil perpetuates the performance of violence” (Ivie 184).

The local newspaper in New Rochelle, New York, (Sunni Ali’s hometown) *Standard Star*, on the other hand, explaining the same event, depicts a less threatening image of Sunni Ali and her associates. First, her portrayal is not at any time associated with terrorism, neither is there any other link to terrorists. She is respectfully identified as a “top official in a black separatist group called the New Republic of New Africa,” correctly identifying the PGRNA, according to the black nation’s definition. Contrasting the *Standard Star* and the *New York Times’s* publications, J.D. Solomon’s article “Cynthia Boston Says Lawmen Are Nation’s Real ‘Terrorists’” neutrally communicates Sunni Ali’s womanist activism. Instead of attaching the negative meaning of terrorism to the Republic of New Africa, Solomon literally headlines his article with Sunni Ali’s voice and political position, effectively situating her in accordance with her activism. She publicly called the U.S. lawmen “terrorists,” inversing the rhetoric of evil and negatively reframing the October 27, 1981 predawn raid. Also, by acknowledging Sunni Ali as a “former New Rochelle civil rights activist,” the journalist sheds light on her history, further anchoring her activism in a trajectory of identifiable resistance.
Using a rhetoric of silence, not speaking to the grand jury, Sunni Ali and other resisters stopped the U.S. government was more attempts at misconstruing the PGRNA and maligning the families. Without more names or specific information, Sunni Ali and my mother publicly taught readers, supporters and non-supporters of the black nation, how to resist, even when the cost were high.

True to her cause as a revolutionary womanist, enduring the self-collective expression of a by-any-means-necessary resistance, she then publicized and exposed what she called the U.S. government’s terrorism against her and other political prisoners. With the well-known radical attorney William Kunstler by her side and her fellow New African citizen and with attorney Chokwe Lumumba standing behind her, she held a press conference at the State Office Building in Harlem on Friday, November 8, 1981. Pointing to the emotional appeals through unstated facts in the mainstream press, she rhetorically condemned the treatment of herself and other political prisoners, highlighting the inhumane acts that occurred while in prison. Sunni Ali retold the story at a press conference.

At 6 o’clock I peeped out the window and saw a camouflaged-colored tank. Then suddenly I saw four of these tanks. Once I was out in the road they looked at each other and said, “Is this her? Is that her?” The female agent nodded. I had a hat on my head which they snatched off and they were tickled that my hair was in braids. They said, “that ought to make a good shot.” (qtd. in Caldwell 1)

In our interviews, she reminded me that all the children, including myself, my seven siblings, and her four youngest children, were either handcuffed or had our hands tied behind our backs with a strip of firm white plastic. Sunni Ali, in the same news story about her press conference, said:
The children, I salute the children. They were as calm as could be. All the children down to age six were handcuffed. They simply had none (handcuffs) small enough for the babies. All the children were brought to the middle of the road, handcuffed behind their backs, grabbed, and told to run, to run away from the driveway, leading to the house and to the (police) cars. They frightened the children. After being told to run, they dragged them immediately afterwards so they would run. It was quite frightening for the children. (Caldwell)

There was not one mainstream story that discussed the presence or treatment of the children. Of course, even the slightest mention of children might easily garner sympathy for Sunni Ali and the Republic of New Africa. The mainstream press, construing the PGRNA citizens as terrorists, could not mention that the children, even children nine months old, my siblings and cousins, were handcuffed. She described how the children, such as myself, a six-year-old child, handcuffed with our hands tied behind our backs, watched Sunni Ali and my mother Jerry Gaines walking with their hands raised high above their heads. We watched my older handcuffed siblings as they marched in procession. Then, we all sat in the backseats of FBI unmarked cars and were taken to the FBI center for questioning by federal agents. If the New York Times or any other mainstream media outlet added this information, the readers, more than likely, would have, perhaps, empathized. Expressing similar sentiments, Earl Caldwell, a Daily News journalist who attended the press conference, said, “Fulani Sunni Ali had told her story well and Kuntsler and the other lawyers who were there on Friday at the State Office Building in Harlem knew it. Much of the story had been chilling, especially the part about the children” (1). Maybe some in the media audience would have supported Sunni Ali’s plight. A broader and more implicit claim, examining Sunni Ali’s comments about the handcuffing of children, can presumably be understood as
her indictment of the American government, indicating that the reach of the country’s terroristic powers was infinite and unchecked.

She admonished readers, as an act of liberatory emergence, that if this could happen to her and her children, then it could happen to anyone in this country. In a television interview that aired in Tarrytown, New York on a cable TV public affairs program, as mentioned by the Standard Star journalist J.D. Solomon, “She said black women and children are special ‘targets’ of the FBI, which she called a ‘terrorist group under the leadership of the Reagan-Haig-Weinberger triangle’” (1). Discursively deploying pathetic appeals, Sunni Ali, narrating the children’s trauma, championed her revolutionary cause, attempting to gain sympathy from supporters and non-supporters. Sunni Ali, representing the New African nation, seized the opportunity to reposition her plight offensively, situating the raid as an act of unwarranted terror by the U.S. (A. L. Smith 31). Law enforcement, as described by Sunni Ali, was an out-of-control force, not enacting a system of justice but engaging in unjust brutality. Government officers were part of a terrorist machine that was controlled by a few elite leaders. As Sunni Ali publicly connected the PGRNA’s situation to the ill treatment of the children, she negatively objectified the American government officials that were involved in the raid and the trial process. Rhetorically, she was able to use objectification to demonize the American system of capitalistic democracy and to legitimize the New Africans’ purpose and system.

As an astute New African woman, completing and implementing what she learned and practiced from her PGRNA nation-building classes and from her mentors, such as her father Obadele and Queen “Mother” Moore, she anticipated the U.S. government’s next attempt to detain her. She said, “First of all I thought that, ok, they’re going to let me out and then they’re going to snatch me right back again. I didn’t even let myself get excited about the release. I had
been given a subpoena on the way out the door and I knew that it wasn’t over. They were begin-
ning another level of this whole charade” (qtd. in Salaam 1). The subpoena read:

    To Fulani Sunni Ali a/k/a Cynthia Boston, Greeting: WE COMMAND YOU that all business and excuses be laid aside, you appear and attend before the GRAND IN-
QUEST of the body of people of the United States of America for the Southern District of New York, at a District Court to be held at Room 1401 in the United States Cour-
house, Foley Square, in the Borough of Manhattan, City of New York, on the 30th day of December, 1981, at 10:00 o’clock in the fore noon, to testify and give evidence in regard to an alleged violation of Title 18, United States Code, Sections 371, 2113, and 1962, and not to depart the Court without leave thereof, or of the United States Attorney, and that you produce at the time and place aforesaid the following: handwriting exemplars and hair samples. And failure to attend and produce the said documents you will be deemed guilty of contempt of Court and liable to penalties of the law. (“Form No. USA-33s-224 (Rev.7-77)—Grand Jury Subpoena Duces Tecum” December 18, 1981)

After almost two decades of womanist activism, Sunni Ali prepared to face the court. Later, in her article “Resisting a Grand Jury,” she outlined what happened, arriving for the grand jury session in New York:

    Essentially, I went into the grand jury room with a prepared statement to read in answer to any question other than my name and address. I refused to swear in, but agreed to affirm that I would tell the truth. I read my statement to the grand jury when they be-
gan to ask questions about my attorney and whether or not my attorney was outside. They directed me to give them handwriting samples and photographs. At that I read the state-
ment again and the U.S. Attorneys became very flustered and began to yell and scream at me to stop reading the statement. (qtd. in Salaam 1).

