Introduction

The Black Arts Movement poet Sonia Sanchez often tells the story of her first few months teaching in the newly created Black Studies Department at San Francisco State University. The year was 1969, and the students had just recently completed a five-month strike in which they had demanded a College of Ethnic Studies. It was a moment when the world witnessed the explosive result of introducing more and more nonwhites into Western systems of higher education. None of these universities had expected that these students would hold onto their cultural identities instead of simply embracing the canon of Western knowledge or the assumed supremacy of the American project. Sanchez was in the thick of this battle as she was brought in to continue the development of one of these alternative intellectual experiments in this dynamic moment.

One night, Sanchez answered her door to find an FBI agent standing at the threshold of her apartment. This was no raid—although it could have easily been the case. No. The agent had come to ask Professor Sanchez if it was indeed true that she was teaching the work of W. E. B. Du Bois at San Francisco State. Turning to her landlord, the agent then inquired if he knew that he had a subversive as a tenant.1 Tellingly, the repression visited on Du Bois, Paul Robeson, and on Marcus Garvey had reappeared amid the struggle for Black Studies.2 What did these figures represent that made the mere teaching of their ideas such a dangerous proposition?

This kind of criminal interrogation may seem unique to the times of the 1960s, but the movement that Sanchez represented continued and continues. Having come to know the work of Du Bois through her brief apprenticeship with the Schomburg Center librarian Jean Blackwell Hutson, Sanchez would not abandon him in her teaching, even as he became persona non grata, in many respects as a result of his own refusal to abandon his radical politics and embrace Cold War liberalism. Sanchez’s embrace of radical Black thinkers was an act of preservation,
Introduction

and she would pass that energy on to the future generations struggling along the lines of Du Bois and Hutson—to those struggling to make Black spaces incubators of radical traditions working toward the liberation of African peoples.¹

One such generation would emerge almost twenty years after the knock on Sanchez’s door. In the nervous moments before perhaps the most important event in this late 1980s iteration of Black student radicalism, it was none other than Sonia Sanchez who would provide inspiration and motivation to its young spokeswoman, April R. Silver, who recalls fondly that

Sonia Sanchez, who guided me so carefully during this time (over the phone), made it all clear to me one night when we, as a group, had decided to go through with the plan to shut down the school. In effect, she said, in the most maternal way, “April, when people ask you why you are fighting against your own school, when they try to tell you that you are wrong to protest against President Cheek, when they ask you why you are going through with shutting down the school (a plan that was unknown to most at the time), you have to tell them it’s because you love Howard University, because you love Black people. You have to tell them that you are fighting because what you believe in is worth fighting for. It’s up to you all to make sure that Howard fulfills its mission to you. We fought too hard to let our Black institutions end up in the hands of people who oppose us.”²

These were all the words she needed. The moment was drawing nigh. And by ensuring connections to those who had participated in similar struggles a generation or two earlier, the Howard student radicals were extending a tradition. The protest would not succeed otherwise.

_We Are Worth Fighting For_ is a history of the Howard University student protest of 1989 as told from the perspectives and worldview of its participants. It frames the actions of the students involved in this movement as a part of a long genealogy of Black renegades who resisted the notion that peoples of African ancestry should remain wedded to the ideals of American universalism. Rather than pursuing détente with an inherently oppressive political regime, this genealogy of Black radicals pursued self-defined norms and self-determined actions for securing a
just society for their group and for humanity. And thus the Black Radical tradition found itself at center of the controversy at Howard University during the key moment in the appearance of what some of have called the “hip hop generation.”

At the center of this story is the student organization Black Nia F.O.R.C.E (Freedom Organization for Racial and Cultural Enlightenment), which was the catalyst for the coalition of organizations that developed and went through with the plans for the takeover of the university. While the overriding ideals of this organization and this movement were geared toward self-determination and Black solidarity, the precipitating event was Howard president James Cheek's decision to support the appointment of Republican National Committee Chairman Lee Atwater to the university’s board of trustees. Yet this was but one—albeit the most objectionable—of the many issues that caused these students to demand changes from the university.

The events of 1989 demonstrated that Black youth were not passive receptacles of the neoliberal values of the Reagan era. Against the trend prominent among many educated Americans that saw them take their place among the “Yuppies” and reject the “sixties values” of their parents, a significant number of Black youth, inspired by those of their communities that felt the “underside” of Reaganism, chose to resist its imposition. While the roles Black youth played in the anti-apartheid struggle, as well as in the political campaigns that rejected the conservative values of the 1980s, have been acknowledged, the Howard protest of 1989 represented an extension of the still-vibrant questions of self-determination and institutional autonomy that have always been associated with Black political activity. It was a nationalist movement that was conversant with and connected to the spirit of the Black Radical tradition.

