A Black Thang: Black Nia F.O.R.C.E, Radical Student Reading Circles, and Intellectual Freedom

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Abstract: One of the central themes of Black student activism in the latter half of the twentieth century was re-education. Finding the curriculums confronted in their schooling to be inadequate, student activists fought for Black Studies. But they also built alternatives to formal schooling. These reading circles and study groups became incubators for radical thinking, places that were free from the authority of campus administrations. This essay explores the prominence of reading circles in the context of Black student struggles at Howard University in the 1980s, through a focus on the organization, Black Nia F.O.R.C.E. It seeks to demonstrate that the preface for radical action, for their radical orientation, was knowledge and that ultimately, it was within self-determined intellectual spaces, where we find the true roots of “Black Study.”

Keywords: student activism, Black Studies, hip hop, study groups, radicalism

“We knew that we had to study.”
Ras Baraka

In the 1990s, Black students were fond of saying, “It’s a Black thang, you wouldn’t understand.” It was a phrase that evoked a kind of orientation that there was indeed an inside knowledge, a way of thinking, but also a way of being that was both outside and beyond the comprehension of the present order of knowledge. It was an especially critical way to differentiate the experiences of students who did not often find themselves represented in the curricula of knowledge. A generation earlier, Black Studies units were created as a Black thang yet by the late eighties, many of those spaces were under direct assault by what would come to be known as the culture wars. Though they thrived in certain areas, there was more to be desired in others. Black Studies was in its “institutionalization” phase at the very moment that the political insurgencies that brought it into being were all the more necessary. Multiculturalism could not paper over the deeper epistemological and political questions that animated the essence of the Black thang. Police brutality, the anti-apartheid movement, and racist incidents on white college campuses created the conditions for a new student movement, inspired by another mantra of the period, “Fight the Power!” Hip hop was the grammar of resistance. It was a Black thang, yet there was very little institutional space to consider its meaning and its importance to this generation. So they created alternatives.

An interesting setting to explore the lives of Black students during this era is Howard University. Founded in the wake of the United States civil war, the university was the only “Negro

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1 Baraka 2017.
2 Harris 2007: 96-97.
institution” that received direct federal aid. In exchange, it had produced a sizable segment of the Black leadership class of the twentieth century. It had also been home to some of the most important political struggles. As a space where Black people came together to think and study, the question of how to be free animated the discourse on multiple levels. Across the ideological range, Howard students and professors would engage this question consistently impacting the global Black freedom struggle in ways that were obvious (Brown v. Board of Education) and not always so (the anti-apartheid struggle and other Pan Africanist movements). Though faculty leaders had pioneered elements of Black Studies going back to the nineteenth century, Howard students were at the center of the student movements that led to the creation of the discipline in the late 1960s. In their calls for the creation of Black Studies, they also called for a Black university. A new kind of space.

Thirty years later, coming on the heels of the Reagan-era policies, we now have a more coherent label. The student struggle would take on new challenges. These children of the sixties heroes would have to discover their mission. And it was not quite ironic that they would also need to target their own institutions. If struggle was as Toni Cade Bambara once wrote, about “realizing the dream of the Black university,” it required new life. The decades since the sixties had seen Howard’s administration move increasingly closer to the right-wing politics of the GOP. Though the open and obvious episodes of racism tended to rankle Black Republicans, there was an ever-present belief that certain economic advancements might converge with Republican logics of deregulation and smaller government. Others felt that personal responsibility rather than government dependency might be emphasized. In either case, radical Black thinkers at Howard and beyond knew that a chumminess with the right-wing spelled disaster. As its administration hewed right, Howard faculty and students supported Jesse Jackson. Where Reagan foreign policy advocated constructive engagement with South Africa and supported the contras and other counter-revolutionary forces throughout the world, Howard students condemned imperialism. And so it went. That is, until more drastic actions became necessary.

