Naming Our Own & Claiming Black Womanhood: The Spelman College Protest of 1976

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ABSTRACT
In the spring of 1976 at Spelman College in Atlanta, GA, the all-women's historically Black College (HBCU) became the site of student protest as the student body challenged the college’s Board of Trustees’ failure to appoint a Black woman as president. Resistance to the decision eventuated in the takeover of the Board of Trustee’s meeting that garnered local and national attention as the students demanded a Black woman president. This article explores an omitted account of Spelman College’s rich legacy of social activism that is grounded in the protest efforts of the Black Freedom Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. This article highlights this significant history that is instrumental to the Spelman College 1987 installment of the institution’s first Black woman president, Dr. Johnetta Betsch Cole. Lastly, this work encourages deeper investigations of student/youth revolutionary 1970s activities that challenged structural inequality and heightened awareness of contradictions while promoting social justice.

The Spelman woman has been stereotyped as the ‘Southern Belle’ too long. She has been portrayed as the middle-class, snobbish woman of the ‘yard.’ Let me say that the majority of the Spelman women are ‘down-to-earth’ and are attempting to deal with their many setbacks and hang-ups from a liberated, Black woman’s view.¹

Spelman College Student ‘76, Deborah Bolden

I believe...the future of Spelman is unpredictable because it is dependent on so many unknown variables. For example, there is the question of Spelman’s next president. Will the next president be man or woman? And will he(she) continue to support Spelman’s somewhat conservative reputation or...be more liberal. However, I feel the future of Spelman also depends...on its students...Observing (participation in) the (full employment) march. Spelman is rapidly becoming a conscious-raising experience for Black women.²

Spelman College Student ‘76, Joyce Winters

From April 22 to April 23, 1976, the young Black students, faculty and staff at Spelman College in Atlanta, GA, bravely protested the institution’s failure to hire a Black woman president in its ninety-five years of existence. This courageous act continued the legacy of the national and international Black student movements of the 1960s and 1970s as these young Black women

challenged the College’s paternalistic and conservative traditions in order to voice their opinions and initiate structural change. Demonstrating the attributes of ‘free thinking’ Black women, the students allied with campus supporters to thwart traditions that contradicted or silenced/erased their Black womanhood. The struggle of these students, supporting faculty and staff for self-realization as free thinking black women was inextricably tied to their demand for a Black female president.

The 1976 Spelman student protests are largely unheralded and omitted from the history of student protests of the 1970s, which cannot be considered complete without including this extraordinary narrative. Keepers of historical memory are charged to continually develop and rewrite history as they uncover new information. Therefore, Black history demands the inclusion of holistic narratives for those seeking a medium for political, cultural and social change. This article contends that the significance of this little known 1976 protest history at Spelman College is the intrinsic link to the eventual 1987 appointment of Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole, Spelman’s first Black woman president. Therefore, the arguments guiding this article are threefold: 1) This historic episode of the Black student movement in the 1970s has been largely ignored and forgotten. 2) Black students, staff, and faculty objected to Spelman’s failure to appoint a Black female president, and 3) the failure to have even one Black female president contradicted the Spelman College image and mission of cultivating Black womanhood independent of patriarchal influence.

Spelman College and the legacy of Black women presidents at HBCUs owe a debt of gratitude to the radical activities of proactive students, faculty and staff who struggled against structural inequity.³ This community of change agents chose to harness their progressive concepts of Black womanhood to mobilize and garner support for Black female leadership in general and

³ In this article, the term radical is used to define social activists and activities that emerge to challenge, alter and restructure existing institutional practices and traditions. Recent scholarship that reflects the radical and politically unorthodox positions of Black women in the twentieth century include the seminal collection of Black women and other women of color in the Black Freedom Struggle: Want to Start a Revolution: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle edited by Dayo Gore, Jeanne Theoharis and Komoni Woodward. Also supporting this position on radicalism is the work of Anne M. Valk: Radical Sisters: Second Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.
more specifically at Spelman College. Thus, this account affirms the activities of the 1976 Spelman Family within a historical arc of radical Black women’s activism. The Spelman College 1976 protest activities reflect and uphold the traditions Black women activists who were leaders, participants and supporters of the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, international women’s liberation movements and the anti-colonial struggles in Africa and Latin America.

**PREFACE TO PROTEST: BLACK POWER AND BLACK STUDENTS**

Black women of the Black Freedom Struggle in the 1960s were leaders, supporters, organizers and linchpins in the overall fight to gain full citizenship and human recognition in United States’ political and social systems. Black women, such as Ella Baker, Jewel Mazique, Gloria Richardson, Ethel Minor, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ruby Doris Smith-Robinson, Gwen Patton and countless others gave the Movement their lives in order to advocate for Black folks’ overdue freedom. In student and professional organizations including the National Urban League, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Black Panther Party (BPP), the National Association for Black Students (NABS), and the Student Organization for Black Unity (SOBU), Black women were thought leaders who challenged racism, chauvinism and paternalism to facilitate the success of the overall

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4 As the 1976 Spelman College protest erupted, students, staff and faculty that included women and men of the College coalesced their efforts to protest the actions of the Spelman College Board of Trustees. These persons became known as the ‘Spelman Family.’ Usage of this phrase throughout this article reflects the core group of these protesters that initiated the lock-in and the demands and ultimately faced the consequences of being the leaders of the protest activities.