Aware of the U.S. government’s repressive tactics and control mechanisms, Sunni Ali worked to control the discursive situation and particularly her voice and representation. She outright refused, because, when first arrested, she was already fingerprinted and photographed eight times. In a womanist form of liberatory emergence activism, she wisely explained to the public that the federal government had a plan. From her position of resistance, the U.S. federal government had “some other scheme in mind,” and she said, “I mean maybe they want to take my prints, my fresh prints or my hair and plant it somewhere” (Salaam 1).

Similar to the other strategies in the black women’s resistance tradition, Sunni Ali used rhetorical presence as a mode of opposition. Countering the mainstream stories that most often portrayed her and the Republic of New Africa negatively, Sunni Ali, differently depicted in the PGRNA materials in her archive, was shown to be a positive representation of New African black womanhood. A one-page *The New African Bulletin* information sheet entitled “Free Sister Fulani: The Struggle is for Land” briefly explained, in the first and third paragraphs, who she was and why support was needed (see Appendix):

Sister Fulani Sunni Ali is a political prisoner of the United States of Amerikkka. A political prisoner is some-one who has been unjustly jailed because of their political beliefs. Sister Fulani is a citizen of the Republic of New Afrika, (all Black People—every descendant of Afrikan slaves—in what is known as the U.S., is a citizen of the Black Nation by birth). This citizenship is a right of birth and is the only valid citizenship which Black People (descendants of Afrikan slaves) here have, under international law, unless such person voluntarily—and with full information—gives up his or her New Afrikan cit-
izenship. [Paragraph three] Sister Fulani is jailed because she is an activist. The U.S. government (Reagan administration) is cynically creating a climate of fear in an attempt to isolate the activist from the masses. (Free Fulani!)

Along with the text, several images, such as the image of an African statue, an outline of the proposed five-state “national territory,” broken chains, and an image of Sunni Ali in a head wrap and smiling, were used as visual rhetoric to further identify Sunni Ali as a New African. The goal of the images and text “worked rhetorically to establish visibility—to make visible people [New Africans], attitudes, and ideas in the context of the struggle over civil rights [self-determined rights] in America” (V. Gallagher and Zagacki 177).

Once the time limit expired for holding a grand jury resister, she and Gaines were released on October 19, 1983. The PGRNA information-campaigning was effectively successful, providing active pressure from within and outside the black nation. The Republic of New Africa’s discursive strategies were constantly negotiated in the dialectical reality of liberation and struggle, managing their enactment of liberatory emergence, using silence as a strategy.

Sunni Ali, along with other grand jury resisters, was imprisoned for a year and half in the Metropolitan Corrections Center in Manhattan, New York. During her incarceration, a number of activities and rhetorical fronts were launched to set her free. One signature petition requested “that U.S. Attorney General William French Smith appoint a special prosecutor to investigate the premeditated actions of the F.B.I. in their October 27, 1981 framed-up arrest and continued harassment of Fulani Sunni-Ali (Cynthia Boston) and her children” (“Petition”). From her archive, in another article in the PGRNA newspaper *The New Afrikan*, she was identified as “a symbol of The Highest In Womanhood, A Goddess,” a phrase that positively acknowledging her womanist activism (3). On the flyer “Free Sister Fulani: The Struggle is for Land!,” she is defined as a “po-
litical prisoner of the United Snakes of Amerikkka,” “a citizen of the Republic of New Afrika,” and as someone who “is jailed because she is an activist” (1). The PGRNA information-campaigning and petitioning completely revised the mainstream story about the predawn raid, inversing the positive and negative traits associated with Sunni Ali and the U.S. government.

Similar to creating new terminology, such as “political prisoner” and “New African,” the archival literature illustrates the discursive war throughout the raids, trials, and imprisonments. Opposing white America’s discursive oppression and physical repression, whether Sunni Ali or someone else produced the communication, the Republic of New Africa rhetoric was “not only a space for experiencing and remembering” the black liberation struggle, “but also repudiating the myths and stereotypes of [New African citizenry resistance and existence] while recording [their] historical contributions on the contours of American life” (O. Davis, “Theorizing African American Women’s Discourse” 36).

Sunni Ali, as a womanist enacting a discourse of liberatory emergence, unwaveringly persisted, sharing her personal narrative of struggle and triumph. O. Davis, in her article “Theorizing African American Women’s Discourse: The Public and Private Spheres of Experience,” posited:

Although history attempted to obfuscate [black women’s] stories, and thus [black women’s] experiences, the supreme perseverance and heroic resistance of Black women became thoroughly intertwined as themes of survival in the fabric of daily existence. That discourse served to center the stories of Black women [and brought] to the fore the relation between discourse and resistance. [Black women’s] survival was a response to the extreme subjugation and oppression by which discourse provided a vehicle for resistance
and change. Discourse then, become the grounds on which to challenge power and exploitation while expanding new vistas of meaning and experience. (35)

Sunni Ali, publicly positioned by the American government as a terrorist and simultaneously as a liberationist by the Republic of New Africa, championed against a four-hundred-year struggle, formidably claiming human rights, respect, and dignity. Her discourse, resistively negotiating a subjective position as a New African woman with the objective-terrorist inscription on her black woman’s body, can be seen as a speech act that changed her life, the lives of other political prisoners, and the lives of those attempting to infringe on her liberation project.

5.4 Conclusion

Sunni Ali’s womanist kitchen dialogue, testifying discourse, and liberatory emergence understandably continued the black women’s resistance tradition. Moving into the Republic of New Africa’s hoped for national territory was the beginning of several revolutionary developments. After moving from Boston to New Orleans, she was immediately immersed in daily activities to nation-build, to raise consciousness, and to secure the land for the PGRNA. She adapted her training to fit the needs of the people in the black community, finding ways to educate African Americans about the goals of the Republic of New Africa.