During the presidential election of 1988, strategist Lee Atwater was one of the principal architects of a strategy that utilized the image of William (“Willie”) Horton to paint Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis, as soft on crime. It was an advertisement that traded in various conceits, none more penetrating than the idea of an inherent criminality of Black folk. The fear it inculcated was enough for Atwater’s candidate, George H.W. Bush to emerge victorious. But Atwater never truly escaped the shadow of the strategy he helped put forth. No matter to Howard’s Board of Trustees. Several days after Bush’s swearing-in, a vote passed selecting him as a new member of the Board. There appeared to be only one dissenting voice. For those who had long associated Black progress with an approximation to United States power, this was a “coup.” Atwater, whose reward for helping Bush win, was an appointment to the chairmanship of the Republican National Committee, was considered someone with strategic value to the Howard board. Some believed like then campus leader, M. Kasim Reed, that the move was strategic. But to others, it was a betrayal.

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5 See Logan 1969.
8 Myers 2019: 45-71.
Angered by his racist past, students condemned Atwater’s selection and demanded that the university reconsider. But the university, led by Republican James Cheek, did not back down. So students responded in the way that their mothers and fathers had just decades earlier. They first disrupted Charter Day, the celebration of the university’s founding. Negotiations faltered so the students energized by the momentum of that day strategized. The next week began with a deeper confrontation. For three days, they shut down the university’s operations by occupying the main administration building. It was only after a violent episode with the police was narrowly averted, that Atwater resigned. And at least a temporary relief was won. Though there were other demands, this defeat of Atwater, President Cheek, and by extension the Republican Party is what garnered national headlines and renewed attention to student activism at the Mecca of Black education.\textsuperscript{10}

At the core of the organizing that led to this moment was a Howard student group known as Black Nia F.O.R.C.E. Its executive minister, April R. Silver was the visible leader of the student coalition that became the public face of the student protest. Other members of the organization provided logistical leadership that both saved lives and ensured the success of the three-day occupation. It was their paramilitary training that was crucial. They also were buoyed by the rhetorical clarity of Ras J. Baraka, the organization’s founder whose handling of the media helped maintain the narrative of what the protest was all about. In the years after, Silver and Baraka would become elected student leaders and Black Nia F.O.R.C.E would accomplish many other feats during the course of its existence, including perhaps most notably, the development of Hip Hop Conferences of the 1990s. But how was it able to do so?

This essay focuses on an aspect of movement work that the organization had borrowed and updated from earlier formations: the practice of radical reading. Among the many practices that Black Nia F.O.R.C.E stood for, study was central. And in founding the organization on study, the leaders of the group were intentional about a form of re-education we might call following Fred Moten and others, “Black Study.”\textsuperscript{11} It was study that existed beyond the Howard curriculum, though connected to those elements of Black Studies that had been fought for by the previous generation. One of the organizational requirements were Friday night meetings where discussions of those readings often took place. Eventually, study became a common practice that new members were required to participate in. This would grow into organizational reading lists that in many ways were the group’s syllabus. Knowledge was necessary for action. And in the case of Black Nia F.O.R.C.E, understanding that Black thang meant being in community together with texts. The radical reading circles they created were the foundation for the hip hop generation’s mission: to continue the struggles of their parents — the sixties generation that had sacrificed so much.

\textbf{Founded in Study}

In the 1980s, Howard University was home to a number of student formations. From the National Organization of Black University and College Students (NOBUCS) to the Kwame Ture-inspired chapter of the All-African People’s Revolutionary Party there were ample spaces for Black radical organizing. It was a response to the systematic dismantling of the more visible Black Power organizations as well as to the devastating impact of Reaganomics as much as it

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.: 100-162.