While this nationalist resurgence of the early-mid 1990s has been commented upon, the protest of 1989 became an outlet for its expression in a space—Howard University—that continued to be known as the “Mecca” of global Blackness. That the conditions at Howard produced a clash that pitted a sizable student population inspired by nationalist ideals against an administration committed to neoliberal ones assuredly has implications for how we understand the dualities at play in Black institutional life in the 1980s and now. We Are Worth Fighting For pays close attention to the ways that nationalist politics influenced student
action at Howard in 1989 and what this means for comprehending the wider Black community’s response to what some have dubbed the “high eighties.”

The evolution of this protest cannot be understood without an appreciation of the long trajectory of Black radicalism, nor can it ignore the specific political context of 1980s America. In many ways, these two might be understood as being bound together. For had Black radicalism not existed, some of the measures put in place to secure “order” in American society might not have produced the brand of politics that was responsible for the center-right politics that came to define the period. While there has been much interest in what some have sardonically called the “heroic era” (the Civil Rights/Black Power movement) in American historical studies as well as in studies of the New Right, less attention has been given to the continuity of the Black freedom movement in the “post–civil rights” era. If there has been a significant amount of conceptual work on the long Civil Rights/Black Power movement, less work has been done on how the ethos of that era actually extends into the decades that lead up to the present. In fact, the entire American twentieth century might be read as the struggle to contain Black radicalism as it intersected with a range of other movements. For these reasons, We Are Worth Fighting For pays just as much attention to the forces at work off campus as to those in play on the Yard.

This is a history that fills both temporal and conceptual gaps. It adds to the historical record, but it also contributes to how we go about comprehending the nature of historical movement—that is, the historicity of these actors and, by extension, the historicity of Black radicalism. The takeover of Howard University by its students in 1989 helps us better appreciate that student protest activity both continued into this period and also took bold steps to ensure that nominally Black institutions reflected what the students considered to be the political interests of the largest segments of the Black world—those normally rejected in both mainstream and Black elite spaces—thus continuing a tradition of Black radicalism that centered “the least of these.”

But given the above, this work does not merely seek to make a historical intervention. More than a matter of presenting historical data, this work responds to the Africana Studies imperative to ensure that connections between past, present, and future movements to realize a
new world are known and maintained. The pursuit of historical memory is not an act of scholarly inquiry as much as it an act of re-membering our collective body. The intent is for readers to see both historical antecedents, contemporary adherents, and future activists as intimately connected by a vibrant, though multilayered, tradition of Black struggle. The narrative is based upon the voices of the students, not because they—as Silver warns us—were without contradictions or flaws, but because they were. At the core of understanding their resistance is the question of what motivated these students to act, particularly given the political and social forces that reigned, but also what it meant to be who they were. This book, finally, interrogates what lessons from this protest can be extended to those generations to come, with the central premise that connections between radical traditions are always present and must continue to be accented and highlighted. As such, the narration of this story derives its meaning from maintaining linkages between movements of yesterday and today. History—if it is to be meaningful—must breathe.

***

The power of memory inheres in its ability to frame the future. Our memories create the pathways that we follow, that our descendants follow. In the face of modern assaults on our humanity, African intellectual traditions have over the last two hundred years generated philosophies of history that were guided by the particular memories—and modalities—of people of African ancestry.

With regard to understanding the recent past, this intellectual practice becomes ever more urgent. The advent of the professional and public narrative of the Civil Rights era has generated “official” memories of the events of the 1950s–1960s “Negro revolution.” We see its impact every February: “whites only” signs, dogs and hoses, marches, “We Shall Overcome,” and finally the Civil Rights Act of 1964. These images are juxtaposed to stock images of “Black anger”—Malcolm X, Watts, and gun-toting Panthers—and then we are often told that such anger was misplaced or misapplied. Consensus historiography has touted the triumphal Civil Rights era as the long-awaited fulfillment of American promise, simplifying the multiplicity of voices and agendas that characterize it, rendering longer narratives of Black resistance as inessential to
fully explaining the terms through which Civil Rights workers engaged the problem of American democracy. Even the two most recent trends in American history, the “long Civil Rights movement” and “Black Power studies,” are simply improvisations upon this master narrative, ultimately expanding the consensus to different fields, which now includes the Black student movement.

This supposedly self-evident framing of the movement assumes a teleology of Black thought faithful to and acceding to the U.S. founding documents and a recognition of the inevitability of inclusion within the logics of the American nation-state, ideas relying chiefly upon the ambitions of a middle-class component of the Black community. Its modern manifestations are the victorious appellation of the United States as “post-racial.” However, both transnational and African-centered frameworks for understanding the Black American experience would caution us against accepting such easy kinds of assumptions.

