

Inside the Panther Revolution

The Black Freedom Movement and the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California

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The publication of John Dittmer's *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* and Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* in the mid-1990s laid the groundwork for scholarly analyses of the Black Freedom movement that did not revolve around the actions of charismatic national leaders or government officials. Instead, Dittmer and Payne crafted richly textured historical narratives centered on the process of political empowerment that led ordinary local people, far away from the spotlight or the headlines, to become active participants in the struggle for civil rights. In their analyses local people were important not only because of the political changes their activism set into motion but also for the lessons about participatory democracy, collective action, experiential learning, and grassroots leadership evident in the flowering of their political consciousness. Although many scholars have elaborated and expanded on Dittmer's and Payne's bottom-up approach to re-analyze the civil rights movement, few have extended their methodologies or analytical frameworks to study the thousands of African Americans who fought for dignity, self-determination, and social justice in the Black Power movement. While civil rights historiography has focused on dramatic and transformative events and highlighted individual and collective triumphs on the national and local level, Black Power has only recently been analyzed by scholars as a local phenomenon that revolutionized grassroots politics in urban America.

and as a mass movement in which the *process* of change was just as important as the *outcome* of change.¹ Instead, many scholars have characterized the civil rights movement and the Black Power movement as two distinct entities with dissimilar goals, strategies, tactics, and movement cultures. In this conceptualization Black Power was a divisive backlash born out of disillusionment with the shortcomings of the civil rights movement; characterized by anger and violence; and spearheaded by Northern blacks who, according to one leading historian, were "filled with rage and looking for a way to affirm themselves."² When local people have been poor black youth in prisons, high schools, colleges, and street corners in inner-city areas stigmatized as dysfunctional and pathological, their attacks on entrenched power and privilege have not been valorized. Yet it is precisely these local urban struggles that so clearly demonstrate the inability of scholarly analyses of black protest premised on impermeable boundaries between civil rights and black power to capture the complexity of the Black Freedom movement.

This essay analyzes the impact of the Black Panther Party, one of the leading organizations of the Black Power movement, on the people and politics of Oakland, California. It argues that the Panthers' political impact was multilayered—not just measurable in their actions but also in late, and their attempts to empower, educate, and politicize oppressed people. The Black Panther Party was a political vehicle created by local people who drew on Southern resistance traditions and the contours of their urban experience to defy police brutality, housing shortages, unemployment, racism, poverty, and their own fear and apathy; and to take collective action to transform their conditions. Founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, two streetwise community college students in 1966, the Panthers captured the imagination of a generation of American youth and inspired them to drop out of school and brave alienation from their families and friends to work for social change. They were committed to remaking the world—and themselves—or literally die trying, and they created alternative lifestyles premised on the notion that the personal was profoundly political. Despite the ravages of a powerful campaign of political repression unleashed against them by the FBI in 1968, the Panthers successfully challenged Republican dominance of local politics, created and staffed innovative free social programs that cushioned the blow of poverty for hundreds of families, and registered thousands of voters in the quest for community control. Perhaps most important, this work was done by a

committed cadre of rank-and-file members whose courage and vision changed the face of grassroots politics in the United States.

Local Context

By the mid-1960s blacks in Oakland, like Newark, New Jersey, Detroit, Michigan, and other urban centers nationwide, were in the throes of a socioeconomic crisis. The roots of black poverty were laid during World War II, when thousands of African Americans migrated from Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas and other parts of the South to Oakland, an essential port and naval shipyard that was home to large transportation and manufacturing industries such as Kaiser Industries, Bank of America, and Safeway Corporation.³ Between 1940 and 1944 Oakland's black population soared from 8,462 to over 20,000.⁴ New migrants brought their own cultural moorings, distinctive speech patterns, protest traditions, and strong sense of community, radically transforming the character of Oakland's black communities. They altered the fragile racial balance brokered between the historic black community and the white majority by flouting the social boundaries that governed interracial relations. West Oakland became home to 85 percent of Oakland's African American population, who were unable to move into other locales because of white property owners' refusal to rent or sell to blacks, racial discrimination in the private market, the banking industry's discriminatory policies in allocating real estate loans, and restrictive covenants barring black people from model suburbs created by federally sponsored wartime construction programs.⁵