New Africans, such as Sunni Ali, employed a black revolutionary rhetoric to counter the discursive challenges posed in the mainstream media and by the U.S. grand jury sequester. First, with the RNA-11 case, Sunni Ali traveled to Jackson, Mississippi, helping to raise awareness about Obadele and other New Africans’ imprisonment. Using a womanist kitchen activism and organizing behind the scenes, she resourcefully transformed their subjugated sites of power—
where the key Republic of New Africa citizens could not publicly speak or physically move—
into sites of resistance. She spent her days, from morning to evening, discursively circulating and
affirming the black nation’s purpose. Initially, she met a few challenges in Jackson, but eventual-
ly she organized her comrades, implementing structure and discipline, where necessary.

Her womanist activism, in the process of seeking to free all political prisoners, led her to
use a testifying discourse, exemplified by her planning the PGRNA’s International African Pris-
oner of War Solidarity Day. Sunni Ali’s citizen work, as the Minister of Information at this
point, was to provide testimony on behalf of the RNA-11, whose leaders had been silenced. Her
voice, her ability to control, to craft, and to identify the voice of many was relatively well exe-
cuted with the Solidarity Day, at least with initially sympathetic audiences. Working inter-
organizationally with well-known community groups, community persons, and African-
American leaders, she strategically brought local, regional, national, and international attention
to the RNA-11 case. Her womanist discourse aggressively opposed white America and simulta-
neously unified supporters, publicly acknowledging the inherent contradictions in American so-
ciety.

As mentioned before, the dominant ideology at this time focused on promoting a socially
equal and just society, supporting a social order of racial harmony and peaceful coexistence. The
contradictions espoused by Sunni Ali challenged that ideology, which suggested that black peo-
ple were unjustifiably pursuing alternative social and political goals, such as separate land for a
new black nation and a redefinition of black identity. “Proposing new vocabularies, seeking
white attitudinal reform, and calling for a restructuring of our national concerns, the black revo-
lutionists… questioned the essence of the American experience” (A. L. Smith 8). Instead of ac-
cepting the dominant white society’s cultural norms, which included Western clothing and
names, Standard American English, straightened hair, and bleaching creams, the message deployed by Sunni Ali and other New Africans worked to reconnect black people with their cultural heritage that extended to African history. Her targeted black audience, through the rhetorical mechanisms of revolutionary womanist discourse, would be persuaded to understand that complete transformation of society was the only means to address the grievances of the black community, even if this meant violence. For the internal PGRNA citizens, the rhetorical message was strong, but obviously problematic for others. It was, potentially for initially sympathetic audiences and understandably unpersuasive to those supporting the dominant ideology.

Sunni Ali’s primary goal was to create an “isolationistic” feeling in the targeted listeners, to “carve out an area that the black audience [could] call its own,” free from white intervention (A. L. Smith 21). In effect, Sunni Ali and her audience, including New Africans and public sympathizers, sought to “occupy a moral or psychological territory that [they] [could] call [their] own.” Through discursive ploys, such as inverting the meaning of terrorist and freedom fighter, where the U.S. government was labeled the terrorist and New Africans were defined as freedom fighters, she conveyed to the New African and potential black American listeners that the dominant white society was exploiting and undermining African-Americans, and, by using this kind of language, that dedicated revolutionary speakers had to increase their audience’s disaffection with white America and simultaneously galvanize more people in the black community that deem revolution was the only acceptable option for people of African descent.

Sunni Ali came face to face with what it meant to be a political prisoner that fateful day on October 27, 1981. Once again, she, leaning upon and learning from the black women’s tradition of resistance and from her New African work, persevered and sought to make a way outta no way. Sunni Ali’s liberatory emergence, after spending one and a half years in the Metropolitan
Corrections Center in Manhattan, New York, was primarily made possible because she and other grand jury resisters used rhetorical silence to challenge their political imprisonment. True, Sunni Ali and other mothers, such as my mother Jerry Gaines, emotionally, socially, and physically had to sacrifice their families, especially keeping in mind that some of the children were not a year old. However, in one of our interview sessions, Sunni Ali unhesitatingly emphasized, “We could not allow our children to see us broken by the U.S. government.” The lesson, she told me, was for the children to know, similar to what she and her fellow activists understood, that people of African descent have the right and self-determination to live with full humanity, dignity, respect, and freedom, without white supremacist oppression and capitalistic exploitation.
6 CONCLUSIONS

Sunni Ali’s revolutionary development, continuing the legacy of the black women’s resistance tradition, was an ongoing process from her childhood throughout the rest of her life. Her experiences, ranging from Civil Rights to the Black Power Movements, clearly correct the imbalanced black feminist account, which occludes the revolutionary black female nationalist perspective. Examining her role as a community organizer, a Republic of New Africa citizen, the Minister of Information for the PGRNA, the chairperson for the People’s Center Council, and a grand jury resister, we see she was a central figure in the long tradition of black liberation. Moreover, she, like other African-American female activists, worked tirelessly with black and white women and men to achieve her goals.

My womanist analysis of Sunni Ali’s role in black social movements has attempted to accomplish several things. First, by interrogating the historical context of her politicization from childhood to adulthood, we saw that Sunni Ali, like other black women before and during her time of activism, faced the race-versus-sex dichotomy, which greatly impacted the priorities and choices for black female activists. Nonetheless, revolutionary black female nationalists, such as Sunni Ali, Elaine Brown, Assata Shakur, and Afeni Shakur, artfully negotiated their identities and roles in the Black Power Movement and as Black Nationalists. Her archival materials, along with her first-person account, added complexity and diversity to the black women’s resistance tradition and Black Power Movement narratives. Black women obviously had both presence and agency in this history.

Sunni Ali’s activism continually evolved. Socially and politically equipped to become an activist in the urban kitchen of her New Rochelle community, she was nurtured as a young black female, learning the ins and outs of racial inequality and injustice. Her mother and grandmother
affirmed her identity and helped her understand the significance of family-hood, community- 
hood, and eventually nationhood.

Through womanism, we were able to see the various modes of black women’s resistance since slavery, paying special attention to their rhetoric. Using the categories of kitchen discourse, testifying discourse, and liberatory emergence discourse, there was a wide-range of examples demonstrating the historical ambiguity of black women’s strategies of resistance. A historical review of kitchen discourse showed how black women, confined to structurally subjugated spaces with limited or no access to agency, creatively found ways to transform subordinated sites into locations of liberation. African-American women, such as Harriet Jacobs, Maria W. Stewart, So-
journer Truth, and Sunni Ali, used kitchen discourse to speak to internal audiences, people who already supported or empathized with their resistance. So for example, black female activists were rhetorically effective by affirmatively self-naming both their femaleness and blackness, and stylistically employing language that was grounded in a black cultural ethos.