\textsuperscript{11} Kelley 2016.
was an awareness and response to the international contexts of Black struggle from Grenada to South Africa. One organization that preceded Black Nia F.O.R.C.E but would play an important role in its conception was the Black United Youth. Of the premiere organizations on campus, it was relatively small and focused largely on study and questions of ideology. According to Aaron Johnson who was also affiliated with the A-APRP, it was in Black United Youth where radical students paused and considered complex ideas. Their meetings often took place in a room in the Armour J. Blackburn Student Center aptly titled the Reading Lounge and consisted of study and debate. In the midst of rancorous debate, members like Johnson, Todd Shaw, Steve X and Maria Jones (Ras Baraka’s sister) often raised the necessity of direct confrontation, which led to their participation in campaigns around the controversial anti-Martin Luther King statements of Doug “The Greaseman” Tracht as well as a year-long campaign in support of Howard’s Afro-American Studies Department. Yet, the group remained essentially a study group.  

During the fall semester of 1986, two new members of Black United Youth joined the organization near the beginning of its decline. The story of their embrace of the organization began in Drew Hall, the men’s freshman dormitory. While selling t-shirts in the dorm room, Aaron Johnson came upon a young Ras Baraka who was holding court amongst a large group. He recalls that there were literally, “Thirty to forty people in his room. To the point where people were kinda out in the hallway… sitting there talking about cultural, political things. They weren’t talking about sports. They weren’t talking about like Howard events. They was talking about things that were kind right up my alley. So my timing was just right.” Johnson would become a mentor, sponsoring Baraka and his friend Carlisle Sealy into the organization. Both Baraka and Sealy were popular students. Baraka was cut from his father’s charismatic cloth, a talented poet and speaker. And like his mother, Amina, a dancer. While Sealy was already somewhat of a skilled organizer, a people person who was able to make connections. In these respects, they were fully formed, but it would be within Black United Youth study groups that an ideological sharpening took place. Johnson remembers:

My role with Ras was more like big brother and at the same time I’ve always been—and still am—in awe with Ras. When I met the brother… they were there pretty much leading a conversation about things I had been talking about with Kwame Ture. I’m fresh off those conversations, and that’s why I was so effective in those situations, the solutions had already been drilled in my head by getting my butt kicked in debates… and I’m getting my philosophy together. And it was right on time to meet Ras and Carlisle. And I guess they kinda looked at me as the answer man… And I think I helped shape their views.

Sealy remembers the push Johnson gave the both of them as driven by a concern that they would not waste their time and potential: “He [Johnson] actually called out myself and Ras one

12 Johnson 2017; Myers 2019: 75-85.
13 Johnson 2017.
day, we were on the Yard just actin’ a fool. He said, “Did you ever think about doing something different? You guys seem to be real popular, and having a good time, but what’s next…?”16

There were other important influences in this largely underground, though not secret, study tradition on campus. Brother Yao (Hoke S. Glover III), like Johnson, was an entrepreneur and in the context of selling books would meet and also influence Sealy and Baraka. Eventually, he alerted them to other communal spaces for study, which were loosely affiliated with the university. During this period, “unofficial” community classes took place at night in classroom spaces often borrowed, often commandeered. Every week, the Nation of Islam’s Abdul Alim Muhammad would lead one such study group. A physician, Muhammad was widely influential in the region and the Nation’s practices would indelibly shape Baraka and Sealy. And then once a month, the two sat in on the psychiatrist Frances Cress Welsing’s forum. An expert on the psychology of white supremacy, Welsing’s influence would enable Baraka and Sealy to be able to confront the meaning of racism beyond the surface infraction or microaggression.17

These were extra-academic formations. Spaces beyond the curriculum. Radical reading however could also be found within the university proper as well, often to the chagrin of official Howard. The persistence of Black Study as practiced by those employed by the university would also be a boon to student organizing. While Sealy was an engineering student, Baraka majored in political science and would be tutored by the likes of Ronald W. Walters, Alvin Thornton, and Joseph McCormick among others. In fact, the study of Black politics was the forte of the department. One could not learn about the constitution or frame political behavior without paying attention to questions of race.18 And so even as there was an elitist component of Howard that shaped those who sought to confront the system, there were those who were shaped by these radical formations within and beyond official Howard. That shaping was also true for another member of Black Nia F.O.R.C.E.