By the 1950s the economic policies of Oakland's deeply entrenched conservative Republican political machine had decimated the economic base of the inner city. Local business elites encouraged industrial development outside the city. Capital flight and white flight soon followed. Between 1950 and 1960 approximately one hundred thousand white middle-class homeowners left Oakland and were replaced by an equal number of black and Chicano renters.⁶ The Nimitz Freeway, completed in 1958, cut through the heart of West Oakland, dividing it in half and destroying many homes and businesses in the process. Two years later train service to Oakland was discontinued, resulting in the loss of a traditional source of employment for blacks.⁷ The economic center of the West Oakland community, the business district around Market Street and 7th Street that was once known as the thriving "Black Downtown," never recovered from these losses. By

1959 one-quarter of all families in Oakland earned less than \$4,000 a year and almost half the families in the city lived in deprivation or worse.⁸ By 1966 unemployment in Oakland was more than twice the national average and almost half the entire work-eligible flatland population was unemployed or sub-employed.⁹

Owing to residential segregation the Oakland hills were a predominantly white enclave, and 60 percent of blacks and approximately 8 percent of Mexican Americans made their home in the dilapidated and overcrowded flatlands. Educational institutions serving flatland residents were overcrowded and underfunded. In 1966 the Ad Hoc Committee for Quality Education in Oakland chronicled ten years of racial inequality in local schools, including the push by both the Congress of Racial Inequality (CORE) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for high school boundaries to be changed to facilitate integration in 1962, the Fair Employment Practices Commission report exposing "discrimination in hiring practices and attitudes of Oakland schools" in 1964, and parent protests about inadequate hot lunch programs in the schools in 1965.¹⁰

Oakland's black newspapers chronicled many accounts of police brutality against African Americans throughout the 1950s, a decade that began with the acknowledgment by a crime commission that there had been numerous instances of police brutality and misconduct aimed at Oakland's non-white residents.¹¹ Much of the city's police force had been recruited from the Deep South, and police officers frequently held racist attitudes.¹² Police brutality worsened as Oakland activists launched civil rights protests and demonstrations in the late 1950s and early 1960s. There were more than twenty demonstrations protesting police violence in Oakland between 1965 and 1966, a time when black police officers made up less than 3 percent of the total Oakland police force.¹³

In the absence of black-led progressive organizations and the paucity of black elected officials to address the city's escalating economic problems, black protest erupted from below. Vibrant grassroots political organizations, led by children of migrants, attempted to fill the leadership vacuum in Oakland's black communities. Newton and Seale were two of these children. Seale was born in Dallas, Texas, and migrated to Oakland with his family in 1942. Newton was born in Monroe, Louisiana, and migrated to Oakland with his family in 1945.¹⁴ Both men had firsthand experience with poverty and housing shortages growing up, and were influenced by Malcolm X's advocacy of armed self-defense and black nationalism, as well as

revolutionary theorists such as Mao Tse-tung, Frantz Fanon, and Fidel Castro. They both cut their teeth in local nationalist political formations in the early 1960s before coming together in 1966 in an Anti-Poverty Center to create the Black Panther Party. Newton wrote in his autobiography that he and Seale "recognized that the rising consciousness of Black people was at the point of explosion."¹⁵ They collaborated to write the ten-point platform and program demanding full employment, reparations from the federal government, decent housing, education representative of the black experience, and the exemption of all black men from military service. Point 7 called for an end to police brutality and affirmed black people's right to organize self-defense groups. It took its justification from the second amendment's guarantee of the right to bear arms. Point 8 called for freedom for black prisoners, and point 9 called for a jury of peers for black defendants, as guaranteed in the Fourteenth Amendment. Point 10 demanded "land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace."¹⁶ This ten-point platform and program, a program of radical reform rooted in visceral experiences of discrimination in Oakland, would become one of the Panthers' most valuable organizing tools.

Emboldened Local People

The local people that Panther co-founders Seale and Newton attempted to recruit to the Black Panther Party were "black brothers and sisters off the block," "mothers who had been scrubbing Miss Ann's kitchen," and "brothers and sisters in college, in high schools, who were on parole, on probation, who'd been in jails, who'd just gotten out of jail, and . . . who looked like they were on their way to jail."¹⁷ Seale and Newton initially practiced an open-door membership policy, hoping to shape recruits into a disciplined, politically astute cadre through political education. Early party members had usually grown up in the Bay Area and often came into the party through their association with someone else. Membership spread throughout social and political circles, in what one member described as "waves of curiosity, interest, acknowledgement, concern."¹⁸ These early recruits came from many different paths and from all levels of income, education, and political consciousness, and were attracted to the party for different reasons. Some wanted the sense of "doing something" to change the conditions around them and were drawn to the concept of black people standing up for themselves. Others were attracted by the

party's ten-point platform and program, while others were drawn in by the party's armed stance. As young people who had come to political age during the sixties, these young men and women were immersed in the process of self-discovery and self-exploration, and were filled with optimism and a sense of possibility.