A testifying discourse, conversely, was presented to external audiences, bearing witness to what is seen and unseen. Black women presented their stories about themselves and other black Americans, demonstrably proving their right to be respected, and providing opportunities for a better quality of life. Illustrating a testifying discourse, they produced fictional texts, published novels, presented public speeches, organized a unified voice through political involve-
ment, and otherwise publicly negotiated their day-to-day experiences (e.g., starting businesses, founding higher educational institutions, starting clubs, and educating youth). These testifying discourses were used to complicate and contradict negative black female stereotypes which portrayed black women as licentious, emasculating, indolent, and animalistic. Liberatory emergence discourse, emerging more prominently in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement, recog-
nized the dialectical reality of liberation and struggle, forcing Africana women to constantly work through socially gendered and raced limitations. Through such discourse, black female activists literally “made a way outta no way,” teaching strategies of resistance to hearers. Exhibiting liberatory emergence, African-American women had a rhetorical presence with various groups such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, symbolizing their humanity. Additionally, through leadership and mentorship, they shared modes of resistance, supporting one another’s activism, and black women, such as Septima Clark, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Annie Devine, were also involved in grassroots’ activities, such as teaching literacy and holding leadership classes.

Examining Sunni Ali’s coming-of-age experiences in a black urban center, we saw her mature during one of the more turbulent times in American history. Most black communities across the country were politically and socially unchanged after the passage of civil rights legislation, and black ghettos basically remained urban plantations. After the Supreme Court struck down the separate-but-equal doctrine, racial integration was gradually implemented, even though there were a number of insurmountable obstacles. However, external factors, such as inner-city racial rebellions, strict police enforcement, and the limitations of civil rights ideology, impacted the socio-political and institutional experiences of Sunni Ali, further reinforcing the gradual progression of her radicalization. Raised amid such turmoil, Sunni Ali and other black female revolutionary nationalists used the limited resources available to sustain themselves and their communities, maintaining a sense of humanity.

While the passage of civil rights legislation was ideally intended to increase racial equality and harmony, in practice, the racial issues were exacerbated, developing from police brutality, lack of employment, poor housing, and inadequate education. Therefore, black Americans be-
came increasingly radicalized during the civil rights era, becoming more and more disenchanted with the promises of American democracy. Eventually, Sunni Ali and other black activists found themselves loudly proclaiming black power, initiating a new phase of black activism. Now, heavily influenced by Malcolm X’s fiery rhetoric and radicalism, Black Nationalists hailed the call of black radicals, rejuvenating their black liberation efforts. Sunni Ali was one of many immersed in a culture of blackness, taking a by-any-means-necessary approach to build up black communities. Accepting the limitations of her initial community-organizing efforts, she soon became a member of the Black Panther Party and became more radicalized in her activism.

After returning from an international singing tour with Stokely Carmichael and Miriam Makeba, she continued searching for ways to advance her revolutionary consciousness. Her father Adegbalola, the appointed Minister of Defense in Boston and eventually in 1970 for the PGRNA, was her guide to the next phase of her evolution. As we charted the story of Sunni Ali’s evolution, from being a defender of tenants’ rights to becoming a member of the Panther Party, we also saw how she quickly became a citizen of the Republic of New Africa, practicing separatist Black Nationalist principles through her understanding of nationhood-building. However, before we could more fully appreciate the trajectory of her activist career, we had to necessarily review the various strands of Black Nationalism in order to situate her involvement. This allowed us to better understand her choice to become a PGRNA citizen. Both cultural nationalism and revolutionary nationalism, while significant aspects of the Black Power Movement, were fundamentally ineffective at permanently affecting gendered institutionalized racism and, therefore, eradicating oppression. By understanding the developments of both cultural and revolutionary nationalism, we could better see how her activism unfolded in the Black Power Movement,
and how it ultimately led to militant black separatism. For Sunni Ali, in the end, separatist nationalism was the only solution.

Immersed in a New African political awareness, after taking the oath at nineteen in 1969, Sunni Ali, guided by her father Adegbalola, started living the dream of black nationhood in Boston. The Republic of New Africa at that point was largely an imagined community, where blacks were not second-class but full citizens. Sunni Ali and other New Africans saw the PGRNA as the next logical solution in the black liberation struggle, since here the “imagined” could become reality. People were drawn to becoming New Africans because they had grown tired of trying to work within “the system.” Taking nation-building classes, doing military drills, and working in one of the Republic of New Africa offices were all tasks Sunni Ali and other New Africans experienced. Unlike the distinctions between and factions among different black power groups, such as the revolutionary nationalists of the Black Panther Party and the cultural nationalists of the “US” organization, New Africans were taught that a Black Nationalist was both a cultural and revolutionary nationalist, undergoing an external and internal process of decolonization. Thus we can understand why Sunni Ali would both sing in Europe to raise cultural consciousness and engage in defense training.

Sunni Ali’s next move, as a New African, was to transfer to the proposed “national territory” of the Republic of New Africa in New Orleans at twenty-one years of age in 1971. Continuing her citizen work for the PGRNA, she, along with her comrades, canvassed the black communities in New Orleans, intending to raise awareness about the purpose of the black nation and preparing African Americans for the planned plebiscite, effectively using a womanist kitchen discourse. As her New African consciousness grew, she was now ready for more responsibility and influence in the black government structure. President Imari Obadele, after the RNA-11
predawn raid in August 1971, appointed her the Minister of Information, and she worked tirelessly to free her fellow New Africans. Planning the PGRNA’s International African Prisoner of War Solidarity Day in March 1973, she employed a testifying discourse, writing press releases and articles about the event. And finally, Sunni Ali, along with my family, her family, and other New African families, faced a daunting test: the 1981 predawn raid in Gallman, Mississippi, where all of us in the house were put under arrest. Deploying a discourse of liberatory emergence, publicly speaking about the horrendous nature of the raid and sharing resistance strategies, Sunni Ali made a way outta no way. After using a rhetoric of silence, she and my mother were eventually released after a year and a half, because the U.S. federal government could not legally hold them any longer.

My study suggests that Sunni Ali’s rhetorical strategies, prior to and after becoming the Minister of Information for the Republic of New Africa, were rhetorically effective when she directly spoke to internal audiences, New Africans or potentially sympathetic listeners. Considering the overwhelming obstacles she faced, Sunni Ali’s rhetorical challenges were enormous. The disruptions from the COINTELPRO operations, including the creation of false documents, the planting of government informants, and the destruction of activists’ organizations, significantly hindered the organization’s effectiveness, limiting their reach to limited audiences. Without access to or control over the mainstream media, which were ever-present, especially with the dominance of the main three broadcast network stations at that time (CBS, ABC, and NBC), Sunni Ali’s rhetorical efforts were basically inaccessible to hegemonic white audiences, never having even the opportunity to persuade broader audiences. Nevertheless, as time was of the essence, maintaining nation-building momentum, in order to recruit and build support among African Americans, was absolutely critical, if the PGRNA planned plebiscite was going to take place.
After experiencing the limited success of working within “the system” as a community organizer in New Rochelle and later as a Black Panther with the Boston Black Panther Party, Sunni Ali knew firsthand the unchecked police brutality and unchanged community conditions. She naturally accepted that if anything or anyone was going to positively make black communities better, then black people would have to do the work themselves, not seeking external support from white America.