Soon after the founding of the organization, a quiet and unassuming April R. Silver began to faithfully attend meetings. Also a member of the freshman class that arrived in 1986, Silver was active on campus but did not command the charismatic following of Baraka and others. She, too, and been shaped by the radical study circle. In her case, it was a consequence of a connection she made in her English class. In that setting, her professor Sandra Shannon assigned the Claudia Tate edited Black Women Writers at Work—a work Silver remembers helped forged a “connection to the movement through art.” And so it was with astonishment that a fellow classmate told her that they would be reading his mother’s work soon: “I was like, “You’re the son of the woman that we’re reading about? For real, you’re her son for real? You’re not just talking shit?”19 That classmate was Morani Sanchez. His mother, the poet Sonia Sanchez became a mentor to Silver almost immediately. As president of the Alpha Sweethearts, Silver put together funds to bring Sanchez to campus, but she refused to accept an honorarium. As many times as they could manage, she came to the Reading Lounge and sat with the students as they studied key texts. Silver remembered in particular, that one session focused on nineteenth century Black nationalist Martin Delany’s

16 Sealy 2017.
17 Ibid.
18 On the study of Black politics at Howard, see inter alia Smith 2021: 100-110 and Smith 2018.
19 Silver 2017; Tate 1983.
celebrated novel, *Blake.*\(^{20}\) Though it “was hard,” Sanchez assigned one book a month during these informal discussions, but it was clear that for Silver it was an important and formative moment.\(^{21}\)

Her other mentor was similarly aligned with the Black Arts Movement. For years, the poet E. Ethelbert Miller served as the director of the Afro-American Studies Resource Center in Founders Library. There, he oversaw an immense library of Black history and culture as well as cultivated relationships with budding artists and writers. Both Silver and Baraka were in that number. Miller who knew more about the inner-workings of Howard historically than most people on campus, first encouraged Silver to read her original poetry while showing the young activist the potentialities and pitfalls of organizing both on and off campus.\(^{22}\)

With these experiences as the ground for the coming into the work, the leaders of Black Nia F.O.R.C.E (BNF) inevitably made the organization one where study would become central. When it was founded in early 1988, Sealy and Baraka as well as many of the freshman men who were present in those initial dorm gatherings, centered study in a way that would attract the energies of youth who had been shaped by hip hop. It would have to look different from the styles of Black United Youth and the community groups that Sealy and Baraka had attended. This was a crucial dimension, for they knew they would need to attract the energy that they themselves represented and the pre-existing organizations could not match that intensity. Baraka recalls:

> All of those organizations that had already existed, we thought that they were good organizations, but they didn’t really represent the kind of new, young, urban African Americans that were coming from these cities. They just didn’t appeal to us. And plus, you know a lot of these people in these organizations were a lot more advanced in terms of their study and what their analysis was. And they already had an opinion about the direction that they were going in and all this other kind of thing. It was a lot more advanced. A lot of people that came into BNF came in very entry-level in terms of trying to figure out who they were. Black history in a basic sense. Relationship to the country, to the world. We knew that we had to study. And there was a lot of study that we needed to be involved in. So first we had to just get buy-in with people. “Are yall down with this?” And most people in the room were. Not everybody came to our next meeting after that, but a lot of people did. And brought other people with them.\(^{23}\)

To help curtail the worst excesses of the group, they decided adopt the discipline of the Nation of Islam and the style of the Black Panther Party, whose political education classes were a prominent model. In fact, the initial name of the organization was the Sons of the Panthers (and then the Sons and Daughters of the Panthers), before a bolt of inspiration came to change the name to center Blackness, purpose (*nia*), and “the force that would accelerate the masses.” It was Baraka who would make of force an acronym, which signified “freedom organization for racial

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\(^{20}\) Delany 1970.

\(^{21}\) Silver 2017.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.

\(^{23}\) Baraka 2017.
and cultural enlightenment.”

