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Power Primers: Black Community Self-Narration, and Black Power for Children in the US and UK

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“We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society. We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of the self. If you do not have knowledge of yourself and your position in the society and in the world, then you will have little chance to know anything else” (Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, point 5).

In 1966, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale created a ten-point program for their nascent Black Panther Party organization based in Oakland, California. The fifth of these points concerned the education of Black children in America, calling for Black history and culture to be taught to facilitate self-knowledge for Black students. The Black Panthers, and the Black Power ideology they embraced, inspired Black teachers and writers in the US and the UK to find and produce reading material that would instruct children how to become both self-aware and part of the global African diasporic community. Such reading material, they hoped, would produce a generation of young Black people educated to resist white hegemony and institutional racism. By using Black-authored reading materials, many produced by independent Black publishers, reading and writing in these schools became expressions of Black Power in multiple ways.

Origins of Black Power Ideology in American Education

Black Power, as an ideology, preceded the Black Panther Party, and Black Power’s influence can be seen in Black Panther Liberation schools as well as schools not specifically connected with the Black Panthers. Although the phrase goes back to the 1950s, when African American writer Richard Wright published a nonfiction book of the same title, the idea of Black Power came into the mainstream during the mid-1960s. Student Nonviolent Coordinating Council

(SNCC) chairman Stokely Carmichael's proclamation at a 1966 Meredith, Mississippi rally that "We want Black Power!" occurred several months before Carmichael spoke at the first Black Power conference in Berkeley, California, which Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale attended and where they formed their Black Panther organization. The call for Black Power was taken up by both militant African American groups, such as the Panthers, and pacifist groups, including many followers of Martin Luther King, Jr.; as such, Black Power did not have a single definition. However, key to most definitions was the idea of African American self-determination—whether through a separatist nationalism or Back-to-Africa movement, or through local efforts to control local institutions, particularly schools.

Schools designed specifically with the needs of young Black children in mind, and as counter to the hegemony of public education, existed in the US prior to the Black Panther/Black Power movement. Large-scale response to educational inequality between Black and white children in the US began to rise in the years following World War II, reaching a peak during the Civil Rights Era with Freedom Summer in 1964. During this summer, volunteers associated with the SNCC set up Freedom Schools in Mississippi to tutor children in basic skills, but these schools also, as Tandra Jackson and Gloria Boutte point out, "intended to transform young people into active, critical participants of their society" (111). Thus, the reading material offered was political in nature, designed to ensure children learned about a history of resistance to dominant paradigms. However, Freedom Schools emphasized non-violence over racial inequality in their readings; sample material included readings from Martin Luther King, Jr., but also Mahatma Gandhi and the white liberal historian Howard Zinn.¹ Black Power and Black Panther schools, on the other

¹ See the Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum, found on the *Education and Democracy* website, for readings from the Freedom School curriculum.

hand, often rejected textbooks and ideologies acceptable to mainstream America, preferring instead to create educational materials based on Black Power principles.

Weusi Alfabeti, Children of Africa, and Tales and Stories for Black Folks: Black Power for American Children

Although the Black Panthers set up schools and supplementary education programs, most notably the Oakland Community School (OCS), many of these struggled to find reading material suitable for their cause. Black Panthers did not, Eldridge Cleaver argued in “Education and Revolution,” believe in school *reform*, because public schools were run by “racists and pigs who only want to exploit people” (52) and “We have to destroy their power in the community . . . our goal is the transformation of the American social order” (52). Panthers achieved transformation through guided analysis of reading material commonly found in mainstream textbooks. In a 1969 video demonstrating the work of Oakland Community School (OCS), the first Black Panther Liberation school (“Black Power Resource Guide”), eight-year-old Kelita Smith attends a social science class, where students read about European-Americans’ westward expansion. The textbook excerpt that Kelita reads describes westward expansion from a white European perspective; Kelita’s teacher then asks questions that lead students to analyze who and what is left out of the story (namely, American Indians) and then compare the position of American Indians with Black people in America. The critique of mainstream literature formed the bulk of reading material in Liberation schools; “non-mainstream” literature used for reading instruction included the Panther newspaper and biographies of significant Black leaders, contemporary or historical, such as Malcolm X or Marcus Garvey. These were often aimed at older readers. The question of appropriate reading instruction for younger readers began to be addressed more directly as

members of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), particularly on the East Coast, became involved in educational initiatives.

In the late 1960s, many schools in the greater New York metropolitan area were failing students of color. Teacher indifference led to student strikes and to parents and activists forming alternative schools, some separate from the public schools and some under their auspices, though community-controlled. Parents and students at all levels began to demand Black history and culture courses, and several Black Studies programs were proposed—although most were rejected by public school and college administrations. Pressure also grew on area colleges and universities to admit more students of color. At all levels, these protests, programs, and demands were being led by members of the Black Arts Movement (BAM). The BAM, which Larry Neal labelled the “aesthetic and spiritual sister” of Black Power (29), was a group of writers and artists foregrounding African American cultural traditions and historical and contemporary experiences. Many Black Arts proponents saw their mission to educate, not just through their art, but through involvement in youth education. Sara Austin, writing about author Virginia Hamilton, comments that BAM women, especially, formed “a subset of black women artists including Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez whose art pushes for real, rather than symbolic, change and serves as a redress to specific concerns such as poverty and education” (263). By the late 1960s, many BAM proponents were teaching in predominantly Black high schools and elementary schools; pushing for increased admissions to colleges and universities for people of color; and running writers’ groups and theater workshops to give voice to the Black community.