Her “inside view,” intending to reach the PGRNA citizens and sympathetic supporters, showed her to be rhetorically effective in several ways. As the Minister of Information, she was able to maintain New African support, keeping morale stable and building national unity. Of course, while most of the leaders were imprisoned, there had to be concerns from citizens about the sustainability of the black nation. President Obadele, one of Sunni Ali’s mentors, and her father Adegbalola as the Minister of Defense, had adequately prepared her to become a leader in the black nation and trusted she understood the purpose of the PGRNA. As all communication was approved by her or written by her, the mere fact that the nation was sustained speaks volumes about her ability to persuade all New Africans that the nation was stable, steadily working for freedom.

As we saw, one of her biggest rhetorical successes was the PGRNA International African Prisoner of War Solidarity Day. Approximately one thousand people attended. Sunni Ali’s press release, sent to the Black News Wire Service, mobilized numerous black political organizations. With access and the ability to circulate her discourse, she effectively persuaded some of the main black organizational leaders to support the New African cause. People such as Ben Chavis, Angela Davis, Albert Cleage, James Farmer, and Amiri Baraka attended, and hundreds of other par-
Participants arrived in Jackson, Mississippi, showing political support. Shortly thereafter, further suggesting Sunni Ali’s rhetorical effectiveness, Obadele was released.

Sunni Ali’s discursive maneuvers, attempting to reach external audiences outside of the PGRNA and sympathetic supporters, were far more challenging, however, if not altogether fruitless. The white dominant ideology of racial equality and harmony was accepted, at this time, by most Americans, especially as the American government implemented a law-and-order doctrine, disrupting dissenting activities around the country. The rhetorical hurdle that Sunni Ali and other New Africans had to jump was, in a nutshell, simply too high. The PGRNA, lacking resources of time, money, recruits, non-imprisoned experienced leaders, widespread discursive circulation, and energy, endured a constant uphill battle in a no-win situation with the American government. The American government literally overpowered the black nation, and, as hearers “outside of the kitchen” learned about the Republic of New Africa through the mainstream media, they had no alternative story about the PGRNA. One could say the audience of the mainstream media, especially without the New African perspective, was forced to accept the negative portrayal of PGRNA citizens. Generally speaking, white and unsympathetic non-white audiences literally had no reason to support the New African cause and had no way to make a more “informed” choice about their judgment. If the mainstream white press called the PGRNA citizens terrorists, more than likely viewers either accepted the story or made no further attempt to understand exactly what the Republic of New Africa was about. So Sunni Ali’s persuasive attempts, contextually and discursively blocked by structural impediments, had no channel of communication to access people outside of those more militant individuals who would tend to support the PGRNA.

Despite the many institutional and discursive challenges facing Sunni Ali, however, she unequivocally must be situated in the black women’s resistance tradition. The main purpose of
this study, as mentioned at the outset, was to compare her modes of activism with previous historical types of black women’s resistance. Starting with her kitchen discourse, Sunni Ali, speaking to internal audiences, from young black girls and potential Vietnam War recruits in Boston to New Africans and sympathetic supporters in the south, was rhetorically effective, demonstrating some similar, dissimilar, and emerging rhetorical modes of activism. Unlike Harriet Jacob, Sunni Ali did not write any fictional texts. However, she did engage in public speaking, similar to Sojourner Truth and Maria W. Stewart. Her discourse, emergent during the Black Power Movement, also tended to be more militant, calling for black people to build their own nation and secede from the United States altogether, so there was already recognition that her true audience was other oppressed blacks, not whites.

Sunni Ali’s testifying discourse, as demonstrated in the Prisoner of War Solidarity Day, also had some parallels to other black women in the resistance tradition. Though she did not use fictional writing like Frances E. Harper or have rhetorical presence through a business like Maggie Lena Walker, she did, however, use her positions in the PGRNA to provide an alternative meaning to black womanhood, especially as a New African woman. Sunni Ali’s work as the PGRNA’s Minister of Information was intended to garner international, national, and local support for the RNA-11 case, and she did achieve this goal. Her press release, like the testifying activism of the black women’s clubs, brought about ten or more different black political organizations to Jackson, Mississippi. She also used language that was designed to logically and emotionally appeal to new recruits for the black nation.

Now, whereas black women during and immediately following the Reconstruction era were primarily concerned with reclaiming black womanhood, Sunni Ali’s emerging mode of womanist activism focused more on the liberation of all black people. While certainly concerned
about the stereotypical portrayal of black women, she nevertheless made her main focus nation-
hood building. Another factor that Sunni Ali dealt with was the media influence, which at earlier
times in American history was not as developed. Since people during her most productive years
as an activist were not reading as much from newspapers, pamphlets, and newsletters as they
once did, Sunni Ali encountered an emergent form of discursive oppression, unlike the black
women during the years of Reconstruction.

We also saw that black women in the earlier part of the Civil Rights and Black Power
Movements were engaged in different discourses of liberatory emergence, initially trying to
work in “the system.” Their strategies included actively mobilizing around efforts to community-
build, setting movement agendas, and pressing for good quality education, healthcare, and hous-
ing. Sunni Ali, initially marching in step with her revolutionary foremothers, also worked to mo-
bilize community efforts with tenants’ rights and draft resistance, also attempting to work in “the
system.” But nothing really changed, and she, therefore, quickly gained an interest in the Black
Panther Party. As a result, her more militant interests were piqued, and she learned many new
ways to develop her burgeoning revolutionary consciousness. Now, at this point, dissimilar indi-
viduals such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Dorothy Height,
who each worked to appeal to both black and white audiences, Sunni Ali was far less interested
in working interracially and far more interested in revolution, seeking to secede from white heg-
emonic institutions and the capitalistic economic system. As a result, Sunni Ali focused almost
all of her rhetorical skills on teaching other blacks, especially as actual or potential New Afri-
cans, about resistance.

Finally, Sunni Ali’s rhetoric of silence, emerging after the 1981 predawn raid in Gallman,
Mississippi, was yet another form of resistance related to the black women’s resistance tradition.
Other women, such as Johnie Tillmon and Shirley Chisholm, used their modes of rhetorical liberatory emergence to radically change “the system” from within but to no significant avail. Sunni Ali, as a separatist Black Nationalist, did not cater to “the system” or believe that “the system” was ever going to rectify black subordination to white domination. Sunni Ali believed “the system” was basically broke, unfixable, and always oppressive to nonwhites.