Awareness was the word which defined the group. The desire was to build for the hip hop generation, a space for them to know themselves, their history, and its relationship to the context of their current struggles and challenges. Awareness, it was believed, would challenge the apathy they witnessed among their generation. If we knew better, we would be better. So as the organization grew, they would dedicate a space for the intentionality of consciousness-raising. Unlike previous organizational formations, BNF could be described as brash, in-your-face, a braggadocio that either attracted you or repulsed you. But it was sincere. And once you were drawn in by the charisma, there was still the work of awareness to be accomplished. So much like the Nation, they chose Friday nights for this work. The party would have to wait.

**Friday Night at 7:00**

The Upper Quadrangle at Howard University, known as the Yard, was a space for gathering and not simply a space for passing through. Fridays in particular transformed the grounds into an almost carnivalesque atmosphere, where respective cliques and crews carved out territory to see and be seen. Black Nia F.O.R.C.E was a sight to see. Punctuating the fashion-conscious university with their own look—all black tops and bottoms, with black tams—they used the outdoors common space as a way to raise the level of on-campus discourse. Adopting the styles of soapbox orator, one familiar to those who had connections to Harlem, Chicago, or the Bay Area, and other places, Ras Baraka was often the featured speaker. His goal was simple: to get them to attend that night’s more serious gathering. Armed with new poetry, ideas gleaned from his reading of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or Eric Williams’s classic *Capitalism and Slavery*, and a dynamic gift for teaching, Baraka’s voice attracted a following.

And eventually as the Fruit of Islam continued to work with the group, they would engage in drilling exercises on the Yard—an important showcase of the organization’s seriousness.

By nightfall, those encouraged and inspired would find themselves in Frederick Douglass Hall, room 116. The largest lecture hall in the building, the room was unofficially adopted by logistics wizard, Charles “Chuck” Webb through a silent agreement with university staff. There was an executive decision to not seek formal recognition as a student organization (perhaps in light of the history other radical groups like the early 1960s Nonviolent Action Group, the Howard affiliate to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee). This decision of course meant that they could not secure rooms on campus or use student activities monies. And so, the Friday night gatherings were unauthorized moments of study practiced boldly within the halls of Howard University.

It was also an intentional decision to use the time where most students would have been preparing for a night out as the time for this type of work. For Baraka and others, it was an explicit attempt to disrupt that sort of lifestyle and thinking. The party was not more important than politics. Of course, some still made it out in time to hit the latest set, but this timing naturally

25 Baraka 2017; Myers 2019: 84; Malcolm X 1999; Williams 1944.
weeded out those who were less serious about their purpose. Arranged in columns with men and women on opposite sides (another borrowing from the Nation of Islam), the night usually began with a recitation of Kevin Powell’s “Black Pledge of Allegiance.” Powell, who had come into the movement working alongside another BNF support and eventual executive member Lisa “Sister Souljah” Williamson, included in that pledge, a vow “to study and discipline myself, physically and mentally…” And that is what BNF ultimately did.

The meetings usually had two phases. The first included “teaching.” In the early days of the organization, this duty usually fell to Baraka who would extend upon themes that they had discussed earlier in the day in the soapbox settings. But this phase often focused on whatever text they were studying. An early favorite of Baraka’s was Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (the first US edition was published by the Howard University Press). Members would come with aspects of the text already read and prepared for discussion. So it was not simply a talking down to, with the leaders telling others what to think, BNF promoted dialogue which constituted the second phase of the Friday night sessions. Discussion meant debate. Disagreements were real. But perhaps most importantly, it signified a community of organizers, held together by their desire to know. Topics ranged from the historical traditions, to the contemporary struggles at home and broad, to focus on the nature of collective organizing to interpersonal concerns around manhood and womanhood. One week might focus on the Eritrean situation and the nature of U.S. imperialism, while the next could be on friendship and mental health. No topic was irrelevant, but all were driven by what organizers viewed through the prism of enlightenment. In characterizing the moment, one of the earliest women to join the group, Killa Patterson recalls “I never thought that I would be excited about studying, you know? We studied.” Sheri Warren, another early woman member, recalls the Friday night meetings as “a watershed… people realized that we’re serious. We’re gonna be reading books, we’re having topics, we’re having guest speakers. And as we made that shift, from just being social and partying together and bowling and all that into ‘alright, we’re discussing heavy topics.’ We’re not saying to ourselves, ‘We’re maturing.’ But that’s what’s going on. And what happened was, people started dropping like flies.”