One notable example of a Black Power school in the New York City area is Uhuru Sasa Shule (the name means Freedom Now School in Swahili), which first opened in 1970 as part of the East School project. Although initially created as an alternative school for high school-aged

Black youth who had been expelled or suspended from mainstream public schools, the school later extended to elementary age students.² While high school students at Uhuru Sasa read material by established Black politicians, commentators, and philosophers, including Patrice Lumumba, Carter G. Woodson, and James Weldon Johnson (A. Austin 102), the school created its own materials for elementary-age pupils, or purchased them from Black publishers and distributors. One of these books was the *Weusi Alfabeti*, or Black Alphabet, written by Yusef Iman, the BAM poet and actor who created a theater group at East. *Weusi Alfabeti* was designed as a teaching tool; the top half of each page had illustrations or photographs, and the bottom half had a single sentence description of a word beginning with a letter of the alphabet, plus “school paper” lines for children to be able to copy the words themselves. Thus, the top of the first double-page spread has a silhouette of the African continent, and at the bottom is written “A is for Africa/Aa” (Iman). The alphabet book combines Black Panther and Black Power principles; while it shows two illustrations of Black men with guns (“D is for Defend” and “M is for our Men”) (Iman), neither are obviously depicting Black Panthers. Additionally, the book’s overall ethos indicates a Back-to-Africa emphasis. The letter N is for “our nation” (Iman) but the illustration shows a political map of Africa, not America. The letter T is for “the truth we learn in Uhuru Sasa School” (Iman); here the illustration is not of the Black Panther ten point plan, but of Maulana Karenga’s Nguzo Saba (or Seven Principles), each of which is named after a word in Kiswahili (and which would later be used as the basis for the seven days of Kwanzaa). Karenga had a violent history opposing the Black Panther party, forming his own organization (“US” or United Slaves), but the Nguzo Saba was nonetheless used by Panther-affiliated schools throughout the 1970s.

² See Russell Rickford, *We Are an African People*, for more on the East School.

The Pan-African emphasis at Uhuru Sasa could also be found in another book used at the school, published by Washington DC-based Black publisher Drum and Spear. Like *Weusi Alfabeti, Children of Africa: A Coloring Book* (1970) was designed as an interactive text. The book's preface explicitly indicates that "the text on the left is to provide the older reader with additional information as he accompanies the child" who, presumably, is coloring the illustration on the right-hand page (*Children of Africa*). The book opens, "The world's population of Black People once lived entirely on the continent of Africa. African people were an independent people" (*Children of Africa*). The text depicts African tribal life until the 15th century, when "Africa's people were kidnapped and forcibly scattered throughout the world" (*Children of Africa*). by European colonial powers. Africans who remained on the continent were dominated by Europeans until the 20th century, and "African people no longer control the resources of the land. We no longer provide for ourselves all the basic necessities of life" (*Children of Africa*). The shift from "African people" to "we" indicates the authors' desire for American child readers to see themselves as belonging to Africa; this is emphasized by the book's final double-page spread. On the left-hand side, the text reads, "We are an African people"; on the right-hand side is a silhouette drawing of Africa, and the bubble letters read "All African people" in large letters, and "(Draw yourself here)" in small letters and parenthetical aside (*Children of Africa*). Algernon Austin notes in *Achieving Blackness* that Pan-Africanism, rather than the militant nationalism of Black Panthers, was chosen by Uhuru Sasa's head, Kasisi Jitu Weusi (formerly known as Les Campbell), because it

was of practical value in his community organizing work. In Brooklyn in the 1970s there were increasing numbers of black immigrants from a variety of Caribbean countries. Weusi believed that the ideology of Pan-Africanism could unify blacks with these various national identities into a political force in Brooklyn. (95)

Tension between Afro-Caribbean and African American communities could, according to Weusi, be diffused by focusing on the African, rather than the American, identity of students at Uhuru Sasa school.

The Pan-African Black Power advocates and BAM activists called for a complete change in attitudes toward Black children's education, away from Civil Rights Era attempts at integration. M. Tyler Sasser points out the nature of that change, writing, "For members of BAM and the greater Black Power movement, complete separation from colonizing and debilitating whiteness was key" (376). Black women artists, particularly, had a role in this change; as Lisa Gail Collins writes, women in the Black Arts Movement were "artists who firmly believed in the necessity of cultural work in the struggle for social and political change" (281). BAM poet Amiri Baraka created the Committee for Unified Newark (CFUN), and under these auspices, Baraka's wife Amina Baraka began the African Free School to help develop the identity of the Black child. The education provided at the African Free School taught "self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense" (Committee for Unified Newark). Baraka believed that understanding the self and the community was key to liberation of Black people and could be taught through the arts. "The Black Arts Movement had three points. One was that we utilize the culture and history of our people; second, that it not be in these little closed, elitist circumstances, that it come out to the street, and; third, that it be an aid to the liberation of Black people" (Moore 111). The African Free School reading material included a Swahili primer and "African and Afro-American and even Asian and South American literature which reflects the same values of cooperation over conflict, feeling over form, intelligence over brute force" (Committee for a Unified Newark). The school committee talked about collecting material for an anthology; although there is no evidence that this anthology was ever produced and distributed "all over the country" as they hoped (Committee for Unified