So we can see that Sunni Ali, while she did continue the black women’s resistance tradition, nonetheless, significantly modified womanist modes of activism. She also used both similar and dissimilar rhetorical strategies from the women before her, and, contextually located, she faced new and daunting historical constraints, calling her to literally invent new rhetorical maneuvers.

Future studies on this topic are needed to continue correcting the imbalanced account about black women’s experiences, not only during the Black Power Movement but also in secessionist Black Nationalism. Scholars could research the different PGRNA leaders’ positions, rhetoric that emerged from the different consulates, or analyze the PGRNA’s main government documents. Studies could also look at the discourse in the black nation’s newspaper *The New African*. The Republic of New Africa, to my knowledge, was the only seriously organized attempt by people of African descent to create a nation within the United States. The mere fact that they did make the attempt, even if it was mostly a provisionally “imagined community,” is significant, because, fundamentally, their main concerns about white oppression against blacks were never addressed and in many ways still remain valid. At the most basic level, the Republic of New Africa’s critique about the worsening conditions for black people in America must, at some point, be more adequately addressed. The constant historical failures of federal, state, and local government actions to eradicate systemic black oppression are of the utmost importance. If the best
outcome was the passage of the civil rights legislation, knowing that since that time the wealth gap has only increased between blacks and whites, that our prison populations remain disproportionately black, that our urban centers are still violent and poor, and that inner city public education is still woefully inadequate, what does this say about “racial equality”? Would it be so bad to have a plebiscite, informing people of African descent about their right to claim another country’s citizenship? For as long as Africans have been in the Americas, especially with the start of chattel slavery, why have conditions for most black Americans remained appalling?

Another important study to conduct would be to gather oral histories of as many surviving New Africans and those who were once closely associated with the black nation, as possible. Many of the initial citizens who signed the Declaration of Independence are deceased, and only a handful remain. Basically, after the 1981 predawn raid on our home in Gallman, Mississippi, my family lost contact with other New Africans, and, from my understanding and after speaking to other surviving New Africans, a number of things shifted in the PGRNA due to the incident.

Today, the Republic of New Africa is still a provisionally imagined community. At this time, I do not know the present number of New African citizens, but government leaders are still elected, according to the Code of Umoja guidelines. The PGRNA leaders plan, sometime in the future, to hold the plebiscite to “free the land,” but, to date, specifics are unknown.

I also think that more scholars should seek out primary materials, similar to what I did, investigating the personal archives of other surviving New Africans who were active in the movement. There is a wealth of information available, and scholars could continue building archives of black radicalism, similar to the archival partnership between Brown University and Tougaloo College. I will never forget when I went to visit Imari Obadele in Baton Rouge, Loui-
siana, discovering that he had a large room (almost the size of two living rooms) filled with his PGRNA materials. Oftentimes I wonder where that information is located, if anywhere at all.

After coming to understand the influence of black feminism and their skewed accounts of black women’s participation in black social movements, it is my hope that this research will open pathways for others interested in radical black history to pursue their own questions. Honestly, since there is a paucity of scholarship about black radicalism and leftist politics, particularly as it relates to black women, the information-gathering process, while sometimes frustrating, is well worth the journey. Gathering the unknown facts and connecting the dots, I found myself always learning something new not only about black women’s resistance in general, but my own history in particular.

One of the challenges, analyzing the effectivity of her rhetoric, was how to assess Sunni Ali’s rhetorical success or limitation, in reaching external audiences. As I demonstrated, she was more effective with the internal audience of the PGRNA, and, in future studies, I will hopefully find ways to address these issues. Nonetheless, it is also important to note that her rhetorical strategies, warranting the repressive censorship of the American government, could be seen as relatively successful, inviting such FBI surveillance and manipulation. Perhaps, there might be an opportunity to interview law enforcement officials, someone from the White Citizen’s Council, and white Mississippians, and I can ask them how they perceived the PGRNA.
7  Works Cited


Print.


SISTER FULANI SUNNI ALI is a political prisoner of the United Snakes of Amerikkka. A political Prisoner is some-one who has been unjustly jailed because of their political beliefs. Sister Fulani is a citizen of the Republic of New Afrika, (all Black People - every descendant of Afrikan slaves - in what is known as the U.S., is a citizen of the Black Nation by birth. This citizenship is a right of birth and is the only valid citizenship which Black People (descendants of Afrikan slaves) here have, under international law, unless such person has voluntarily - and with full information - given up his or her New Afrikan citizenship.

The FBI, CIA, state and local police etc. have once again escalated the on-going war against Black (New Afrikan) People and our aspirations to be free. The very fact of our experience historically, and presently in the U.S. proves that we have been and are in a state of war, waged against us by the government and people of the U.S. This is a difficult realization for many of us, especially those who still have their minds in paws to the great amerikkkan delusion.

Sister Fulani is jailed because she is an activist. The U.S. government (Reagan administration) is cynically creating a climate of fear in an attempt to isolate the activist from the masses.

THE MALCOLM X PARTY - RNA & THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT, REPUBLIC OF NEW AFRIKA

Imari Abubakari Obadele, President, The Provisional Government
Black Militants in Chains After Arraignment

FIVE MEN and two women (one hidden), purported members of the Republic of New Africa (RNA), walk in a chained procession across a Jackson, Miss., street Wednesday after they were arraigned before a federal magistrate in connection with their arrests Wednesday following a shootout in which two Jackson policemen and an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation were wounded. The blacks were among 11 persons arrested following the gun battle with police at the RNA headquarters.
PRESS INTERNATIONAL

FULANI A. OBAFEMI
Min. of Information

IBIDUN SUNDIAYA
Edison

RELEASE: 1 December 1972

THE STRUGGLE FOR POWER IS REAL MOTIVE
BEHIND EMMANUEL'S MISSISSIPPI PROSECUTION

An NIA Information Ministry feature

NEWS RELEASE

JACKSON, Miss. — Fifteen months after the Jackson, Mississippi, police department and the FBI suffered one dead and two wounded in a surprise dawn attack on the Republic of New Africa's Government House here, NIA President Imani Abukari Paulele.I, remains in jail un-tried. His path to freedom by means of posting $75,000 bond has three times been blocked by Mississippi state and federal courts and the FBI.

Although Brother Imani was not at the scene of the August 1971 shoot-out and was arrested at the NIA office several blocks away, Hinds County Prosecutor Ed Bates and Circuit Judge Russell Moore are hoping to send the 42-year-old political theorist activist to jail for life. They have already visited such sentences upon NIA Vice President Nekima Ama, Delta Interior Minister Ofegge Quaduss, and 16-year-old Karin Myabedidi. In the meantime harsh bail requirements and stringent prison regulations are being used illegally but purposefully to silence and isolate Imani.
Why?