Not everyone stayed around, but there was also a palpable energy and deep interest for those who would constitute the new organization. The excitement morphed into special occasions where some Friday sessions became Jazz and Poetry nights where the thickness of political debate was supported by the lightness of the arts. More and more students were inspired to participate, BNF, if nothing else, was an organization of artists. As all of these creative and positive energies permeated the space, many of them, according to Baraka, eventually forgot about their other Friday night plans: “… eventually, the Friday was killed. Because you’d be there all hours of the night having conversation. Eating bean pies.”

The success of the protest in the spring of 1989 made the Friday night meetings all the

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28 Patterson 2018.
29 Powell n.d.
30 Rodney 1981.
31 Patterson 2018.
33 Punter 2017.
34 Baraka 2017.
more popular. In fact, the discussions that led to the protest took place in a series of Friday night sessions that led to the March takeover. On each Friday from mid-February through the end of the semester, the primary agenda item was the state of the university in the wake of Atwater’s appointment, the protest, and the aftermath. BNF had boldly moved into direct action. But this was not a negation of study. Though guest lecturers preceded the protest, their presence was all the more common in the days after the protest. It was a BNF Friday night session where Amiri Baraka warned them of the dangers, with his now famous words, “you know they will because they’ve done so for less than this.”

Other writers and organizers soon graced the group, many of them expecting a small smattering of committed students. But what they encountered was a standing room only crowd, over one hundred students that had engaged their work and were ready to discuss. The list of invitees in those years is a veritable Black Studies faculty, all of whom came on the strength of the commitment of this organization which was not officially recognized or sanctioned by Howard: Anthony Browder, Yosef Ben-Jochannan, Jeff Donaldson, Cornel West, Ronald W. Walters, Amiri Baraka, and of course, Sonia Sanchez. Their books were required reading. But the heavy hitter organizers were also invited, including representatives from the All-African People’s Revolutionary Party, the African Socialist People’s Party, the Nation of Islam, and when appropriate, figures from freedom struggles on the African continent.

The most consistent guest speakers, however, were Baba Zak and Mama Nia Kondo. Educators, artists, and publishers, the Kondos had “dedicated their lives to the liberation and empowerment of Afrikan peoples the world over.” Baba Zak was also a professor of history at Bowie State University and is now perhaps most known for his *Conspiracies: Unraveling the Assassination of Malcolm X*, but his volume, *The Black Student’s Guide to Positive Education* written in 1986 was considered BNF’s “Bible.” It was the one book everyone would eventually be required to read. In fact, it became so associated with BNF that in a later edition the cover art featured a photo of members Akanke Washington, Shawn Houston, Louis Romain, Louis Camphor, Shereese Woodley, and Mardi Bess in a supremely confident stance.

*Figure 1 — Cover of Zak Kondo’s “The Black Student’s Guide to Positive Education” circa 1990.*

The text itself was a weapon against miseducation. It started from that premise but moved toward what Baba Zak called “positive education.” In order to combat the system of white supremacy and its penetration into the education system, the mind must first be liberated. A redefinition of identity and re-narrativization of history was central. But the text also endorsed

36 Myers 2019: 156.
37 April Silver and Akanke Washington’s private collections have meeting flyers which features the details of these dynamic programs. I thank them again for allowing me to access the collection.
38 Kondo 1987.
39 Silver 2017; Baraka, 2017; See Kondo 1993.
particular values that would create new soldiers in the liberation struggle. Action must follow. In addition to the Nguzo Saba and others borrowed from earlier struggles, Baba Zak asserted the necessity of creating communities driven by love, knowledge, and cultural awareness. In his sets with BNF, how to instill and perpetuate these values were the central focus.