Newark), an anthology of stories and folk tales, some written by Newark-area mothers who had returned to college, was produced in 1971. Edited by BAM writer and activist Toni Cade Bambara, who was friends with the Barakas, *Tales and Stories for Black Folks* includes stories “written by students in a freshman composition course Bambara was teaching at Livingston College. Some of the students had been working with children in an independent community school, and Bambara had asked them to produce term papers that were useful to someone” (Deck). Bambara called the women “the Newark Mamas” (162), suggesting that the independent community school might well be Baraka’s African Free School.

Bambara had come to Livingston College from City College of New York, where she worked with poet June Jordan, trying to achieve an open admissions policy that Jordan and Bambara felt was necessary to ensure the college reflected its name. “The History of Open Admissions and Remedial Education at the City University of New York” (1999), by Sally Renfro and Allison Armour-Garb, describes how, in 1969, “a group of Black and Puerto Rican students demanded . . . that the racial composition of City College entering freshmen reflect the proportion of black and Puerto Rican students in the city’s public high schools” (19). Renfro and Armour-Garb add that “the more ‘hip’ faculty supported student demands” (19); these included Jordan and Bambara. In 1969, Jordan wrote,

how will the City College continue unless it may admit the children of the city? . . . The children of the city are Black and Puerto Rican; they are the children of suffering and impotence; they are the children coerced into lower grade education that alienates upward of 65 percent of them so that the majority of this majority disappears into varieties of ruin. (54)

Jordan recognized that many students calling for open admissions were underprepared for City College's curriculum, and she not only campaigned for the (eventually achieved) policy, but also started a writer's group for Black and Puerto Rican elementary, middle, and high school students in the Fort Greene neighborhood of Brooklyn. The writer's group, Voice of the Children, met once a week and published their work in a weekly newsletter and a quarterly publication (Gansberg). Richard Flynn points out that Jordan's "refusal to underestimate children served to foster respect for children's voices" (163), and Amy Fish discusses the ways that Jordan's writing and activism, "rewrites dominant narratives about black and Latinx urban young people, countering destructive discourses of deviation and criminality with a story of creative power and love" (198). Jordan interested a publisher, Holt Rinehart, in producing a collection of the children's poetry in 1970 entitled *The Voice of the Children*. One of the young poets published in the collection was Vanessa Howard. Fourteen-year-old Howard's words open the book in a piece called "Ghetto," which expresses Howard's frustration at assumptions made about her. She writes, in part, "I think they put all Black people in a box marked 'ghetto' which leaves them having no identity. They should let Black people be seen for themselves, not as one reflection on all" (Jordan and Bush ix). Howard's foreword sums up Jordan's aims, and indeed the aims of many women BAM writers, first and foremost of which was to amplify voices of those usually unheard.

Jordan's colleague Toni Cade Bambara included some Voice of the Children writers in her collection, *Tales and Stories for Black Folks*, Vanessa Howard among them. Howard's contribution to Bambara's collection, a short story entitled "Let Me Hang Loose," is the last in a section entitled "The Great Kitchen Tradition." It is preceded by stories from Langston Hughes and Alice Walker, among others; all the stories in the section focus on the relationship between younger and older generations in African American communities. Langston Hughes's story,

“Thank you, Ma’am,” is about a boy who attempts to steal an older woman’s purse; she catches him but instead of punishing him or turning him into the police, she feeds him and gives him money, telling him, “I have done things, too” (Bambara 27). Alice Walker’s “To Hell with Dying” tells the story of Mr. Sweet, who “had been ambitious as a boy, wanted to be a doctor or lawyer or sailor, only to find that black men fare better if they are not” (52). Despite becoming a drunk instead, he is much loved and looked after by a family who “revives” him every time he is dying—until the last time. When that time comes, the female narrator is “finishing my doctorate in Massachusetts” but still “drop[s] everything and come[s] home” (57) to try to revive him and, failing that, to say goodbye. These stories focus on community responsibility and ways that African Americans support each other despite seeming failures, as those failures often result from a white society that denies them their full potential.

Vanessa Howard’s “Let Me Hang Loose,” in contrast, shows what happens when community and generational understanding breaks down; the story begins with teenage narrator Kathy participating in “a demonstration against the school by the Black students, who stated several teachers had prejudices against them” (Bambara 101); the protest turns into a riot, and Kathy ends up in the hospital after being knocked unconscious. Kathy’s unsympathetic mother criticizes her for being “disrespectful” toward the police, causing a rift between them that results in Kathy’s leaving home. But this departure does not signal Kathy’s maturation. Her participation in the riot is not connected to political feelings—she does not attempt further changes at the school but instead stops attending school altogether—rather, her participation is connected with a desire to belong, to feel wanted. Because she does not actively participate in the Black community, however, the only acceptance she finds is from a white boy who gets her hooked on drugs that eventually kill her. Devoid of support of family and her Black community, and disconnected from

the causes of that community's problems, the young Black teenager tries to rely on the white community, which uses and then discards her. Kathy, in Howard's story, understands Black solidarity and Black power only as an expression of anger, and not as a vehicle for change.