Sherwin Forte was one of the Panthers' first recruits. Forte became involved in the party in early 1967, when he was in his late teens. His family had migrated from Birmingham, Alabama, to Berkeley, and then to North Oakland. He grew up with a consciousness of police brutality and frequently witnessed the police harassing black teenagers. The politically charged atmosphere of the sixties had raised his awareness even further, and he had become an avid admirer of Malcolm X. Forte recalled the atmosphere of that time:

The Vietnam War was happening, and I had a choice whether I would go and fight the country's battles in Vietnam or whether I wanted to take my life and use it to redress some wrongs in this country. I didn't see the Vietnamese as the enemy. I saw the enemy as racist America. . . . And you know, when you are young, you have a lot of fervor, a lot of strength. I think I felt like the way a majority of young people felt at that time given the riotous atmosphere, the killings, the National Guard, the helicopters, the protest in Berkeley, the anti-draft movement. It was a period of action and tension, and a lot of blacks focused on the political system.¹⁹

The Panthers' emphasis on the issue of police brutality resonated deeply with Forte, and he was attracted to the self-defense aspect of the party's program and the potential of having "the same tools that the oppressor had—guns." At the time he joined, he was a student at Merritt College. The Panthers had opened their first office at 5624 Grove Street, a few blocks away. Merritt was a hub of political activity, and Forte recalled spending a lot of time in "these little sessions, these arguments, these discussions about the black man in America, the draft, what Stokely Carmichael was saying, what H. Rap Brown was saying. I guess the general term was 'bull sessions.'²⁰ Forte met Seale at one of these sessions, and was intrigued by the Panthers. Forte and his younger brother Reginald attended a meeting and experienced an "instantaneous connection" with the fledgling organization. By the second meeting, they were both committed members.

One of Newton's and Seale's first actions was to dauntlessly monitor the actions of the Oakland Police Department, poised to intervene with tape recorders, cameras, law books, and legally carried firearms.²¹ These police patrols were random and incorporated into their daily movements and activities as they drove around Oakland's black communities. Typically Newton and Seale would observe police officers as they arrested people to make sure that the police were not breaking any laws or using excessive force. Their goal was to educate the community about its legal rights, to legitimize the idea of self-defense, and to gain the attention of Oakland blacks. Facing down agents of the state in this way was not very dissimilar from going down to the courthouse in the rural South to attempt to vote—it required the same courage and self-assurance, and held the same potential of bloody retribution. The sight of young black men, with guns in their hands, loudly asserting their right to bear arms and warning the police not to be the aggressors, repeatedly drew a crowd. The Oakland police repeatedly reacted with shock and surprise at the sight of the armed youths but were powerless to strip the Panthers of their weapons. Although patrolling often consisted of reading the penal code or simple observation, there were several major confrontations and stand-offs with the police in which the Panthers refused to back down. Onlookers reacted with elation and victory when the police would retreat after being bested in verbal confrontations by Newton's rapid-fire rhetoric and Seale's wise-cracks. In addition to the drama of the bravado, onlookers also were being schooled in active citizenship. According to Panther Emory Douglas, onlookers also observed "the way the Panthers articulated the law," "the way the Panthers were able to bail them out of jail if they were arrested. The way the Panthers explained to them what their rights were when they were being arrested: that all they had to do was give their name and their address and they didn't have to answer all the questions."²² Not only were these patrols laboratories for observers, they also served as powerful workshops for participants on overcoming fear. When Sherwin Forte went on patrols and saw Newton explain the law to the police and saw their reaction of frustration and shock, he felt empowered. It "confirmed that we could gain respect, command respect," and "bolstered our egos, made us feel very powerful, like we were a force to be reckoned with and it was something that we became less and less afraid of doing."²³ Many others were inspired by the Panthers' example of standing up.