5 Studies that acknowledge the socio-political contributions of Black women and women of color include *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement* edited by Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin; *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement* edited by Peter J. Ling, John Ling and Sharon Monteith; *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* by Ashley D. Farmer; *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* by Keisha N. Blain; *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* by Robyn C. Spencer; and *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism and Making of Black Left Communism* by Erik S. McDuffie.
Movement. While battling negative notions of Black female sexuality and fighting male-defined concepts of femininity and motherhood, Black women encountered critical limitations as they tried to advance during the Black Freedom Struggle. While in many cases Black women may have been held in high esteem as elders and considered 'wise,' their gender prevented them from exercising consistent and diverse leadership roles in the upper echelons of prominent organizations. An alarming example of this is the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom; not one single woman was programmed to speak, despite the fact that countless Black women had risked their lives for the Movement.

Nationally, after student organizations like SNCC called for Black power and demanded an end to the Vietnam War in 1966, an upsurge of political activity by Black students increased to challenge militarism, warmongering, local discrimination and abuses of power on state and federal levels. After the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King on April 4, 1968, Black youth and students took to the streets and took over their college campuses nationwide to demand an end to marginalization and discrimination at traditionally white institutions (TWI). Across the nation, Black students took over numerous administration buildings to voice their displeasure with institutional racism and the dearth of Black faculty at TWI’s. Colleges and universities such as Cornell, Northwestern, Duke, Columbia, San Francisco State College and the University of Illinois became battlegrounds for Black student protests in higher education. In the South at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) such as Howard University, Fisk University, Alcorn

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6 Scholarship that is significant in historicizing the leadership qualities and contributions of Black women as organizational and thought leaders during the twentieth century include The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam by Ula Taylor. For political biographies that are critical to explicating the silenced contributions of Black women as leaders, organizers and mentors to the Black Freedom Struggle see Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision and also Eslanda, both by Barbara Ransby. Scholar Gerald Horne also contributes to the centering of Black women in the Black freedom struggle with his text, Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham DuBois.

State University, Dillard University, Texas Southern University, Jackson State College, and South Carolina State University, Black students adopted Black power positions that challenged Black middle-class conservatism and the perceived dictatorships of Black college presidents (mainly Black men). Militant Black students described their leaders as ‘Uncle Toms’ and/or disconnected from Black communities that surrounded most HBCUs. These students challenged ‘old guard’ thinking as Black consciousness continued to increase at the close of the 1960s. Historian Ibram X. Kendi [Rogers], echoes this point in his work, *The Black Campus Movement*:

At HBCUs, the faculty bodies were mostly white, and included many conservative African Americans. At Tougaloo in 1968, 60 percent of the professors were still white...Most of the professors at Clark (Atlanta) were white, and none of the shared art and psychology instructors at the Atlanta University Center were African American in 1968. The vast majority of HBCU boards of trustees were either all-white or majority white, and they employed African American presidents that were often conservative and paternalistic.

The resistance to such conservatism went beyond mere conversation for student-activists in Atlanta. With an opulent legacy in the Civil Rights Movement, Atlanta was a political base for SNCC activism and the overall Atlanta Student Movement. Thus, by the late 1960s, the spirit and fervor of student and community protest in the Atlanta University Center (AUC) were very much alive in students who were deeply influenced by the Black Power movement. A noteworthy example of student mobilization in the AUC is reflected in the April 18 - 19, 1969 student protests that demanded trustees consolidate the six HBCUs of the Atlanta University Center (Spelman

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10 For a critical examination of the rich history of the Atlanta Student Movement, see the work of Winston A. Grady Willis, *Challenging U.S. Apartheid: Atlanta and Black Struggles for Human Rights, 1960-1977*. Also, for a comprehensive examination of the historical and political developments of SNCC, see the work of Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*. 6
College, Morehouse College, Clark College, Atlanta University, Morris Brown College, and the Interdenominational Theological Center) into one major all-black university. Students staged a twenty-nine-hour lock-in of the Morehouse College Board of Trustees and demanded an all-Black University named after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Students spray-painted “Black Control of Black Schools” and “Martin Luther King University – Now” on the side of campus buildings. Students representing Spelman College, Clark College, Morris Brown College, and Morehouse College joined in solidarity to demand institutional and curricular change in the AUC. From the protesters, a core leadership of nine students emerged and identified themselves as the “Concerned Students” of the AUC. Their institutional affiliations included Clark College, Morris Brown College, students from Morehouse College, Spelman College and one professor from Spelman College.11

Though the siege was unsuccessful, the actions echoed a sentiment regarding the direction of the historically Black institutions of the AUC. In a May 8, 1969, communication disseminated from the Organization for Black Unity Now, the organization listed a number of student-generated grievances that had been festering throughout the institutions of the AUC. The document, with separate sections for each college, included the following in the Spelman College section: “How do you feel about the administration’s maternal attitude toward you?” and “On your board of trustees the white members still outnumber the Black members four to one.”12 The activities of the lock-in

11 John H. Britton, “Freshmen Take Proud Morehouse Through Changes”, Jet Magazine, May 8, 1969; “Atlanta University Faculty Statement on Campus Unrest”, n.d. Box 106, Folder April Lockin Spelman College Archives, Atlanta, Georgia; For more on this account, see the autobiography of then Morehouse president, Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, Born to Rebel: An Autobiography by Benjamin Elijah Mays, 313-315 (2003). Mays recalled being berated by the student protesters and during the ordeal being called an “Uncle Tom” due to a ‘Honors’ day speech he delivered at Spelman College in which he relayed to the audience that, “...if we expect to get $100 million from Negroes (the conservative estimate to build a university for ten thousand Black students) we might as well forget it because Negroes did not have the economic resources to put up that much money – and if they have it, I doubted they would give it.”