None of the stories in the first half of Bambara's collection mention Black Power (indeed, most were written before the movement began), but all emphasize the importance of Black community. The stories in the second half, however, allow for a freer exploration of the possibilities inherent in the collective power of Black people. Bambara labels the book's second half, "Rapping About Story Forms," and she writes that although several of the stories are revisions of fables and fairy tales, "you realize when you read them that they are no longer the cute little things you heard when you were very little, though for my money these stories should be in the nursery, cause that's when basic learning about the world should take place" (124). Bambara's emphasis on teaching children "in the nursery" came at a time when the Black Panther movement in the US was in crisis; Huey P. Newton, who had been released from prison in 1970, now advocated a party focused on social programs, while Eldridge Cleaver, the exiled-but-not-yet-expelled party's minister for information, wanted a more revolutionary (and violent) stance. The stories in the second half of Bambara's collection address this tension in the Black Panther Party and in Black Power circles generally, particularly in the revised version of fairy tales written by Bambara's college writing class, the Newark Mamas.

Certainly, the Newark Mamas' re-visioned folktales in *Tales and Stories for Black Folks* emphasize Black Power and Black Panther values and, like Baraka's African Free School, emphasized values of cooperation over conflict and intelligence over brute force. Despite this, the threat of violence is never far away. "The Three Little Panthers," for example, written by Bambara and her student Geneva Powell, begins with the eponymous panthers who "attended Freedom

School, not to learn how to make their fortune, but to learn how to survive in this world” (140). As Freedom School homework, the panthers are sent to live in the suburbs, where they attempt to become a part of the community. However, the suburban animals don’t exactly welcome them; a rat burns a cross on their lawn, a vulture drops a bomb down their chimney, and even the “nice” suburban animals bring their housewarming gifts with a note saying, “You don’t have to move. We really like you people. But you don’t eat properly, you dress funny, and your I.Q. is low, so please use our gifts so you can be like us” (141). One of the gifts is a set of encyclopedias but finding that “the books didn’t say one word about Panthers and their history” (141), the three little panthers return home “where they could be loved and be for real” (141).

Other tales by the Newark Mamas contain similar messages of Black community and cooperation against the white/dominant society. Bernice Pearson’s “The Three Little Brothers” is set in Newark and begins with brothers who can’t decide what sort of house to buy (straw, wood, or brick), “so they went their separate ways” (Bambara 142). But when a riot breaks out, the brothers learn the value of community. The brick house brother not only reunites with “his blood brother but all his sisters and brothers who were sick and tired of living in crummy houses” (143). The need for community in Pearson’s story is made even more poignant by the fact that white institutions ignore the Black community; the fire department fails to respond to calls for help during the riot.

In Linda Holmes’ “The True Story of Chicken Licken,” also in *Tales and Stories for Black Folk*, institutions don’t just ignore the Black community, they actively seek to silence it. Chicken Licken, in Holmes’ story, “was waiting to cross at the corner when out of the clear blue sky—a policeman walked up and hit her on the head” (Bambara 146). Chicken Licken tries to tell the king, and even gets a number of others in the community to go with her, but police convince the

community “that it was a piece of sky that fell on her poor little head and made her so anti-police” (149)—and then police proceed to beat up the protestors. Holmes’ story has the least hopeful ending of all of the *Tales and Stories* written by Newark Mamas because the police are able to raise mistrust among community members, but in doing so the narrative challenges readers to question “official” history given by institutions.

Bambara’s inclusion of stories from new writers in her *Tales and Stories* alongside well-known writers such as Langston Hughes underscores her commitment to a unified Black community, something that Amiri Baraka noted in his obituary of Bambara in the *New York Amsterdam News* in 1996. Baraka argued that, like Bambara, Black people needed to “Unify the Afro-American political culture with the development of a national Black artists and intellectuals network for self-determination, self-consciousness, self-reliance and self-defense. Use the art to provide resources, education, employment and political unity” (13). Black community-run schools, such as Uhuru Sasa and the African Free School, supported the entire local community by providing locally-written and locally-published literature for children in the district. However, unlike Black Panther Liberation schools, they did not aim to divorce themselves from other Americans entirely. Rather, the literature supported young Black students in finding strategies to survive and thrive as Black Americans—and gave space to the self-expression of Black writers, particularly women. *Weusi Alfabeti*, *Children of Africa*, and *Tales and Stories for Black Folk* supported Black Power principles through the creation of space for Black communities, local and global, readers and writers.

British Black Panthers, Black Power, and the Supplementary School Movement

Black Power came to the UK at a time when the Black community was under increasing threat. The Windrush generation of migrants who had arrived to help rebuild Britain after World War II, thinking of themselves as British citizens (which they were) soon discovered that white British people not only did not see them as British, but saw them only as Black. Eddie Chambers writes that “the immigrants found that there were, by and large, no aspects of British public life, amenities, housing, schooling, and so on, in which skin colour did not factor” (34). As they became disillusioned with the British education system, which placed a high percentage of Black students (particularly Black boys) into what were then called Educationally Sub-Normal (ESN) schools, Afro-Caribbean activists began to take matters into their own hands, creating supplementary schools that would account for both the poor success rates of their children in the British education system and the lack of Black History taught in British schools. Black supplementary schools in Britain taught basic skills, such as reading, and often taught Black history and culture at the same time. Like the American Black Power activists, however, Black British activists had difficulty finding appropriate reading material.