Membership in the organization grew at a slow but steady pace. Women began to join the party as members in the spring of 1967. Despite

the Panthers' macho public image and the traditional gendered associations surrounding the defense and protection of community, black women drew on their own protest traditions to demand a space for themselves within the organization. For some Panther women, involvement in the party gave them the tools to contest the Panthers' gender politics and provided a space where they could develop their own consciousness. Larika Lewis, sixteen years old at the time, was the first young woman to join the Panthers. Like Reginald Forte, she was a student at Oakland Technical High School and an activist in the Black Student Union. Lewis grew up in North Oakland and would often sit in on classes at Merritt College. Joining the Black Panther Party was part of her search for self-knowledge, and a reflection of her concern with Oakland's pervasive police brutality.²⁴ Elendar Barnes joined the party in the spring of 1967 after learning about the organization through Laverne Williams, her best friend and Huey Newton's girlfriend. For Barnes, Panther membership was a continuation of her activism as a Merritt College student involved in the Black Student Union, and a natural evolution of the politics she had grown up with:

I became very involved in that level of politics because it was an extension of what I knew, an extension of what they called the Deacons [for Defense] down South. And my grandfather wasn't necessarily a member of the Deacons but our family's stance was, you know, you protect your family by any means necessary and, you know, you use guns. My grandfather was the first person to buy land on what was considered the white part of town. I'd go visit him in the summers and I remember that the Ku Klux Klan burnt a cross on his yard because they opposed him living on that side of town. And I think a lot of people in Oakland have these southern roots and that whole connection with the idea of protecting your own. People were used to using and keeping guns because that's what they did in the country. My grandfather always kept a gun; it was invisible but it always was in the back of the car, or up in the window in the back of the truck and they always said in the South that they were for hunting but he said it was for the white man. And it wasn't for the white man who wasn't bothering you. It was for the KKK and the others. And that's what moved me into the Panthers.²⁵

The Panthers soon evolved from local organization to social movement. On May 2, 1967, the Panthers led an armed delegation of thirty men and women to Sacramento, California, to highlight their opposition to the Mulford Bill, which prohibited carrying unconcealed firearms in public.

The Panthers' received national and international publicity after the delegation mistakenly walked onto the floor of the state legislature. Requests began to pour in from people around the country who wanted to establish Panther chapters, and the Panthers received increased scrutiny from the police and from the FBI, who saw them as emblematic of the urban unrest sweeping the country.²⁶ In October 1967 Newton was arrested and accused of killing one police officer and wounding another in an early morning melee. The Free Huey movement, launched to raise awareness about his case, was the catalyst for the Panthers' nationwide expansion.²⁷ The assassination of Martin Luther King, and the subsequent police killing of Bobby Hutton, the Panthers' first recruit, several days later confirmed the tactical viability and necessity of armed self-defense to many in the black community. The *Black Panther*, the publication founded by the Panthers in 1967, had grown into a full-scale political organ, filled with news articles, commentary, speeches, and bold political graphics, and was read by thousands of people around the country. By 1969 there were more than forty Panther chapters nationwide. These chapters were a result of local people rooted in what Kathleen Cleaver, Panther communications secretary, described as "pre-existing . . . local relationships," who had identified themselves with the image of "Black Power and popular rebellion and resistance . . ." that the Panthers represented. The party's transition from a tightly knit band of Bay Area residents to a web of loosely interconnected local activists across the country changed the nature of the Oakland Panthers. They were now not just a local organization filled with people who "somebody knew who they were or had gone to school with them [and could] . . . vouch for them" but rather the national headquarters of a movement of local people nationwide working to change the conditions in their communities.²⁸

The Politics of Community Empowerment

The Panthers launched community programs in 1968 which included a Free Breakfast Program, Liberation Schools, and a Free Clothing Program. These programs empowered people to pool resources to address the lack of social services in their communities. This was no lesson in self-reliance but instead a trenchant critique of the government's unwillingness to provide for its poorest citizens, and an attempt to embody a socialist ethos and model alternative institutions. The Panthers' pioneering community

program, the Free Breakfast Program, drew on established institutions and longtime activists in Oakland's black community. The Panthers approached Reverend Earl Neil of St. Augustine's Church to provide facilities to house the program and attempted to obtain lists of black elementary school students in West Oakland and to contact parents.²⁹ Ruth Beckford, a community activist and a member of the Panthers' Community Advisory Committee who became involved in the planning and implementation of the Free Breakfast Program, helped plan the logistics of the program in terms of food, frequency of merchant donations, and staff. Beckford recruited Parent Teacher Association (PTA) mothers to cook for the breakfast program in shifts. Despite the rigors of volunteering, including arriving at the church at 6:00 A.M. to cook in bulk and lay out the food, "those women were happy to do it. They felt that this was a very positive program for the Panthers. Where others might have been afraid of any association with the Panthers' cause they thought that they were violent, this program was their strongest point and was able to rally people from all sections of the community."³⁰