With the lessons of *The Black Student’s Guide to Positive Education* as guide, the self-development aspects of BNF took off. The men and women’s meetings, separate from the Friday night sessions were places where the interpersonal was centered. There was a real concern with how the dominant society had disrupted the dynamics of male-female relationships and how repair might be approached. It was also here in the women’s meetings where ideas about youth education were actually born and relationship to local African-centered education schools were forged. They also continued their trainings with the Fruit of Islam, eventually developing their own Saturday routines. All of this activity was an outgrowth of the Friday night gatherings and the openings made by the protest. With the opportunity to realize the expansion of the organization, study would become that much more important.

**A True Education**

One way to deal with the enhanced popularity of the organization after the 1989 protest was to develop a screening process. The brainchild of executive committee stalwart Sheri Warren, the new process included various levels to ensure the commitment and seriousness of new members. She remembers: “Our membership was increasing like crazy. We were doing a lot of interviews, screening people to get into the organization. There was a committee, and interviewing committee. People would come and they better had read that *Black Student’s Guide to Positive Education*, because you had to be about your business. We wanted workers.” The initial questions and interviews included such questions as: “What is racism?; What is prejudice?; What, if any, is the difference between the two?”; “How would you define culture?”; and “What have Black people contributed to the development of America? Give five examples.”

That summer, this organizational growth transitioned into what Warren described as the

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41 Warren 2017.
42 “Black Nia F.O.R.C.E. Questionnaire” n.d.
process of “building capacity.”  Together with Sealy and Silver, they would develop a new governing document for the organization. Titled “The Guidelines and Policies of Black Nia F.O.R.C.E.,” forcefully framed liberation as a question of radical study:

We are united for the purpose (Nia) of building a stronger race for the future through intellectual, psychological, and spiritual re-education. We will stand tall and loudly proclaim our determination for true education. We will constantly attempt to alleviate and eventually abolish the injustices and corruptions that have taken root and are feeding off our people. Any person(s) that attempts to obstruct, violate, or oppress our people will be met with a force.  

They continued:

We all study, learn, and teach other. This process is constant. One way to fulfill this process is through reading. With reading comes knowledge, and with mastery of that knowledge comes power. We are all students, teachers, and leaders studying to become “masters of knowledge.” We must harness and distribute the power that comes with knowledge to our people.

History was a teacher. Discipline was a method. Self-determination was the route to enlightenment and power. This attempt to re-educate the organization extended also to attempts to re-educate the campus. The broad concepts of Afrocentricity were very much in the air, largely because of BNF. So in the spring of 1990, BNF decided to use that energy to essentially take over student government. Silver and Baraka would become the president and vice president, respectively, of the Howard University Student Association. Others would run for smaller offices on campus. Together, they would attempt to command the resources of the student body in order to lead this re-education initiative. Extending the demands of the protest, they advocated a graduate department of Afro-American Studies. They also brought the Friday night model to a wider audience. Finally, and perhaps most impactful, they used the Howard example to train and support student struggles on other campuses. More forceful action expanded with experience. And study was the spark.

Then there was the wider DC community. BNF members addressed the gap that had been yawning between Howard students—and quite frankly the university itself—by developing both tutoring and after-school programs. Much of this had been in place in the early moments of the organization’s existence, with some tutoring programs at Gage-Eckington Elementary School, Ujamaa Shule, and NationHouse Watoto. But soon after, a larger initiative under social development chair, Jenell Brown, saw BNF create a program within the Clifton Terrace complex.

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45 Ibid.
46 Myers 2019: 165-194.
For two hours every day (except Fridays), they helped young students with their homework and provided a curriculum of “cultural enlightenment.” By 1992, this extended to community food and clothing drives, care for the houseless population, drug prevention programs for high school students, and lecturers on Black history geared towards the whole community. Scores of BNF organizers would go on to enter the teaching profession and it was these experiences that helped frame their approaches to tackling miseducation in both the public school system as well as in partnership with African-centered educational schools.