Many of the Black Britons who formed supplementary schools were influenced by (if not members of) the British Black Panthers and various other Black Power organizations. The British Black Panthers (BBP), active between 1968 and around 1973, were inspired by but not affiliated with the US Black Panthers, and there were some significant differences between British and American Panthers. Although the BBP concerned themselves with many of the same issues, including education and the treatment of Black people by police, they were a broader-based organization which included British Asians (most notably with regard to children’s literature, the writer Farrukh Dhondy) as well as Black Britons such as poet Linton Kwesi Johnson and

photographer Neil Kenlock. During this time, as Jenny Bourne points out, “‘coloured immigrants’ forged *Black* communities and Black became a political colour” due to the “starkness of the crude racism” that Black and Asian Britons all had to face (123). Education was a key element of their fight, and Kenlock argues that the BBP’s interest in education stemmed from the fact that,

In school, there was no black history. We did every form of English history, but learnt nothing about our own. If you asked the teachers where black people came from, they would say: ‘Somewhere in Africa, up a tree,’ and that’s it. So with the Black Panther movement we had educational classes, public meetings and lectures. (Williams)

However, most educational classes were aimed at adults rather than children. Additionally, like the American Black Panther movement, the BBP did not always embrace writers and artists. Farrukh Dhondy, in “The Black Writer in Britain,” describes his and other writers’ experiences in the BBP as non-nurturing:

There were several young West Indians in the [BBP] Movement who wanted to write and actually did. Most of them kept it a secret, because the leadership of the Movement had never seen the political growth of which we were all a part, as the establishment of blacks, culturally and politically in Britain. (67)

Dhondy, who would later write award-winning short stories and novels about Black activism in Britain, suggests that the BBP movement was short-lived in Britain “because of the attitude it took to black creativity . . . A community does not live by rhetoric alone” (68). Ansel Wong, another activist, joined the Black Liberation Front rather than the British Black Panthers. The BLF, unlike the BBP, emphasized education of young Black Britons, and also (often in partnership with left-leaning white British groups) worked to achieve justice for Black Britons through legal channels rather than violence. As Paul Warmington points out in *Black British Intellectuals and Education*,

Identifying as ‘black’ *and* ‘British’ (albeit with ambivalence about the latter) became an organizing principle, not least in the site of education . . . The Black Power-inspired groupings critiqued British society and its racism from the standpoint of both rebel and citizen movements. (41)

The BLF organized using strategies learned from earlier participation in Caribbean labour movements, and in cooperation with white British radical groups such as the British Communist Party. However, although they may have partnered with white Britons and avoided violent means of protest, they nonetheless saw the Black Panthers as an inspiration in terms of ideas of Black community and self-expression.

Black supplementary schools in the UK, as in the US, are important sources of literature created specifically for a Black child readership because materials were often self-published, independently-published, or chosen to create opportunities for self-expression for a specific Black British community. Supplementary schools for Black children existed in the UK from at least the mid-1960s, but became a movement in the late 1960s following the Haringey school district’s plan to “band” students into schools by ability (banding was a process by which children would be tested, and then placed in schools according to their ability). Given that a disproportionate number of students in what were then called “Educationally Sub-Normal” (ESN) classrooms were from Afro-Caribbean households, Black parents resisted attempts to categorize their children in this way. In 1969, many parents and community activists united in what would eventually become the Caribbean Education and Community Workers Association (CECWA). The CECWA tackled inequity in schools from a variety of angles, one of which was through supplementary schools. According to Kehinde Andrews, the CECWA “saw Black supplementary schooling as one platform through which inequities in the school system, particularly in the curriculum, could be

challenged” (*Resisting Racism* 14). In 1970, the CECWA hosted a conference at which a doctoral student in education, Bernard Coard, spoke. Coard’s speech was later published as *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Sub-Normal in the British School System* (1970) by New Beacon press, and supported by Bogle L’Ouverture press, both independent Black publishers who sought funding for their publication ventures from groups such as the BBP. The head of New Beacon, John La Rose, as well as many others including Ansel Wong, took Coard’s words to heart and started supplementary schools for Black British children. La Rose was a member of the British Communist Party, and although neither he nor Wong ever joined the BBP, they worked with several party members including Darcus Howe, Farrukh Dhondy, and Linton Kwesi Johnson, on various educational and literary projects.