NAK leaders say the stakes is whether whites or blacks will have political and economic control of a 25-county area in western Mississippi, named by the KNA as the "Kush District." (Kush was the brilliant and powerful civilization that flourished in Africa 1,000 years before Christ and is referred to in the Bible's Old Testament as Ethiopia.) Mississippi Kush dominates the east bank of the Mississippi River for over 350 miles, from just south of Memphis in the North to the Louisiana border in the South. It includes the soil-rich Delta and counts a majority population of 500,000 blacks. (It could support ten times that number.) In excess of 15,000 square miles, Kush is twice the size of Israel. The KNA is working to hold a plebiscite - an independence vote - in this area to establish it as the heartland of an independent black nation. In pursuit of independence the KNA has carefully laid out the legal basis for black independence and submitted it to both the U.S. Congress and the United Nations. That legal basis has two essential ingredients. First, blacks are not legally citizens of the United States because the ex-slave should have been asked if he wanted to be a U.S. citizen (or take some other course) but neither he nor his descendants ever were asked. Second, blacks are entitled to independent land and money and goods as reparations for slavery and for the unjust war waged against us by the U.S. during slavery, and because we have been the traditional majority population on the land of the Blackbelt.

The aim in going to the U.S. Congress and the United Nations is to force the United States to accept the results of the Kush Plebiscite in peace. There is already an important precedent: in 1967 the United States...
the Puerto Ricans - who, like us, are classed as U.S. citizens - to hold an independence plebiscite.)

However, Mississippi, Louisiana, and the United States government have all responded with a stepped-up campaign to "bury" the NNA before the United Nations or the Congressional Black Caucus acts. The killing of two students, and the wounding of others, at the Baton Rouge campus of Southern University in November reflected simply the hard-line which the Deep South is frantically pursuing against every manifestation of the independence movement. The student leaders were not even official NNA government workers.

Despite being jailed, shot at, and generally harassed, NNA workers have continued their efforts to prepare the plebiscite. At the same time, because of a need to assure that the coming black nation has a proper economic base, Brother Irari has personally pushed a $100-million dollar pilot project, which would bring 20 New Communities to Kansas in the next two years. To incorporate modern urban design features, NNA New Communities are to have fine housing built in factories owned cooperatively by each community, along with farms and new industry, also cooperatively owned, and new schools, day care and medical centers, and an independent black film industry. On-the-job training and technical and professional training for all workers are included in NNA New community planning.

Crucial to success of all this is the organization of blacks to vote approval of the NNA's economic plans - the outline of which is packaged as a three-bill "Anti-Depression Program" now at Congress - and to organize community planning and development boards. Since the Anti-Depression Program centers on the black demand for reparations, the planning and develop-
want boards are to be organized into a black "Congress of Reparations Commissioners."

Significantly the FBI/policeman armed attack on the MNA residence in Jackson took place only weeks after the first neighborhood representatives were elected. FBI pressure has not diminished since then.

Last October in federal district court in Biloxi, where Brother Imari and his Mississippi counsel attorneys Fred L. Banks, Jr., and Nausead Steward went to seek permission to post ten percent of the federal bond, FBI Agent William Holder admitted on the stand that the FBI had been in touch with the MNA President's bondmen. In prior weeks, on two separate occasions, the MNA lawyers had presented $60,000 in property collateral and ten percent fees to inter-state bondmen in Memphis and Detroit, who promised to write the MNA President's bond, only to have the bondmen mysteriously back down at the last moment.

Moreover, no bondman in Mississippi will write the bond. Further, when black farmers in the Delta offered to put up their property, they were threatened — in keeping with information received by MNA Attorney John Brittain that Hound Bayou officials were also threatened when it was learned they planned to allow the MNA President to live there and give him official protection. MNA officials are positive that the FBI is the culprit in each instance.

The federal judge in Biloxi — a racist named Walter Nixon, whose aunt was allegedly a black rape-murder victim — refused to permit Brother Imari to post ten percent of the $25,000 federal bond, as the law allows, or to lower the bond. He further required, as the openly hostile U.S. Attorney, Robert Enbarger, demanded, corporate sureties. During the hearing Enbarger spent most
most of his time reading to the Court from "The Struggle Is For Land!".

The President describing the strategy for liberating
the land and self-defense, and inquiring if the President planned to asso-
ciate with H. Rap Brown when released — all improper in a bond hearing.

At the present Mississippi Circuit Judge Moore has not accepted the
out-of-town property for bond. This means that for state bond alone Brother
Imari will have to post $50,000 in cash or stocks and bonds — a sum which
the NNA cannot at present reach.

Consequently the President of the Provisional Government of the
Republic of New Africa — now bearded, physically ill, and 25 pounds under the
155 pounds he weighed when he entered jail — waits in an old, cold-water,
open-toilet, 8x8 perpetually locked cell in maximum security at Hinds County
Jail. The bond battle goes on, even as an early-February trial date approaches.

Evidently the feeling among white Mississippi leaders and the U.S. Justice
Department is that holding Brother Imari in jail — where virtually his only
visitors are his lawyers, and where his mail is censored, his voice stilled,
and his presence absent from the battlefront — will break the NNA drive for
political power and economic strength.

They are mistaken, the Mississippi New Africans insist. NNA citizens
continue to organize toward the plebiscite in Mississippi, and Brother Imari
continues to give guidance. In fact, his new book — "FOUNDATIONS OF THE BLACK
NATION" — is scheduled for publication on December 15. "Despite all," the
New Africans say, "We shall soon, and without a doubt, FREE THE LAND!"
(1) Orientation
(2) RNA Doctrine & Philosophy
(3) A Clear Understanding of
    What All Citizens Must Do
(4) A Clear Understanding of
    What the Individual Must Do

Orientation. In an organized course, taught by the local EDUCATION
MINISTRY (if one exist), the citizens should be given knowledge in these
areas:
(a) Government history, the Declaration of Independence, the Code
    of Umoja, the New African Creed, the New African Oath, Government
    structure, and Government procedures.
(b) History of white atrocities against Black people in the modern era. This should be based
    upon material in the following

    K. M. Brotz

(c) A World History Survey
    Course (Outline to be provided by Ministry of Education)

(2) RNA Doctrine and Philosophy. This generally is taught in a specifically organized
course called "Revolution and Nation Building". The outline of the course is given in Imari's paperback book of the same title (pg. 11, Part Four of Four-Part Lecture"). But the material for the course must also include, in addition to "Revolution and Nation Building," Brother Malcolm's record, "Message to the Grassroots", Imari's "War in America", and materials dealing with the emergence of modern nations (including the white racist nations), Algeria, Ghana, Guinea, Tanzania, the Congo-Kinshasa, Australia, Cyprus, Israel, Rhodesia, Union of South Africa, Canada, India, China and Cuba.