BNF was also a part of a project called the Hip Hop Conferences. It too, was in part, sparked by A. Haqq Islam, a Howard graduate student and mentor who taught some of the first hip hop courses at the university. The idea was to take ownership of the cultural production of hip hop—one of the most important influences of that generation. The paradox was that this production was governed from on high by music executives at corporations who had different interests than the artists themselves, let alone the communities they spoke to. Re-education in this instance meant that the music must both follow and inspire a revolutionary transformation of that ownership structure. It must be liberated from those conditions which repress and redirect the power of the medium. For the next several years, outliving BNF itself, the Hip Hop Conferences raised these critical issues, sparking several careers of prominent Black label owners and executives in the process. The question remained if hip hop could be as politically revolutionary as it was culturally.

So, BNF entered the 1990s with a very clear program for revolutionary change. In 1992, that program was made plain with a platform document modeled after the famous Ten Point Platform of the Black Panther Party. In their statement of desires and beliefs, they articulated an ideological position that was both revolutionary and anti-capitalist as much as it looked inward upon Black people’s desires and needs to be culturally whole. Questions of justice revolved around an end to war and state violence and a true democracy meant full equality and the abolition of those structures that historically and presently prevented Black self-determination.

In a moment where multiculturalism and squabbles about Western civilization were taking root, BNF was never seduced by an American narrative of inclusion. And they were particularly keen to point out the violence of American empire, an extension of white supremacy, as a further demonstration of the need for a “true education.” Police brutality, war, and poverty were all part of a single antagonism. And so, as these issues developed, BNF committed themselves to an even more urgent program of study and an expansion of chapters beyond Howard. To make that transition to a national organization, the new platform was necessary. Yet, in the excitement of the moment, it was also necessary to remember that so too was study. For the summer of 1992, then executive member Jelani Makalani (Cobb) of the DC chapter, reminded members of the importance of reading. He wrote: “We must constantly remain aware that consciousness is a verb. That is, it requires activity. To maintain a state of consciousness that will enable us to significantly affect our shared condition positively, we must actively pursue knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. We must actively live.

50 Islam 2018.
51 Myers 2019: 203-204.
in accordance to the principles we profess. We must do work.”

That work, included bringing organizational work with you to wherever you went, but also meant engaging with a reading list, that “should not be read but studied…” Of the thirty books assigned that summer were classics like E. Franklin Frazier’s *Black Bourgeoisie* and Lerone Bennett’s *Before the Mayflower*, movement classics like *Assata: an Autobiography* and Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton’s *Black Power*, historical works such as Cheikh Anta Diop’s *The African Origin of Civilization*, anti-capitalist and anticolonialist texts such as Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, Manning Marable’s *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, and Robert Allen’s *Black Awakening in Capitalist America* and finally, works such as John Henrik Clarke’s *Africa at the Crossroads: Notes Toward an African Revolution* that tied many of these strands together.

Both the extensive nature of the list and the variety demonstrated the many-pronged approach to Black liberation that BNF members felt that they needed to know in order to grow into the disciplined organization that would represent the transformative potential of Black liberation.

**Conclusion**

It would be inappropriate to write an epitaph of a movement organization that was as influential as Black Nia F.O.R.C.E. That is a convention that this essay must reject. The organization no longer exists but the spirit that created it does. There is still a movement to reclaim ourselves from the multiple kinds of erasures that white supremacy has wrought and to place history right side up. But that history is not about telling nice stories (though it may include that). It is about telling those stories that will help us frame and create another kind of existence for ourselves. The radical reading practices, the Black Study practices, this Black thang, that BNF cultivated within and beyond Howard University stand as a testament to a larger spirit of shared knowledge that has sustained Black communities thus far. The spirit that animates it then has never died. So we must tell the stories of where it has been and what it has shaken up. So we can know where and how we may realize it too.

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References

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