John La Rose was never a militant activist. Although he actively participated in protests and campaigns for Black justice throughout his career as an independent publisher with New Beacon, but Ruth Bush suggests that intellectual aspects of Black Power appealed to him:

La Rose was consistently opposed to exclusive forms of black nationalism and saw New Beacon’s work as part of a fundamental (that is, *radical*) change in the organization of society and culture. Black consciousness movements, such as Black Power and Rastafarianism, together with Marxist ideas fed into his thinking. (22)

The connection with Black Power ideals, in La Rose’s case, signaled an emphasis on sustaining and improving Black self-image and forging a connection with ancestral homes of the Caribbean and Africa. Ansel Wong, who counted La Rose among his “mentors” was (Waters, “Student Politics” 18), through the BLF, more concerned with “situating our heritage firmly within the British landscape” (20). The distinction between the two men’s approaches can be seen by examining the reading material available for the supplementary school run by John La Rose, the

George Padmore and Albertina Sylvester Supplementary School, and the C. L. R. James supplementary school and Ahfiwe School run by Wong.

John La Rose began the George Padmore Supplementary School in 1969 with four pupils—two of whom were his own sons. Echoing Neil Kenlock’s ideas about the need for education, La Rose wrote, in a brief history of the school’s founding,

This was a time when anxiety about the education system in Britain and what it was doing to black children had already surfaced publicly in this part of London . . . the schools gave black children no understanding of their own background history and culture, no help understanding their experience of the society in Britain. One of the main purposes of the school was to do just that. (Notebook on GP/AS)

The GPSS was for older children (the Junior School ran on Saturdays for children aged 7-11; the older students came on Mondays and Fridays); younger children attended the nearby Albertina Sylvester Supplementary School; by 1975, these two schools would merge. Although La Rose says “some” instructors were professional teachers, many were just concerned parents and community members. Teaching materials used in the school were of primary importance in helping children succeed, both in mainstream society and in their own Afro-Caribbean communities.

The GP/AS schools utilized three main types of reading material: trade books, textbooks, and reading comprehension passages. Textbooks consisted of standard reading texts of the time, but rather than being British-based (which rarely had Black children as central characters), they were from various Caribbean islands. These included Ginn’s *Caribbean Junior English* and Nelson’s *West Indian Readers*. That the schools used these readers instead of the rare reading series including Black Britons such as Macmillan’s *Nippers* is significant, because John La Rose was involved in helping the *Nippers* editor, Leila Berg, find Black British authors to write for her series

(Sands-O'Connor 43-44). John La Rose's bookshop, New Beacon, included *Nippers* in their catalogue of books available for purchase, but in his own supplementary school he eschewed them. Choosing to focus on reading texts from the Caribbean at his supplementary schools speaks either to a desire for the legitimacy of traditional textbooks (*Nippers* were small, pamphlet-like, individual stories rather than textbooks, and they used working-class colloquialisms in their dialogue) or the need to connect Black children, many of whom were born in Britain, to their Caribbean past or ancestry. Given that their trade book list included books from many smaller, independent presses, including Bogle L'Ouverture (the Black British press run by La Rose's friends, Jessica and Eric Huntley) and Centerprise (a community-based publisher in Hackney), it is likely that the reason for choosing standard Caribbean reading texts had more to do with connecting Black British children to their community and heritage.

Traditional reading texts found at the GP/AS supplementary schools, for example, included Inez M. Grant's *The Island Readers*, a joint publication between Collins, a Glasgow- and London-based publisher, and Jamaica's Ministry of Education. While early books in the series, such as Book 1A, *Nola and her Friends*, had highly traditional primer stories (even including a dog named Spot), illustrations clearly show an island setting, with palm trees, poinsettia bushes, and Afro-Caribbean protagonists. Book 1B, *The Story Book*, does much more to emphasize background history and culture of intended readers. Along with stories of the traditional Caribbean trickster figure, Anansi (Grant 22-29), there are realistic tales in which children sing limbo songs (57), eat rice and peas (74), and hunt for mangoes in the forest (56). In Book 2A, *Stories for Work and Play*, children could read about modern manufacturing of condensed milk in Jamaica, as well as the traditional celebration of John Canoe—which came originally from Africa. In these stories, Black British readers learned about Africa and the Caribbean, instead of white British history offered in

mainstream schools, or the suggestion those white history books produced of the Caribbean and Africa as backwards, primitive countries.

The few British primers available that included Black Britons did not teach Caribbean history and culture so effectively. Beryl Gilroy, one of the first Black headteachers in Britain, was asked in the late 1960s to write for Leila Berg's *Nippers* series, an alternative reading series focused on working-class children. Gilroy wrote seven books for *Nippers* (plus an additional three books in the *Little Nippers* series for younger readers). Most of these books, like Gilroy's own classrooms, depicted multiracial groups of children in school and home activities, including eating dinner, going on class trips, and getting a pet; they are not specific to any particular group, although they occasionally refer to a child's background in a relatively non-specific way. For example, whereas in the Island Reader IB, *The Story Book*, there is an extensive discussion of mother's rice and peas in the story "The Holiday" (Grant 72-85), encompassing their preparation, transportation to a picnic site, distribution and the family's enjoyment of them, Beryl Gilroy's *Nipper, Rice and Peas* (1975) only mentions the food as one of several being served at tea, and illustrations by Beryl Sanders never show the rice and peas clearly. While it is helpful for children to see traditional foods from their background being represented in books, Gilroy's story is culturally nonspecific compared with the story in the Island Readers. Gilroy occasionally addresses racism within Britain, in books like *New People at Twenty-Four* (1973), but does so in a way that eventually integrates Black and white Britons into a happy community. Gilroy's *Nippers* are designed to make readers (white or Black) comfortable with the idea of Black Britons as a part of the book-world, and as such, they did not function as literature that actively supported the "understanding of their own background history and culture" on which John La Rose built his supplementary school.