12 “Organization for Black Unity Now communication,” May 8, 1969 n.d. Box 106, Folder April Lockin Spelman College Archives, Atlanta, Georgia. For a first-person account of the AUC takeover, see the Brailsford R. Brazeal papers, Box 64 restricted files. The Brazeal papers are located at the Robert F. Woodruff Library Archives and Special Collections This file contains a statement of account that the witness describes as an “imprisonment” was delivered to the Circuit Court of Cook County on May 16, 1969. Much of the account refers to the collective protesters as the “McWhorter Group” after the professor Gerald McWhorter who was identified as the leader and coordinator of the “Concerned Students” protesters who demanded a Black university in homage to the slain Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
became reflective of a critical mass of Black students and radical activity that challenged the many conservative perceptions of the AUC as a conservative Black middle-class factory for elites and socialites. More importantly, the four Spelman women who participated in the events of April 1969 established that the women of Spelman were ready and able to engage in radical participation for their political convictions.

By the early to mid 1970s, the national student movement activities and organizations such as SNCC that defined the previous era were defunct. The vestiges of the Civil Rights Movement and the era of Black Power transitioned to the political arena as Blacks sought political power in state and local government nationwide. In 1973 the Black political power of Atlanta voters elected Maynard Jackson to become the first Black mayor to preside over a major city in the South. Atlanta continued to become a national magnet for Black folks seeking job opportunities in the new Black mecca. More importantly, more middle-class and working class Black youth ventured South from the major metropolitan cities of Oakland, Los Angeles, Detroit, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington D.C to attend school throughout the AUC for an HBCU higher educational experience at Spelman, Morehouse, Morris Brown, Clark College and Atlanta University. Many of these students had family in the South and were coming South to their familial roots to attend school. Additionally, beyond the patterns of Black ‘reverse migration,’ the legacy of systemic racism provided slow transition into TWIs and many Black students still chose to attend college South of the Mason-Dixon line. But if radicalism had softened into political participation, students arriving at southern schools still had been influenced by the racial political ideologies of the Black Panther Party, Friends of SNCC Chapters, the Revolutionary Action

McWhorter, who by 1969 changed his name to Abdul Alkalimat expressed his sentiments for a Black University in an article published in the March 1968 edition of the Negro Digest/Black World. For more on the insight of McWhorter/Alkalimat see the article, “The Nature and Needs of the Black University” Negro Digest/Black World Vol 17. No.5.

Movement and the many Black organizations that were influenced by the New Left Movement, which arguably became a catalyst furthering disputes over race and class positionality.¹⁴

As SNCC and other movements lost momentum, the New Left Movement emerged accompanied by a call for Black feminist ideology and organizing to exact a presence of Black woman’s activist leadership in a male-centric Black Freedom Movement, which lauded the ‘leadership’ authority of men while the bedrock activities of organizing and strategic planning were shared equally if not more often by the sweat equity of Black woman activists in a plethora of organizations around the country. In 1968, Black women activists of SNCC formed the Black Women’s Liberation Committee (BWLC) to address the sexism and lack of pronounced leadership and acknowledgement of Black woman activists. As the BWLC matured, the organization morphed into the Black Women’s Alliance (BWA) by 1969. While working and organizing for women’s rights and justice, the coalition building of the BWA evolved to include Puerto Rican women activists. By 1970 the push to expand the organizational membership of the BWA led to the

¹⁴ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, The Black Church and the African American Experience. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 112; There is plethora of scholarship that chronicles Black migration patterns from South to North and also narratives that explicate the familial relationships of Black folks and the alternating patterns of movement from North to South throughout the twentieth century. See, “Atlanta: New Mecca for Young Blacks,” Ebony Magazine, September 1973, 62-68; also see the following: The Warmth of Other Suns by Isabelle Wilkerson and the work of Timuel Black, Bridges of Memory: Chicago’s Second Generation of Black Migration (Vols I & II); Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City by St. Clair Drake and Horace Clayton; For work on several radical Black organizations and the New Left of the late 1960s and early 1970s, see: Fighting for Our Place in the Sun: Malcolm X and the Radicalization of the Black Student Movement 1960-1973 by Richard D. Benson; Revolution in the Air: 1960s Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che by Max Elbaum; The East is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Imagination by Taj Frazier. Also, regarding the white Left, see the pioneering work of Kirkpatrick Sale, SDS (1973) which arguably provides the most comprehensive history and account of the organization’s political evolution. SDS became vitally important in the influences of the Black Liberation Movement during the era of Black Power. In 1968, SDS explicitly established policy regarding Black Liberation organizations. In terms of giving top priority, the SDS policy stated that, “We must institute programs of internal education on racism, the history of the Black people in this country, and the history of the Black liberation movement...We should give physical and financial aid to those Black people now the object of State repression.” Economic by white Left organizations such as SDS provided political influence and resources as the Black liberation struggle advanced into the 1970s. Consequently, an increase of Black student groups and activist organizations teased with the ideations of Socialism and Marxist-Leninism in their analysis of socio-political challenges of Black people in the US and regarding global Black liberation from thongs of imperialism. See also, SDS: 101 From the Inside (1998) by Dennis O’Neil for the Student Commission of Freedom Road Socialist Organization.
formation of the newly formed Third World Women’s Alliance (TWWA).\(^\text{15}\) That same year, the TWWA continued a proactive stance directed towards the uplift of Black women with the creation of the historic treatise, the Black Women’s Manifesto. Created by activists Eleanor Holmes Norton, Maxine Williams, Frances Beal and Linda LaRue, the Black Women’s Manifesto attacked the cooperative roles of racism, patriarchy and capitalism, noting that the centrally led White women’s ‘Liberation Movement’ could not speak for the historical or socio-political positionality of Black women. While the Black woman who had historically worked and struggled with Black men from ‘can’t see in the morning ‘til can’t see at night,’\(^\text{16}\) their political stances were not formulated to compete or contend with Black men but to inform the overall movement of their plight. These women sought global allegiances with women of the third world to advocate for the challenges of women of color.\(^\text{17}\) More specifically the Black Women’s Manifesto posited that