Newton's release from prison in 1971 precipitated heightened repression against the organization and brought to the surface simmering internal debates about the direction of the. COINTELPRO, the FBI-launched counterintelligence program against black nationalists, had been squarely aimed at the Panthers in late 1968. The Panthers were classified as "most violence-prone organization of all the extremist groups not operating in the United States," and the FBI vowed to "not only accelerate our investigations of this organization and increase our informants in the organization but that we take action under the counterintelligence program to disrupt the group" by creating "factionalism between not only the national leaders but also the local leaders, steps to neutralize all organizational efforts of the BPP [Black Panther Party] as well as create suspicion amongst the leaders as to each other's sources of finances, suspicion concerning their respective spouses and suspicion as to who may be cooperating with law enforcement."³¹ This precipitated a violent period of internecine warfare, resignations, and expulsions that almost destroyed the organization.

The Panthers regrouped with fewer than one thousand members and concentrated organizational resources in Oakland, hoping that the city would become a model for grassroots organizing and community activism all over the country. They self-consciously reassessed the organization as a political vehicle and created a vibrant movement culture that nourished

and sustained members' activism. Although the Panthers remained a top-down organization, democracy had flowered at the base of the organization, where a collective structure facilitated members' total commitment. The Panthers attempted to meet the needs of its membership for food, clothing, shelter, and even health care. They created a Health Cadre whose job included keeping track of ill comrades and children, and tracking epidemics of the flu and other contagious illnesses that could spread quickly in a collective living situation. The close-knit nature of the collective gave the Panthers all the trappings of a family. Agenda items for central committee meetings included comrades' appearance and clothing needs, interpersonal conflict, and the maintenance of cleanliness in work areas.³² A memo to central body members dated August 16, 1972, brought up the need for a dialogue on planned parenthood within the party, policies for expectant mothers, the creation of an infirmary, and the teaching of remedial reading and math skills.³³ The Panthers adopted collective parenting, providing a space for women to be both mothers and active political organizers. Panther James Abron fondly recalled that the party "basically took care of you from dusk to dawn if you had kids." Parents were "given their kids on the weekends, but Monday through Friday, we would teach 'em, feed 'em, take 'em to our dormitories and wash 'em, help them with their homework, put 'em to bed, clean their clothes, wipe their butts and then [laughter] the process would start over again."³⁴ The collective structure also facilitated internal dissension as party members grappled with sexism, classism, individualism, and materialism in the attempt not only to create alternative structures and institutions but also alternative lifestyles. Panther Bobby McCall described this dynamic:

We ate together. We slept together. We lived together. We did everything together like a family, like an organization should. . . . We were a bunch of disciplined, organized young brothers and sisters who were determined to uplift the black community. It wasn't no joke being in the Party. It might have been called a party, but it was no party. We had a lot of fun with each other because we loved each other. We had a lot of family affairs. We always celebrated each other's birthdays. . . . in a big way. We didn't celebrate holidays but we did celebrate life with each other.³⁵

The Panthers' recommitted themselves to local activism, building relationships, and working for the long haul, key themes of the community organizing tradition described by Payne.³⁶ Panther Ericka Huggins pro-

claimed the organization's commitment to doing "the hard, drudgery, boring, day-to-day, no-reward, you-can't-see-the-future kind of work." This might involve going "door to door every day all day long and ask people 'Do you—?' and not get to finish the sentence," trying "to educate people that have no understanding of what you're talking about because they don't have any food, they don't have any shoes, they don't know where their children are going to be in the next minute, they can't get their welfare check, don't know what their social security number is, don't know where the office is, can't get to the office, and don't want to, anyway. And are having family problems on top of that." The Panthers hoped that this work would "lead to an eventual understanding of why there is a need for alternative institutions."³⁷

The Panthers sought political power in Oakland as a tactic to mobilize and organize the black community, which would also provide them with a legitimate voice in the Oakland political scene. Although Oakland blacks had mobilized to elect Ron Dellums to the House of Representatives in 1971, local politics remained dominated by conservative whites. By 1972, a time when the city had a black voting population larger than 25 percent, only one in eight members of the Oakland City Council was black. The Panthers were poised to move into this political vacuum. They began to engage in strategic endorsement and campaigning for Democratic candidates, and actively sought municipal and county appointments. In May 1972 four Panthers won seats on the Berkeley Community Development Council, a twenty-four-member antipoverity board with a multimillion dollar federally funded budget.³⁸ One month later the Panthers issued a press release stating that they were running candidates for the West Oakland Planning Committee (WOPC), which was to facilitate citizen participation in Oakland's \$4.9 million budget "Model City" urban renewal project because voting was the "Power of the People: the only means to begin implementing community control."³⁹ In August 1972 Panther members and supporters ran for seats on the West Oakland Planning Committee,⁴⁰ winning six out of eighteen seats on the West Oakland Model Cities governing board.⁴¹