In fact, most of the reading material in the GP/AS Supplementary Schools looked back to either the Caribbean or Africa, rather than focusing on Black British experiences. The younger children's library included picture books set in the Caribbean, such as *Emmanuel Goes to Market* by Karl Craig; folktales in Petronella Breinburg's *Legends of Suriname* (published by John La Rose's New Beacon Press); poetry in *The Sun's Eye*, a collection of Caribbean poetry compiled by Anne Walmsley; and biographies of Marcus Garvey and Nanny of the Maroons ("Albertina Sylvester"). A written report of books in the George Padmore School in 1972 and 1973 includes several texts looking at Caribbean and African history, and the history of political revolution (the book list includes one on Toussaint L'Ouverture, the Haitian Revolutionary leader, as well as one about Mao Tse Tung). Following the listing of a book about *The Kingdom of Benin in Nigeria*, La Rose writes, "I, John La Rose, selected it so as to be able to compare an African City State and a section of African society of the 15th Century with other city states of the same period Venice, Genoa, (in Italy) etc to show the little difference in power and development that existed between them" ("Albertina Sylvester"). Pan-Africanism, and a connection with the recent Caribbean past, informs the entire book list of the GP/AS schools. Black British children are not taught how to survive in white-dominated British society, but to appreciate the rich heritage and traditions of their parents' culture.

The list included books published by New Beacon and another Black British independent publisher, Bogle L'Ouverture. Most notable on this list is *Getting to Know Ourselves* (1972), written by Phyllis and Bernard Coard to "assist the young Black child in his search for his identity" and "help to bridge the gap between our peoples in the Old and New Worlds" (*Getting to Know Ourselves*). The book, much like the coloring books from Uhuru Sasa and Drum & Spear in the US, takes a pan-African view, comparing children from Africa and the West Indies and noting

their similarities. Gary from Jamaica, Pam from Trinidad, Shola from Nigeria and Jomo from Kenya meet and decide to “ask Mamma why we look alike” (12). The mother explains that “wicked men made [her ancestors] leave their homes in Africa” and endure slavery (14). In the end, however, the new West Indians triumphed, building modern nations, but always mindful of the “stories from Africa our Mother Country” (19). The book never mentions Britain at all, focusing solely on the success under duress of people of African ancestry. Unlike mainstream British text and trade books, which, according to Gillian Klein, were filled with images of Black people as “cannibals, minstrels and Aunt Jemimas” (43), the GP/AS school attempted to surround Black students with positive images of Black people from the Caribbean and Africa.

Original material written for and used by the GP/AS school added biographies of famous Caribbean men, including politicians such as Alexander Bustamante, sports heroes such as Frank Worrell, intellectuals like Philip Sherlock, and calypsonians such as the Mighty Sparrow (La Rose, “Meeting Michael Manley”). Based on material in the GP/AS school archive at the George Padmore Institute, students were taught about either the far- or near-distant past of their ancestors; they were not given material about Black British activists such as Claudia Jones (who started the West Indian Gazette, a Black British newspaper, as well as helped to organize the event that became the Notting Hill Carnival), historian, cricket commentator, and playwright C.L.R. James, or Harold Moody, the leader of the (British) League of Coloured People. “Meeting Michael Manley,” one of the self-produced reading materials found in the supplementary school archives, indicates how biographies produced by the school attempt to connect young Black Britons directly with their Caribbean past; the author begins the short biography with, “I was born in London but my parents come from Jamaica. A lot of the time they talk about life in the West Indies. They tell me all about the beautiful hills and valleys and about the people who live there” (11). The focus

of John La Rose's school reading curriculum was on understanding a time *and space* that, for students, existed in the past only. The community that La Rose tried to create was a Pan-African one, and specifically not a Black British one. However, like Black Power material in the US such as *Weusi Alfabeti* or *Children of Africa*, the reading material in La Rose's school encouraged readers to build and discover their Black identities, and resist the notion pressed upon them by white British society that they were inferior to their white counterparts.

This focus on past times and places was common for many supplementary schools in Britain, but some schools were more present-focused than John La Rose's. Ansel Wong's first educational venture was the C.L.R. James Supplementary School. Wong, a qualified teacher who had been working at Sydenham Girls Secondary School, was also an activist—cooperating with the Ujima Housing Association to secure decent housing for Black Britons and others—and a radical, writing for the Black Liberation Front's newspaper, *Grassroots*, under a pseudonym. Like La Rose, Wong offered extra tuition in math and reading, but also supplemented British school curriculum with “our history and our background” (Waters, “Student Politics” 25). Unlike La Rose, that background focused on Black people in Britain; students studied the school's namesake, C.L.R. James, and heard Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Marc Matthews, Basil Smith, and Femi Fatoba perform poetry as part of the Black Arts Workshop. The workshop, Wong says, was “based on the concept of a black aesthetic as had been articulated by people in the USA, Amiri Baraka and others” (25). Wong would carry the idea of Black Arts through to other educational ventures after he left the C.L.R. James school, involving students in poetry, theatre, and music produced by living Black British artists through the 1980s.