The Black woman is demanding a new set of female definitions and recognition of herself as a citizen, companion and confidant not a matriarchal villain or a step stool baby-maker. Role integration advocates the complimentary recognition of man and woman, not the competitive recognition of same.\(^\text{18}\)

The Black Women’s Manifesto transcended the mere intentions of being primarily a TWWA organizational document, but the treatise became a source of curriculum for the instruction of women and men of the movement requiring edification on the central role and importance of Black women naming their own and defining the multifaceted roles of Black womanhood. As a tool of consciousness raising, the manifesto complemented the global support and literature of the 1972 “Free Angela Davis Campaign” and the seminal writings of Toni Cade Bambara, such as the

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\(^{17}\) Third World Women’s Alliance, “Black Women’s Manifesto,” 10, 16-17, Duke University Archives, Women’s Liberation Print Culture.

groundbreaking 1970 Black feminist work, *Black Woman* that interrupted the paternalistic narratives of the 1960s Black Freedom Movement. Additionally, Toni Cade’s 1974 arrival in Atlanta converged with Black women activist organizations such as the Sojourner South activists who supported women’s issues while challenging institutional and structural inequalities. \(^{19}\) Also significant in the socio-political influences of Black woman were the writings of Joyce Ladner, who while working at the famed Institute of the Black World (IBW) in Atlanta, produced the groundbreaking book, *Tomorrow’s Tomorrow: The Black Woman*. Released in 1971, Ladner countered the ‘traditional’ work of white sociology in framing the nuances and challenges of Black life. As a vital member of the IBW think-tank, Ladner contributed significantly to the development and consciousness-raising of Black women.

Consequently, these targeted political elements for the support of Black women in Atlanta created a ripe climate of Black women’s activism that highly influenced young Black women throughout the higher education consortium of the Atlanta University Center by the mid 1970s.\(^{20}\)

Scholar-activist-professors, organizers, student/youth organizations continued to evolve politically

\(^{19}\) Winston A. Grady-Willis, *Challenging U.S. Apartheid: Atlanta and Black Struggles for Human Rights 1960-1977*, (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2006), 200-204; Liberation News Service, “Angela, Sister You are Welcomed in this House”; Ernesto Gonzalez Bermejo, “The World Watches Angela”, text of an interview with Fania Jordan, sister of Angela Davis. Duke University Archives, Women’s Liberation Movement Print Culture; The formal and informal exposure of the histories and socio-political contribution of Black women were increased through the writings of activists such as, “Black Women’s Liberation” by Maxine Williams and Pamela Newman. These writings became vital in the political education of activists and especially young Black women at the infancy of their political activism across the country. Organizations such as the Third World Women’s Alliance played a critical role in such political education advancements and as a professional women’s organization, the TWWA took an express objective to provide both organizational and political education to continue the work of consciousness raising. For more information on the founding, developments and legacy of the TWWA, see the work of Stephen Ward, “The Third World Women’s Alliance: Black Feminist Radicalism and Black Power Politics” found in, *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights – Black Power Era* (2006), edited by Peniel E. Joseph.


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in Atlanta and the Black women of Spelman College largely benefited from these seeds of change. These legacies of such radical activity became critically important and politically influential to the types of students who would later emerge as participants in the Spelman College protest of 1976.

**ADVOCATING FOR CHANGE**

Founded in 1881 by missionary society aid of the prestigious industrialist, John D. Rockefeller Sr. and The Rockefeller Foundation, Spelman College was established to train young Black women to become nurses and schoolteachers.\(^{21}\) Traditions of the College were deeply reflected in the four white women presidents who held the post of college president in succession from the institution’s founding in 1881 until Ms. Florence M. Read’s retirement in 1953.\(^{22}\) But nearly a hundred years later in 1976, the Spelman community was eager to identify leadership that reflected the racial, ethnic, and cultural demographics of its Black female students. In early April 1975, after 23 years at the helm of the prestigious institution, Dr. Albert Manley, the first Black and first male president of Spelman College, announced his retirement effective at the close of next academic year, June 30, 1976.\(^{23}\) Upon the announcement, the Spelman College community anticipated that the eras of white female and Black male presidencies would finally end. Many of the institution’s alumnæ, faculty and students readied the campus for the new presidential search process for what many believed to be the pursuit for an exceptional Black woman candidate.\(^{24}\)

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\(^{24}\) Interview by Dr. Cynthia Spence (Spelman alumna and student observer during the 1976 campus protest), August 11, 2017.
Ironically, the rest of the nation echoed this sentiment as the impact of the Women’s liberation movement took root in higher education:

A report in the spring 1976 publication of the Association of American Colleges reported that ‘women’s colleges practice what they preach.’ By the time several women’s colleges had demonstrated their faith in the leadership ability of women by choosing women presidents. Colleges mentioned as having recently selected women presidents included Wilson College, PA; Smith College, MA; Goucher College, MD; Barnard College, NY; and Wheaton College, MA. At this time, the University of Chicago had also chosen its first female president, Hanna Gray. However, it was noted in the same report that less than five percent of colleges and universities in the United States were headed by women.25

