Chapter 11

It’s Nation Time in NewArk: Amiri Baraka and the Black Power Experiment in Newark, New Jersey

Komozi Woodard

It is time for Beauty and Truth to rule the world again. It is time for the evolved beings to reorder this planet.

—Amiri Baraka, “From: The Book of Life”

In the political field, you have to know at each stage if you are doing the possible or not, and preparing the field for the possible for tomorrow or not. This is the problem.

—Amilcar Cabral, Return to the Source

Pushing many of the feeble organizations aside, thousands of black youth stormed into militant Black Power organizations from coast to coast. Where there were only small Black Power organizations, they filled the ranks and made them bigger. Where there were no Black Power organizations in their locality, they established branches, and in that manner groups such as the Oakland Black Panther Party, the Los Angeles US Organization, and Amiri Baraka’s Committee for a Unified NewArk (CFUN) became national phenomena in 1968.

Because the Black Power movement was experimental, the critical study of Black Power politics must begin with an inquiry into its most important experiments. This chapter is one effort toward that goal. The Black Power period in Newark lasted from 1966 to 1976, embracing both the 1967 Newark...
Rebellion and the 1974 Puerto Rican Rebellion. Alongside the mounting political victories, those developments between 1967 and 1974 consolidated Baraka's standing as a pivotal leader, not only of the Newark black community but also of black America. His ascent to that rank was tied directly to the flowering of the Modern Black Convention Movement. Both locally in Newark and nationally in the U.S., the Modern Black Convention Movement was an essential component of the Black Power experiments, which included the cultural, political, and economic programs proposed and developed by the Black Arts movement, the Black Panther Party, the US Organization, the Republic of New Africa, the Revolutionary Action Movement, the Nation of Islam, the Organization of Afro-American Unity, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and Baraka's Congress of African People. Together, those cultural and political formations galvanized millions of black people in the broadest movement in African American history: High school and college youth organized black student unions, professors and educators created black studies programs, athletes mobilized protests against poverty and racism, workers fashioned militant unions, welfare mothers demanded power and dignity, soldiers refused army discipline, and during prison uprisings such as Attica, politically conscious inmates saluted Malcolm X and George Jackson. In other words, the Black Power movement was so thoroughgoing and the Black Cultural Revolution was so unprecedented that important historians such as Vincent Harding and Manning Marable have reached for such terms as "watershed" and "zenith" to calibrate its sustained impact during the Second Reconstruction in the United States.

So dramatic was Baraka's rise in the political arena that the *New York Times* could not fail to notice that at the March 1972 National Black Political Assembly in Gary, Indiana, "most convention officials acknowledged that ... the 38-year-old Newark native's influence predominated during the convention" and that "no one else had the organization or the strength that he had." In the same vein, Professor Vincent Harding noted Baraka's "tough-minded and powerful presence, based in a highly disciplined, Newark-based black nationalist organization, was the central force in the convention's leadership." Actually, Baraka's core organization had chapters in 25 different cities from coast to coast, not to speak of the tens of thousands of dedicated activists in the allied groups such as the African Liberation Support Committee and the Black Women's United Front. Was all of that after the movement was officially pronounced dead by a number of experts?

In fact, the Black Arts movement, the ghetto uprisings, and an explosive African American sense of identity produced a new generation of Black Power organizations and leadership. The Black Power organizations were fashioned in the aftermath of the urban uprisings that supplied hundreds