In 1973 Seale ran for mayor and Panther Elaine Brown ran for City Council on the Democratic Party ticket. Seale's and Brown's campaign platform centered on social programs such as housing, preventative medical health care, childcare, educational improvement, and environmental protection. The Panthers' array of free social services was central to their political vision and a cornerstone of their campaign. They expanded the

range of programs to include a free plumbing and maintenance program, a free food program to "supplement the groceries of Black and poor people until such time as economic conditions allow them to purchase good food at reasonable prices," and opened a health clinic in Berkeley to provide free medical attention, medication, referrals, sickle cell anemia testing, immunization, prenatal instruction, first aid kits, and community health surveys.⁴² The Oakland Community School (OCS), a model for community-based education, was one of the Panthers' strongest programs. The OCS began as the Intercommunal Youth Institute in 1971, a school program catering to the children of party members. OCS students, ranging from two to eleven years of age, received full tuition, health care, and individualized classroom attention. The staff of twenty-seven full-time accredited teachers taught students art, music, science, Spanish, environmental studies, and physical education.⁴³ In the summer students participated in a structured program of trips, classes, and recreational activities.⁴⁴ By May 12, 1976, approximately 125 children attended the OCS, which had earned a nationwide reputation for excellence in community-based education.⁴⁵

Brown and Seal spoke out against secrecy in government and the negative impact of urban renewal on local communities; they also advocated transferring the economic resources from the port of Oakland to the city itself. This campaign transformed the Black Panther Party into a political machine. The party closed down many local chapters nationwide and brought their cadre to Oakland to work on this campaign. Voter registration was the main task of these campaign workers and the linchpin of the Panthers' strategy. Between November 8, 1972, and March 18, 1973, the Panthers registered 14,662 people to vote.⁴⁶ In the spring of 1973 white supporters formed "Whites for Bobby Seal and Elaine Brown"; the Gay Men's Political Action Group of Oakland created fliers supporting Brown and Seal;⁴⁷ and Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers endorsed Seal and Brown.⁴⁸ By March Seal was one of the recognized front runners in the mayoral campaign. As Election Day drew near the Panthers increased the pace of their campaign. Brown won more than thirty-four thousand votes but lost her bid for City Council. Seal received forty-five thousand votes, 37 percent of the total vote—enough to put him in a run-off election with incumbent John Reading.⁴⁹ Although Seal lost the run-off, he considered his campaign an example of the power of blacks and of working and progressive people when they are organized "into a mighty political thrust." In his victory speech, he stated:

We organized to make our power known and felt. That knowledge, for us and those who oppose our right to the expression of our humanity, can no longer be kept from us. For, this election has made an historic decision, here in the midst of this most powerful country. Black people, especially, as well as the majority of people have decided that together we can move mountains and turn the tide of reaction, so that we all may live and be free from exploitation, slavery and the many ills we have faced.⁵⁰

The Panthers were unable to retain campaign machinery in local communities to build on their momentum after the campaign. By 1974 there were fewer than one hundred members and the organization was filled with internal contradictions and structural weaknesses. Hilliard and Seal both left the organization, and Newton had fled into exile to escape felony charges. As a result of focusing all their resources on the election, other aspects of the Party's program, such as their newspaper, and the community survival programs, inevitably suffered. Although the Brown-Seal campaign did not result in grassroots empowerment or the long-term organization of the Oakland community, the Panthers did become an important voice in local politics. Between 1974 and 1977 the Panthers made significant inroads into Oakland's local political scene. The Panthers supported John George in his successful bid for election as the first black county supervisor in Alameda County. When Governor Jerry Brown ran for president in 1976, Panther leader Elaine Brown served as a Democratic delegate. In 1977 the Panthers campaigned for Lionel Wilson, a longtime Panther ally, for mayor of Oakland. Wilson's campaign built on Seal's successful showing in 1974. The Panthers played an important role in voter registration, mobilization, and get-out-the-vote actions around his campaign. Wilson won, becoming Oakland's first Democratic mayor in thirty years and the first black mayor ever.⁵¹ After Newton's return from exile in 1977, and his descent into substance abuse and criminal activity, more and more Panthers resigned from the organization. The Oakland Community School, the Panthers last remaining survival program, closed its doors in 1982, and the Black Panther Party officially came to an end.