In 1974, Wong started the first Black supplementary school funded by the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), the Ahfiwe School, accepting UK government funding and

partnering with white educators and officials. The school was designed for a specific population, Black British children from the Caribbean; at the time, “Black” encompassed both Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean people. Therefore, the Ahfiwe School did not have the same attachment to Africa that many other Black Power schools had. Unlike some American Black Power schools, Ahfiwe’s name came, not from Swahili, but from Trinidadian patois; the word means “all for us.”

Wong described the remit of the school as

a full time school for young people who were truanting in the head or truanting with the feet in the education system . . . the opportunity existed for a positive intervention in the lives of these young people because you were giving them some positive opportunity to deal with all this underachievement and poor self images. (Dalilah 8)

Some criticized Wong’s decision to take money from the ILEA, which oversaw curriculum for all London schools. As Winston Best put it in his article on “The Black Supplementary School Movement,”

Since the aid is inevitably granted with strings attached, community members have always regarded this as something to avoid at all cost . . . No supplementary school worth its salt can afford not to be political. It is dealing with a situation that is embarrassing to the education authorities. The very existence of the movement is an indication of the failure of the state education system. (165)

However, Wong seems to have successfully walked the line between being critical of British education and keeping the ILEA officials happy (at least initially), primarily by focusing on student self-expression. His curriculum included revolutionary reading, as shown in a poem by a student at Ahfiwe School entitled “To My Black Teacher.” In this poem, Chin praises her teacher and asks for guidance. Chin lists her school reading: “Rap Brown, Lester, / Fanon, Cleaver, / All this reading

going round my head” (lines 16-18), arguing that this reading combined with her teacher’s guidance made her “more a black woman / Studious, Cultural, / Militant and Free” (lines 39-41). Rap Brown, author of *Die, Nigger, Die!* (1969; 1970 UK) famously stated in 1967 that “violence is as American as cherry pie” (Jensen 1). Lester is probably Julius Lester, an African American anti-war activist, musician, and author who in 1968 published his first work for young people, *To Be a Slave*, which focused on personal accounts of the indignities of slavery by formerly enslaved people. The book discusses how white enslavers used mental manipulation to “ensure that the slave would enslave himself and there would be no need to police him” (Lester 77). Frantz Fanon, author of *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks* similarly focused on psychological effects of colonial exploitation on the Black subject by white colonizers. Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, written in Folsom Prison, argues that the “black soul which has been ‘colonized’... by an oppressive white society that projects its brief, narrow vision of life as eternal truth” (14). Chin’s response to these texts was exactly what Wong advocated, as he saw the reading as a means to the end of self-awareness. In *Thinking Black*, Rob Waters notes that “Black self-narration was central to the project of empowering pupils at Ahfiwe. Wong’s teaching practices . . . conceiv[ed] the process of narrating the black self as a dialogic one, in which black radical literature would play a formative role” (148). In other words, although Wong used already- and mostly mainstream-published literature, his purpose was to help students create new literature of their own that expressed what it meant to be Black and British.

Although by 1978, the Ahfiwe School had closed because of what Wong termed “the growing radicalism” of the school encompassed by a move toward a specific Black Studies curriculum (Waters, “Student Politics” 28), Black Power principles continue to influence Black British children’s literature today. Kehinde Andrews recently published *The A-Z of Black*

Radicalism, an alphabet not unlike those produced in the 1970s, that emphasizes community—“G is for grassroots”; history—“U is for United Negro Improvement Association”; and identity—“B is for Black” and “Y is for youth.” By publishing the alphabet on the website *Make it Plain*, Andrews uses technology to bring Black Power principles to a new generation of Black youth and expands the notion of community to Black people around the world.

Conclusion: Making Black Powerful for Child Readers

Black activists concerned with young children’s education in the 1960s and 1970s embraced Black Power principles because, as Kwasi Konadu points out, they believed that “if given a medium to express their nationalism or cultural integrity, [children] would obtain a more positive learning experience and perform accordingly” (86-87). While Black Panther Liberation schools used mainstream textbooks to critique dominant white society’s racism and to call for a separatist nationalism, many Black Power schools in the US and UK created their own children’s literature or purchased it from exclusively Black-run publishing collectives. Writers associated with Black Arts in the US often produced texts that exposed the need for self-defense against a violent, dominant white society, and for community-building among people of African descent as a way of strengthening individual Black identities. Black British writers and educators embraced a more broad-based definition of “Blackness,” including British Asians as well as Britons of African descent, and as such often looked back to the Caribbean as much as if not more than to Africa, but in either case the idea of Black community was central to individual Black identity; as Stuart Hall says, “people of diverse societies and cultures would all come to Britain in the fifties and sixties as part of that huge wave of migration from the Caribbean, East Africa, the Asian subcontinent . . . and all identified themselves politically as Black” (205). Or, as Bernard and

Phyllis Coard's *Getting to Know Ourselves* (1972) concludes, "We are all Brothers and Sisters, from Mother Africa . . . We are one People, and we are friends" (20-21). In the current era of Black Lives Matter and global pandemics, a message of Black community, self-awareness, and unity is one well worth revisiting.

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