In coming to terms with the history of this student protest at Howard University, we would do well to place these students in more nuanced political and cultural constructs than those that have animated the dominant trends in American history thus far. Recent work on Howard University’s activist history simply follows the received triumphalist narrative of the Civil Rights/Black Power era. In these formulations, Black folk rescue the idea of American exceptionalism from the clutches of reaction by overcoming segregation and/or instituting the still-unfinished projects for diversity. In rethinking this framing, we reduce the probability that the history of student movements becomes construed as attempts to provide Black paint to an often overdetermined, hackneyed conception of the “American dream.” Such a move also redefines for the coming generations what “activism” is beyond the imagery and iconography that have been force-fed us by officially sanctioned portrayals of the Civil Rights era. Instead of being led to reproduce the mere imagery of a movement, an alternative narrative would allow Black people to imagine how they might contribute to a living, breathing, actual movement for something larger and more grand, one that is connected to a tradition of “conquering the world by thought and brain and plan.” For when it was all said and done, the 1989 protest rested on assumptions that were against and beyond the motivations of those who have accepted the notion that American ideals were the only ones worth fighting for.
We Are Worth Fighting For is divided into three parts. Part I considers the cultural, social, and political contexts of the student actions of 1989. In contextualizing the movement in this way, we can further glean how the protest was both unique and representative of certain tendencies among Black students across time and space, while maintaining an awareness of the ways it engaged and resisted the dominant political structures at work. Chapter 1 gives a brief overview of student protest at Howard University. The best-known protest on campus occurred in March 1968 and has been somewhat of a model for subsequent actions. This chapter considers how the dominant framings of Black political struggle have affected our understanding of the meaning of student activism at Howard. Chapter 2 charts the evolution of American national politics and tells the story of how its rightward turn converged with James Cheek’s tenure as Howard president and the emergence of Lee Atwater as a political operative at the close of the 1980s. While electoral politics produced Atwater, this chapter shows how his emergence was part of a broader reckoning with questions of race that marked the American century. Chapter 3 examines Black youth movements during the 1980s, giving further context to the political scene of the era. The anti-apartheid movement, the insurgent presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson, and the cultural movement around hip hop provided much needed space for young people to cut their teeth.

Part II is a narrative of the actions leading up to and through the 1989 takeover. Chapter 4 explores the founding of Black Nia F.O.R.C.E (BNF) and its early activities on campus. Founded in January 1988, BNF espoused a nationalist philosophy that combined elements of study, protest, and cultural programs on campus. After hearing of Atwater’s appointment, its leaders were responsible for convening the meetings that led to plans to shut down the university. Chapter 5 covers the actions of the students at Howard’s Charter Day Convocation of 1989. It discusses the development of the demands and the disruption of these activities, which preceded the more militant actions to come. The convocation protest was important, for just as in previous protests, it gave the administration the opportunity to prevent those more militant actions. Just as much, it demonstrated and galvanized support for those
who were still on the sidelines as well as solidarity among those who were outside of the university. Chapter 6 details the events of the Mordecai W. Johnson Administration Building takeover, which occurred days after Charter Day. Along with a narrative of the events, it explores the meaning of direct action within this context, the students’ philosophy of struggle, and the nature of outside support that saved the protest from disastrous results.

Part III closes this story with an assessment of the impact of the protest. Chapter 7 explores both how the students came to understand the meaning of their actions after the protest had been called off, leading to the resignation of President Cheek, and the ways that this shifted campus politics and culture. Chapter 8, the final chapter, reveals the ways that the Howard protest influenced on-campus struggles at other historically Black colleges and universities. It also details the work of BNF at Howard and beyond in later years, showing how BNF members attempted to force permanent changes premised on the spirit of the demands voiced during the 1989 protest, as well as their broader national growth and influence.

The kind of university that BNF and the students who participated in the 1989 protest imagined was one that rested on the reality that Black lives have always mattered. But what to do once that declaration had been made has not been resolved. Their central question remains: What is a Black university?

The Howard student protest of 1989 laid bare the implications of this question in a critical moment in American political history. As the scourge of late capitalism continues to envelop the social environment and as neoliberal alternatives continue to represent the “common sense” of contemporary life, we might think with these student radicals about what kind of future is possible for our people. It is becoming more and more necessary to anchor our futures with such memories. In the face of a higher education industry that continues to fail us, it is quite refreshing to remember in our times of despair that we are heirs to a long tradition of forerunners who said: “No.” And then imagined otherwise.