Conclusion

Two of the Panthers most important and perhaps most overlooked contributions to the Black Freedom movement were their attempts to nurture

oppressed people's political consciousness and revolutionize their daily personal and political praxis. The Panthers' determination to provide not only a philosophy of liberation but also to embody the world they were trying to create, despite all its shortcomings, reflected the same ethos as Martin Luther King's Beloved Community. This community was a work in progress, frequently derailed by cult of personality, lack of accountability of the leadership, breakdown in internal political education, and other flaws that would prove fatal to the organization long after the juggernaut of political repression had receded into the past. The process of bringing local people to political consciousness, which was at the heart of the Black Freedom movement organizing tradition, eluded the Panthers as they became more insular, and rigid structural hierarchies increasingly muffled rank-and-file members' most persistent calls for democracy and organizational reform. This slow process was chronicled in the complaints of party members: that comrades did not "love and respect each other as human beings instead of males and females";⁵² that members were unable to "do any consistent door to door work around the subscription drive, voter registration or any of the other activities that are done to hold the previously established and to build new face-to-face relationships with the people on the precinct level";⁵³ that insularity hindered community organizing and Panthers "barely see the masses much less have a chance to educate them."⁵⁴ In 1979 party members demanded that the organization "firmly embrace the principle of criticism and self-criticism," warning that "without this our leadership becomes separated from our party body as is the case now, consequently isolating the party from the people." Their poignant plea, that "our party must be a microcosm of the kind of society we want to create to replace the old" went unanswered.⁵⁵ However, their efforts at reform embody just how successful the Panthers had been in creating empowered political activists committed to change, even though the organization was ultimately not able to live up to the expectations it had produced. The power of the Panthers' history is not in the how and why of their failures or even in the tally of their successes; it is in the process by which they swept young black men and women off street corners and away from college campuses all around the nation to partake in the work of social justice—what Newton once described as "the attempt to make more freedom."⁵⁶

NOTES

1. See Komzoi Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Yohuru Williams, *Black Politics/White Power: Civil Rights, Black Power and the Black Panthers in New Haven* (New York: Brandywine, 2000); Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komzoi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles outside the South, 1940–1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
2. Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 297.
3. Rod Bush, ed., *The New Black Vote: Politics and Power in Four American Cities* (San Francisco: Synthesis, 1984), 320.
4. Marilyn S. Johnson, *The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 52.
5. Donald Hausler, "Blacks in Oakland: 1852–1987," [photocopy], 122, Public History Room, Oakland Public Library, Lakeshore Branch, Oakland, California; Johnson, *Second Gold Rush*, 214; Hausler, "Blacks in Oakland," 117.
6. Edward Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 108.
7. Hausler, "Blacks in Oakland," 125–26.
8. Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy*, 44–45.
9. Hausler, "Blacks in Oakland," 176; Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy*, 46.
10. Ten Years of Segregation in Oakland, folder: "Oakland Schools Racial Problems—Other Than Clippings," Oakland Public Library, Lakeshore Branch, Public History Room, Oakland, California.
11. "Crime Commission Reveals Local Cops' Brute Methods," *California Voice*, 13 January 1950, 1, 2; The police chief at the time did not acknowledge that a problem existed and few reforms were made; see Hausler, "Blacks in Oakland," 122. The *Sun-Reporter* was at the forefront in reporting complaints of brutality. See "Police Brutality, Old Story," *Sun-Reporter*, 26 February 1955, 8; "What's Wrong with Our Police Department," *Sun-Reporter*, 7 June 1958, 6; "New Police Brutality Cases Anger Parents: Ask Police Chief and Mayor 'Stop Brutality,'" *Sun-Reporter*, 14 November 1959, 1; "Victim of Police Brutality?" *Sun-Reporter*, 4 March 1961, 1, 5.
12. Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy*, 36–39.
13. Personnel Division, Oakland Police Department to Chief C. R. Gain, 16 February 1973, folder: "Vacancy Projection and Recruiting Data," Oakland Public Library, Lakeshore Branch, Public History Room, Oakland, California.
14. Bobby Seale, *A Lonely Rage: The Autobiography of Bobby Seale* (New York: Times Books, 1978), 19; Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther*