By the mid 1970’s the general Spelman community alone had produced an overwhelming number of Black women in national service positions in higher education to make the appointment of a Black woman president a seamless process. At this juncture, the students, faculty and staff of the College were confident and ready for a paradigm shift at Spelman College. Thus, following Manley’s retirement announcement, the Spelman College Board of Trustees conducted a national search in February 1976 to identify top candidates for the next college prexy. After narrowing the applicant pool from 2200 applicants down to the final three top candidates for the post, on-campus visits ensued on February 14 and 15, 1976. As the candidates descended upon the Atlanta HBCU campus, various groups that expressed their vested interests spoke with the candidates and evaluated their varying philosophies on leadership pertaining to Black women and HBCUs.26 By March 22nd of that year the overwhelming majority of the Spelman College community readied in anxious anticipation for a Black woman to be identified to lead the college after the tenure of Dr. Manley. The hot topic of discussion pervaded student dorms. However, for many of the students who confidently assumed that the transition of leadership would be to a Black woman became leery as the days passed that spring semester. In taking the lead in raising concerns were approximately

26 Ibid, 95.
twenty-five first year Spelman women who were frustrated to witness the second appearance of Dr. Donald Steward on campus as a potential selection of the College's Board of Trustees. By April 1st, the Spelman Student Government Association (SGA) was charged with assuming the leadership role in organizing campus wide and community support to demand a Black woman president. However, a week prior to the SGA's mobilization, an alternate collective began to advance petitions to install a Black woman president. This petition stated

We the undersign believe that the essence of Spelman College is Black womanhood and that the future of the college depends on loyalty to this concept. Hence, we believe that the leadership position of college president should be centered in the personage of a Black female. To go against this precept is to be false to the values that Spelman has embedded in this student body over the past ninety-five years.  

By April 2nd, the SGA leadership spearheaded the efforts to communicate the Spelman students' concerns regarding the future leadership of the College. The Spelman SGA began an aggressive campaign to organize support for the selection of a Black woman president of the College. From these efforts, the SGA was invited by the College President's administrative staff to a luncheon on Sunday April 4th to present the campus-wide student grievances on the matter. The SGA presented position papers and statements while maintaining an unwavering position that 'nothing less than a Black woman president would be accepted by the Spelman student body.' In keeping with the momentum, on April 6th, the SGA organized a mass student meeting to keep the student body abreast of activities and continue strategizing for the selection of a Black woman president. Students

27 Jeta Edwards & Margaret Lee, “Students Petition for Black Woman President”, Spelman Spotlight, April 1976, 1, 19; Edwards and Lee, as contributors to the school news organ, Spelman Spotlight were visible activists in the 1976 campus protests. Additionally, they were able to communicate a campus-wide sentiment with their Spelman sisters through the school newspaper which became a critical tool for consciousness raising for Black woman of the college. An important example of this can be located in the same April 1976 issue on the article, “Blood Money Revisited”. This article was critical of the college financial ties to foundations such as Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation which both maintained integral ties of business investments to the South African Apartheid government. Such pieces in the Spelman Spotlight were vital in the transnational consciousness raising for the students of Spelman College as more young Black women became actively engaged in the Women's Liberation Movement and with the continuation of the Anti-Apartheid Movement that transitioned into the 1980s.

28 Ibid, 19.
responded positively, and the SGA continued their position as vanguard by organizing additional workshop meetings a few days later on April 8th. 29

Dissatisfied with the Search Committee's lack of communication, a critical mass of student representatives requested an open meeting be held in Sisters Chapel on April 12. The meeting, which lasted five hours, failed to resolve the apparent contention and dissatisfaction on Spelman's campus. The students, faculty and staff lobbied for the Search Committee to be composed of students from every class rank, faculty members from each division, two non-teaching faculty, one staff member, two alumnae and the incumbent president. 30 According to an official report of the occurrences, "These events revealed that the attempts of the Spelman Family to provide input had been meaningless and an exercise in futility. This revelation [was] made even stronger by the fact that the representatives were not given the opportunity to present final reports to their constituents." 31 Though frustrated by the action or lack thereof of the Search Committee, the campus activists expanded the efforts of the petition created just days earlier on April 11th and constructed "The Spelman Family Position Statement" and continued to mobilize campus efforts in vying for Spelman's first Black woman president. These efforts led to an overwhelming 319 favorable ballots casted from students, faculty and staff for a Black woman president. Unfortunately, according to the autobiographical account of Dr. Albert Manley regarding the process, "The Search Committee itself did not feel the need to get alternative perspectives from students, faculty, and alumnae," and the Executive Committee of the board expressed that "input from other sources did not seem essential in making a decision." 32

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29 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Manley, A Legacy Continues, 97.
However, prior to the official announcement of the next president that spring, the general campus learned that the next appointment would not be a Black woman but would most likely be another Black man, Dr. Donald Stewart, a dean of the University of Pennsylvania. Realizing their voices had not been heard and that the Board had chosen to discount their positions as Black women and as institutional citizens, the concerned students, staff and faculty of Spelman decided to take matters into their own hands.