(3) A Clear Understanding of What All Citizens Must Do

A citizen must be taught that every citizen must:

(a) Be informed, studying RNA materials and keeping abreast of local, national and world events.

(b) Study the New African Creed and put it into practice in one's own life.

(c) Pay taxes, to support the operations of the Government and the liberation of the land.

(d) Sell newspapers and distribute literature to aid in recruiting citizens, creating mass support, and lifting the political consciousness of the community.

(e) Take out petitions, as they are used, to support the national and international objectives of the Republic. (The two current key petitions deal with disengagement of Black
troops in Vietnam and with reparations.

(F) Prepare oneself and search out others, for service and/or residence in Mississippi and the rest of the national territory.

(4) A Clear Understanding of What the Individual Citizen Must Do. Each citizen must be taught that each citizen must:

(a) Let your special talent or aptitude be known to the local leaders of the Government. (Can you type, drive, write, speak well, know guns, medicine, or radio, mix well with people, know photography or printing or art, and so on?)

(b) Accept assignments of work, based on your special talent or aptitude. (NOTE: The Consul or Administrator or Minister must be very specific in assignment of work based on these talents or aptitudes. For example: "Bolade, on Tuesday and Wednesday night we need you to run some mail to the post office after 8 p.m. but before 11 p.m." "Akinwole, we want you and Sister Jameela to work with the Welfare Mothers. They meet every Thursday." "Brother Nino, you and Brother Sundat will report to Brother Sonni at 6 p.m. tomorrow for special instructions on your security assignment." And so on.

(c) Above all, you must be a missionary, carrying the basic simple RNA message to all Black people with whom one come in contact. That basic message is this: WE SUFFER OPPRESSION BECAUSE WE LACK POWER. TO GAIN POWER WE MUST ESTABLISH AN INDEPENDENT NATION. THROUGH AN INDEPENDENT NATION WE WILL END OPPRESSION AND MAKE A BETTER LIFE FOR ALL OF US.
INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY DAY
FOR AFRICAN PRISONER'S
OF WAR

Date - March 30th, 1973
Place - Jackson, Miss.

Purpose - The rapidly accelerating pace of American repression against African Freedom Fighters on this continent and abroad is taking an ungodly toll on the International Black Mass. Irreparable damage has been inflicted on the homes, the families, and the friends, as well as the persons of those presently engaged in Black Liberation Struggle. Episodes of political persecutions, such as in the cases of George Jackson, the Attica Massacre, Fred, Imari Obadele and New African Prisoners of War in Jackson, Miss., and Miami, Florida. Private Billy Smith, and thousands unnamed involve the premeditated decimation of Black liberty and Black life on the part of a callous adversary.

The International Solidarity Day for New African Prisoners of War has been called by the Republic of New Africa and the National Black Political Council, for Jackson, Mississippi. The Pan African Congress, U.S.A., the Cairo United Front, C.O.R.E., Congress of African People, and several other National as well as local political organizations are expected to directly endorse and co-sponsor this Solidarity Day. The National Black Political Council (the council of the Black National Convention) does itself represent every major Black political organization in North America. Representatives from other African Governments in addition to the Republic of New Africa are also being asked to participate, a positive response is expected.

On this Solidarity Day thousands of Blacks will converge on the site of the infamous attack by F.B.I. and Jackson Police on the Black-ill in a mass show of Solidarity for all African persons past and present, taken prisoner as a result of the U.S.A.'s war against humanity. The Solidarity Day will also be in commemoration of those African's who have been slain as a consequence of this same inhumanity and it will be a tool to arouse mass resistance against the current reign of repressive terror which acts of genocide in Cairo, Ill., and Tuskegee, Alabama represents. Being international in scope, the Solidarity Day will dramatize the plight of Africans seized and/or killed in the arena of struggle on the African Continent, in Asia and Latin America.

Representatives of International Embassies as well as prominent national figures such as Julian Bond, John Conyers, Congressman Joe Bunn, James Wath, Mayor Richard Hatcher, Congressman Charles Diggs, Roy F. Newson, Angola Davis and several others are being asked to participate.

Preliminary Solidarity rallies will take place in virtually every state before the 30th of March 1973.

Organizing and preparation for the Solidarity Day is being handled by the National African Solidarity Day Prisoner of War Committee and by state wide African Solidarity Day Committees.

To participate in these organizing efforts as individuals or in groups or for further information please contact your state committee's office:

or contact the National African Prisoner of War Solidarity Day Committee at: 128 1/2 N. Gallatin St., Jackson, Miss. 39201, Phone 601-353-7493.
“Nobody said it would be easy.”

Pres. Imari Adebakari Obadele

Jackson - May Third, the day they said Mississippi Justice to our Vice-President Brother Malik Shabazz was a bad day for our team.

It was not that we had received a tremendous setback. The truth is that despite the verdict against us in this lower court and we do see "guilty", the movement is still going forward, we are closer to liberation of the land than we were last August; we are at work setting up a separate election in Mississippi for this year and are moving steadily toward the Potemkin - the thing which this area's main devil, Mississippi Attorney General A.F. Sumner, vowed last April would never happen. Moreover, strained and battered, the national structure of the Government of the Republic of New Africa has survived.

(Continued on Page 2)
New Mexicans Struggle for Land and Justice

The following are excerpts from material published in El Grito del Norte, the movement newspaper of northern New Mexico, about a new agricultural cooperative recently established there.

For the present, readers should know that the Española, new American, people of the state (sometimes called El Grito, or sometimes El Grito del Norte) have united to form a land cooperative. This new cooperative is being formed for the benefit of the people of this region and has been endorsed by various organizations and individuals. This cooperative is being formed to provide an alternative to the current system of land ownership and to promote social justice.

Vineyards have extended their efforts beyond the local area to include national reform. Changes in the political system, larger wages for workers and others, are being proposed. This struggle by each action as the people demand of the King of Kings for the overthrow of evil and for the establishment of justice. United Americans have fought for the right to vote, but after the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, some Americans are still fighting to have the right to vote.

Meanwhile, Vineyards and the surrounding area have become the scene of a new effort to build an economic base for the continued political struggle. This is a new phase in the struggle of the people for economic independence. The area has been designated by a federal agency as an Economic Opportunity Area, in which economic development is actively promoted. It is a time of change and hope for the future of our children.


debut

This is an urgent call to our countrymen to set to work to speedily realize the demand for equality and the possibility of economic independence.

Nobody said it would be easy

"Nobody said it would be easy" are the words of our people in Arizona. This is a message that we must heed. The task of building a new society is not easy, but it is necessary to achieve equality and independence. The struggle is not just for the benefit of our people, but for all people.

The "New African" is published monthly by the Ministry of Information, and is the official organ of the Republic of New Africa. Subscription $6.00 yr.

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(List not complete)