- Party and Huey P. Newton* (Baltimore, Md.: Black Classic Press, 1991), 4; Huey Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Writers and Readers, 1973), 13-15.
15. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 110.
 16. Seale, *Seize the Time*, 59-63.
 17. *Ibid.*, 64-65.
 18. Judy [Hart] Jannita, interview by author, 20 October 1997, tape recording, Oakland, California.
 19. Sherwin Forte, interview by author, 9 October 1997, tape recording, Oakland, California.
 20. *Ibid.*
 21. Their actions were not without precedent. Other community groups had also begun to monitor police activities in Oakland. The Oakland Direct Action Committee (ODAC), founded by Mark Comfort, began patrolling Oakland's black communities in the summer of 1966. Mark Comfort, "Conditions in the Oakland Ghetto," interview by Elsa Knight Thompson, 1967, cassette E2BB1309, Pacifica Radio Archives, Los Angeles, California.
 22. Emory Douglas, interview by author, 9 October 1997, tape recording, San Francisco, California.
 23. Forte, interview by author.
 24. Tarika Lewis, interview by author, 16 October 1997, transcript, Oakland, California.
 25. Elendar Barnes, interview by author, 25 September 1997, tape recording, Brooklyn, New York.
 26. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 151.
 27. *Ibid.*, 187.
 28. Forte, interview by author.
 29. Bobby Seale, interview by author, 13 October 1997, tape recording, Oakland, California; "FBI Intelligence Summary—Nov. 15-22, 1968," box 65, Huey P. Newton Foundation Papers, Special Collections, Green Library, Stanford University, California (hereafter, HPN Papers); n.b.: I accessed the HPN Papers at Stanford University in 1996 when the archival recording process was just beginning, and therefore box and folder titles, contents, and so on, may be different.
 30. Ruth Beckford, interview by author, 16 October 1997, tape recording, Oakland, California.
 31. Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars against Domestic Dissent* (Boston: South End, 1990), 124-25.
 32. Memo re: Agenda Items to be discussed, May 22, 1973, folder: "Central Committee Info," box 10, HPN Papers; "Notes from Central Body Meeting, October 2, 1972," folder: "Central Committee Info," box 10, HPN Papers.
 33. Folder: "Central Committee Info," box 10, HPN Papers.
34. James Abron, interview by author, 6 October 1997, tape recording, Oakland, California.
 35. Bobby McCall, interview by author, 14 October 1997, tape recording, San Francisco, California.
 36. Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 364.
 37. Michele Russell, "Conversation with Ericka Huggins. Oakland, California, 4/20/77," 12-13, box 1, HPN Papers.
 38. "Panthers Elected to Berkeley Anti-Poverty Program," box 2, HPN Papers.
 39. "Bobby Seale campaign info," box 14A, HPN Papers.
 40. "Innerparty Memorandum #3," box 14, HPN Papers.
 41. "Panther Protection: Party Will Start Escort Service: Officials Ponder Moves," *Sacramento Bee*, 10 December 1972, folder: "US v. Hilliard re: Wiretap," box 26, HPN Papers; "Panthers elected to Berkeley Anti-Poverty Program," box 2, HPN Papers.
 42. Black Panther Party, ed., *CoEvolution Quarterly*, no. 3 (fall 1974): 29; "Budget, 1971," folder: "Black Panther Party No-Profit Corporations Including Black United Front," box 34, HPN Papers.
 43. February 1976 article, folder: "OCS Brochure," box 4, HPN Papers.
 44. "July 1977 Corporate Overview EOC," folder: EOC, box 4, HPN Papers.
 45. Folder: "Montclair Article," box 5, HPN Papers.
 46. Voter Registration Counts, folder: "Voter Registration Elections Committee," box 7, HPN Papers.
 47. Folder: "Bobby Seale Campaign Info," box 14A, HPN Papers.
 48. *Ibid.*
 49. "Seale's 'Revolt' Plans," *San Francisco Examiner*, 12 November 1972, 1.
 50. "Election Victory Statement," folder: "Bobby Seale Campaign Info," box 14, HPN Papers.
 51. Folder: "Wilson's Donation List," box 17, HPN Papers.
 52. "Memo to: The Servant From: Comrade JoNina Abron," folder: "Reports on Comrades," box 14, HPN Papers.
 53. Section Progress Reports, 6 September 1973, box 2, HPN Papers.
 54. "Memo to: Huey, From: Dale re: Women in the Party [sic]," 4 October 1977, folder: "Reports on Comrades," box 14, HPN Papers.
 55. 1 May 1979 Report, folder: "Reports on Comrades," box 14, HPN Papers.
 56. Box 15, HPN Papers, folder "West Magazine Interview with Huey P. by Digby Diehl—LA Times," 30.