Anticipating the Spelman College Board of Trustees' resistance to the appeals for a Black woman president, a cadre of the students and faculty prepared to protest in the event that a Black woman was not nominated. During an interview, Spelman alumna and former student protest leader Dr. Margaret Lee noted that prior to the protest, she and other students visited the home of the outgoing president, Dr. Albert Manley and his wife, Dr. Audrey Forbes Manley, to express their concerns and seek counsel on how to proceed with their protest actions. The Manley's, who totally supported the student and faculty protest, provided these activist women with critical mentorship for the radical actions that were about to ensue.33

THE TIME IS NOW OR NEVER

On the morning of Thursday April 22, 1976, the Spelman College Board met and approved the appointment of Dr. Donald Stewart of the University of Pennsylvania to succeed Dr. Manley after his retirement in June of that same year. The trustees included Mrs. Laura Rockefeller Chasin (niece of Vice-President Nelson Rockefeller), Attorney Marion Wright Edelman, a former student leader at Spelman during the mid-1960s, Dr. Albert Manley, Dr. Eleanor Franklin of Howard University (a candidate for the Spelman presidency), and Board chairman Frances Rogers, an

33 Interview with Margaret Lee, September 1, 2017. (in author’s possession)
affluent New York architect.\textsuperscript{34} Witnessing the Board's approval were the student and faculty representatives who had been engaged in the search process. After the conclusion of the morning session, the Board decided to break for lunch and asked the students and faculty to leave. Disgruntled and unsatisfied with the dismissive tactics of the Board and the overall outcome, the protesting students and faculty demanded that the Board postpone and reconsider their decision. The overwhelming sentiment amongst the Spelman community was dissatisfaction with the Board's selection. The basic, modest question for many of the students, staff and faculty of the Spelman community was how could the Board of Trustees substantiate that there were no qualified Black women available to lead the all Black women's institution? None of the excuses offered as answers satisfied the many students, faculty and staff who were primed for the appointment of a Black woman college president.

Finally, exhausted by additional efforts to convince the Spelman College Board, these women decided to take direct action. Jeta Edwards, a senior philosophy major at the time declared, "We're going to make the trustees believe that Spelman women mean business."\textsuperscript{35} To emphasize the gravity of their demands, they locked up all eighteen Board members in the conference room.\textsuperscript{36} Using rope bought and supplied by faculty member Mrs. Millicent Dobbs Jordan and College Minister Reverend Norman Rates, the students and faculty tied the conference door and demanded that the Board begin an entirely new presidential search. Those protesting also demanded "the inclusion of student, faculty and alumnae with voting rights on the selection committee and a pledge of no reprisals against those who took part in the demonstration."\textsuperscript{37}

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\item \textsuperscript{35} "Students Free 14 Trustees Held at College for Black Women," \textit{New York Times}, April 24, 1976.
\item \textsuperscript{37} "Spelman Trustees Vow to Reconsider Decision to Ok Dr. Stewart as Prexy," \textit{Atlanta Daily World}, April 27, 1976: 1.
\end{itemize}
These radical Black women, numbering less than fifty, identified themselves as the “Concerned Spelman College Family.” The protest leaders included senior students Margaret Lee and Jeta Edwards. The faculty and staff members supporting the students included Beverly Guy-Sheftall, who was at the time an untenured junior faculty member as well as Reverend Norman Rates and Millicent Dobbs Jordan, the aunt of Atlanta’s first Black mayor Maynard Jackson. As the press arrived and took statements, Mrs. Dobbs Jordan commented to a reporter from Jet Magazine that the protest “was a gratifying and heartwarming effort in arousing attention to the issue that a Black woman can be a capable college president.” Dobbs Jordan also expressed her support by chasing a security guard away and helping several students tie ropes around the doorknobs of the trustees’ meeting room. Of the Spelman Family protesters, “one faction of the coalition wanted simply the best qualified candidate for president, preferably a woman, while others were demanding a woman only to head the 1,244-student college [sic].”

While allowing the detained Board members water, cereal and milk, and a trash can with toilet paper for a makeshift toilet, Spelman protesters communicated with the trustees by notes and walkie-talkies. Some of the board members received prior intel on the possibilities of a lock-in and some of them brought cookies, apples, and sandwiches. Many of the members kept occupied with card games and needlepoint. Outside the boardroom, protesters continued to gain campus wide momentum and support from students, faculty and staff who corralled in the student center and eventually stayed the evening to show solidarity for the lock-in of the trustees. In addition to

38 “Held as Hostages, Trustees Yield to Angry Spelmanites,” 22-23; In 1976, Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, a junior untenured faculty member at Spelman College joined in the protest against the Board of Trustees over their decision to end the presidential search for a Black woman president. Sheftall’s work and action during the protest of 1976 contributed to critical women’s studies at the College led to the founding of the Spelman College Women’s Research and Resource Center, the first at an HBCU, of which she became the founding director.


40 Interview with Dr. Margaret Lee, conducted with author, August 11, 2017.

faculty and staff, members of the Atlanta Civil Rights establishment arrived on campus to support the students; these included Dr. Martin Luther King, Sr., former Executive Director of the SCLC Congressman Andrew Young (D-GA), and the “God Father of Soul” himself, Augusta native James Brown, who informed the press that as a concerned citizen he supported the protesters 1000%.42

Throughout this protest, the Spelman women refused to accept that there were no black women qualified to lead their institution. After all, for years they had been taught to live the ideals of strong, black womanist leadership. The institution and its faculty insisted that women were not only capable of intellectual and creative leadership but were obligated to serve their communities and promote social change. If Spelman women were expected to be models of intellectual and moral strength, how could they not have such a model at the helm of their institution?

While the trustees were locked in their boardroom, Spelman students at the Manley Center camped out in the hallway, stood outside of the conference room and mobilized on campus, picketing with signs that read, “72 yrs WHITE WOMEN, 23 yrs BLACK MAN = 95 yrs DOMINATION” and “TAKE THE ‘MAN’ OUT OF ‘SPEL’man.” Students, faculty and staff overran the Manley Student Center en mass while Spelman student leaders gathered outside the boardroom speaking to the larger crowd with a mega-horn to spur the protest activity.43 Dr. Jane Browning, sociology professor at Spelman, expressed her desire for Black woman leadership at Spelman when she informed a reporter that “and now, I can’t believe that I must say it to you. Let me have myself in front of me to make the decisions.”44 Echoing Browning’s comments were those of staff member Norah McNiven, who informed a reporter that “this school has been here for

42 “Students Lock Up Georgia College Board in Demand for a Black Woman President,” Los Angeles Times, April 24, 1976; “Coeds Keep Trustees Locked in Conference”, Columbia Missourian Newspaper, April 24, 1976; “Students Win Tug of War,” 13; At the time of the Spelman College lockin, Congressman Andrew Young was then the first Black Congressman from GA since Reconstruction. Young later became mayor of Atlanta in 1981.
43 “Held as Hostages, Trustees Yield to Angry Spelmanites,” 22-23; Also, additional and vital information on the historical underpinnings of the College, see the work of, Yolanda L. Watson and Sheila T. Gregory Daring to Educate: The Legacy of the Early Spelman College Presidents (2005).
44 “Students Lock Up Georgia College Board in Demand for a Black Woman President.”
ninety-five years. To say there are no qualified Black women to be president, well, you might as well close us down."45

After nearly twenty-six hours of holding the trustees, on Friday, April 23, the Spelman College Family protesters released the board members. As a condition of the release, the trustees provided a signed agreement to reconvene and discuss the dispute within a ten-day period. As the trustees exited the conference room of the Manley Student Center, they were forced to walk over the outstretched legs of nearly two hundred Spelman students who were sitting in the hallway singing "We Shall Overcome." Five of the trustees attempting to leave campus were then chased by about five hundred Spelman students shouting, "You're not going to go." However, student leader Jeta Edwards neutralized the additional activity by reminding the crowd of students that "we set them free, now we must let them go free." Edwards also informed the crowd that "they have given us a written agreement...so let them go."46 With faith that their efforts would yield the intended change, the Spelman College protest group prepared to begin the next phase of negotiations. However, the Spelman College Family protesters would be met with disappointing news from the Board of Trustees.

In response to the national attention received from the protest activities, supporters and alumnae alike from around the country forwarded telegrams and letters of support and disapproval for the protesters' actions. A communication from Ida J. Curry, President of the New York Spelman Club "strongly urged everyone to dispense with this type of demonstration and bring our college back to normalcy. We are confident that the better judgment expected of Spelman will prevail."47 Jewell J. Cooke's telegram to Dr. Manley was equally as stern as she chided the protest activities by

45 "Hostages, Trustees Yield to Angry Spelmanites," 22.
46 "Spelman Trustees Vow to Reconsider Decision to Ok Dr. Stewart as Prexy," Atlanta Daily World, April 27, 1976: 1.
47 "Ida J. Curry correspondence to Dr. Albert A. Manley," May 1, 1976, Box 106, Folder April Lockin, Spelman College Archives, Atlanta, Georgia.
stating, "Miss Giles, Miss Packard, Mrs. Laura Spelman Rockefeller and Miss Lucy Spelman must have been disturbed in their resting places...as an interested former student I trust that you will give due reward to those perpetrators under your jurisdiction."48 However, protest supporters such as Joyce Young Shelby, class of '68 proclaimed "this is the day—indeed, the age of women...it comes as a slap in the face that a man—any man— is being asked to serve as president of this country's most outstanding institution for Black women."49 Alice A. Deck, class of '72, commented "considering the fact that Black women have made more important contributions both as administrators and teachers to American colleges and universities, I find it hard to believe that there are not at least two or three women in this country qualified to fill the position."50 The seven-page hand written letter of Mary Louise Gordon, class of '41 spoke volumes in her note to Dr. Manley that said "it is time for a Black female or Black woman to head Spelman College because there is an urgent need that Black women have an educated, as well as dedicated woman to emulate."51

However, despite the outpour of sentiments to install a Black woman for the post, the Board remained steadfast in their initial choice. After the agreed upon ten-day grace period, the trustees upheld their decision to appoint Dr. Donald Stewart who accepted the position and in May of 1976 became the second Black male and sixth president of Spelman College. Aware of the climate and challenges of entering into the post amidst the protests against the selection of another male president, Stewart informed a reporter that "the protesters are completely within their rights to request a woman," but added "I can’t change my sex."52 Though Stewart accepted the position with

48 "Jewell J. Cooke correspondence to Dr. Albert A. Manley," May 1, 1976, Box 106, Folder April Lockin, Spelman College Archives, Atlanta, Georgia.
49 "Joyce Young Shelby correspondence to Dr. Albert A. Manley," April 28, 1976, Box 106, Folder April Lockin, Spelman College Archives, Atlanta, Georgia.
50 "Alice A. Deck correspondence to Dr. Albert A. Manley," April 28, 1976, Box 106, Folder April Lockin, Spelman College Archives, Atlanta, Georgia.
51 "Mary Louise Gordon correspondence to Dr. Albert A. Manley," May 6, 1976, Box 106, Folder April Lockin, Spelman College Archives, Atlanta, Georgia.
an eagerness to improve the financial standing and national notoriety of the institution, he was keenly aware of the mixed sentiments emanating from the Spelman community. Stewart’s tenure as chief administrator from 1976 until 1987 is acknowledged as a successful period in the College’s history. Spelman’s endowment increased from $9.9 million to $41 million, and Stewart is credited with providing the College with academic and fiscal stability. However, as Stewart noted, and as the entire Spelman Community came to acknowledge, his retirement would mark the end of an era of male and/or non-black leadership.

GROUNDINGS OF THE PROTEST: AN ENDURING LEGACY

The fires ignited by the protesters of 1976 were far from extinguished and facilitated a national platform to usher in Spelman’s first Black woman president in 1987, Dr. Johnnetta Betsch Cole. An anthropologist by training, Dr. Cole was veteran, tenured professor with degrees from Oberlin College in Ohio and graduate training from Northwestern University. Cole boasted the keen ability to establish and develop departments as an administrative juggernaut who was responsible for cofounding one the nation’s first Black Studies programs at Washington State University. She also held faculty and administrative posts at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and Hunter College in New York City prior to arriving at Spelman College in 1987.

However, the arrival of Dr. Cole arguably came during the height of 1980s American conservative movement led by the chief gardener of the nation, President Ronald Reagan. Reagan, whose campaign a mantra was “Let’s Make America Great Again,” successfully seized the throne of the presidency in 1981. His election marked the beginning of a decade of retrenchment from

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the civil rights gains of the 1960s. Reagan’s “Trickle-Down” economic policies increased the White-Black wealth-income gulf, which subjected Black America to a nadir of social declination that yearned for the mobilizations of the 1960s. However, this resurrection of the Black Freedom Struggle came in the form of an increase of Black youth attending college during a decade most noted for Black America’s victimization with the crack epidemic, urban blight, and Reaganomics. Yet, Black youth emerged from this era with targeted interests of attending HBCU’s to take advantage of social, academic, political and cultural refuge in institutions throughout the South. Such factors as ‘The Cosby effect’ (*Cosby Show* 1984 & spin-off *A Different World* 1987-1993) on Black youth media consumption in-turn projected college attendance as viable option for Black youth seeking (upward mobility? Complete the sentence). Dr. Cole’s historic arrival at Spelman College not only coalesced with these social and political events, but it also helped to validate the Black experience at HBCUs via Black leadership; this moment became a symbol of hope as she received the reins of the Spelman College presidency in 1987.56

Dr. Cole, who was affectionately referred to as “Sister President” or “Sista Prez” increased the endowment of Spelman College from $40 million to approximately $143 million, placing Spelman in the “top ten of the one hundred top colleges rated by *Money* magazine.”57 Cole’s arrival in 1987 marked the beginning of a new era for Spelman College and concretized the HBCU as a vanguard of liberal arts colleges on a national and international scale. However, in the midst of acknowledging the accomplishment bestowed on the vanguard institution, students, alumnae, and the larger contemporary Spelman College community must always acknowledge the all-important protest history of the institution. The courageous and radical students of the Spelman College

Family of 1976 protested and critically questioned if and how Black woman leadership would be defined by Black women in principle and practice in the mid-1970s. Professor of History Robert Cohen echoes this sentiment in his timely account *Howard Zinn’s Southern Diary*, which chronicles the life of late activist and former Spelman faculty member Howard Zinn. Cohen posits

...The student protest of 1976 paved the way for Johnetta Betsch Cole to become Steward’s successor in 1987. It was not merely that Cole was a Black woman that made the appointment so historic but also that she was an influential feminist scholar and a radical who believed in faculty governance, and so would establish a faculty council and promote a democratic ethos at Spelman.58

As a result of protesters’ gallant efforts, Dr. Johnetta Betsch Cole’s presidency at this premiere Black women’s institution became a reality and lasted from 1987 until 1997 as well as the presidencies of the three succeeding Black women: Audrey Forbes Manley (1997 – 2002 wife of the former college president Dr. Albert Manley), Beverly Daniel Tatum (2002 – 2015) and Mary Schmidt Campbell (2015 – present)

Ultimately, the actions of the Spelman College Family protesters were more than actions of disapproval. These Black women demanded to be heard and to be defined on their terms as institutional citizens who were loyal but critical of oppressive traditions. These women challenged traditional norms of being ‘lady like’ and structured obstacles upheld by racist and sexist policy that has historically dismissed Black women.59 Founder of the Spelman College Women’s Research and Resource Center, Professor Beverly Guy-Sheftall echoes this sentiment in her reflection and analysis of the 1976 protest events,  

It was the first time that students had mobilized around an explicitly feminist agenda...in this case, that Spelman's leadership should reflect who we are as a women's college. I believe that this mobilization also paved the way for the appointment of Johnetta Cole as the first African American president of Spelman College...current students should know about the students

58 Robert Cohen, *Howard Zinn’s Southern Diary: Sit-Ins, Civil Rights, and Black Women’s Student Activism*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 194
who participated in the lock-in and our indebtedness to them with respect to the evolution of Spelman College as a "progressive" Black women's college, not just a women's college.\textsuperscript{60}

Their applications of theory and practice in protest (re)-defined the essential concepts of social justice 'praxis' and advocacy for longitudinal growth and change. These Black women took a confrontational position and (in many of their cases) risked graduation, their jobs and social capital by taking an uncompromising stance to name the importance of Black women leadership to usher in a new era of Black womanhood. The contemporary Spelman College mantra of a "Free Thinking Woman" is a historical extension of the Spelman student protests of 1976. From the campus mobilizations of epoch, Black women are able to proudly continue their evolution as social justice advocates who seek to make systemic change wherever they may find injustices that effect marginalized people. Most significantly, this Spelman legacy of unapologetic Black women change agency is one born out of struggle.

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\textsuperscript{60} Interview with Beverly Guy-Sheftall, August 28, 2017. (in author's possession)