THE REVOLUTION HAS COME

BLACK POWER, GENDER, AND THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY IN OAKLAND

ROBYN C. SPENCER

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For my mother, Pansy Spencer,
and my daughter, Sira Imani Basse

In loving memory of my father,
John A. Spencer

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Acknowledgments

I took my first research trip to the Bay Area in the summer of 1996. Melvin Dickson, a Panther rank-and-file member and lifelong community organizer, invited me to come along with him as he did some community work. Eager to meet people and immerse myself in unfamiliar Oakland neighborhoods, I said yes without hesitation. It was just me, him, and a folding table, intrepidly set up on a street corner in the hood, with the Panthers' well-known powder blue banner hanging on the front. We set out literature, a newspaper dedicated to commemorating the Panther cofounder Huey P. Newton, a few pamphlets about political initiatives, and a donation can. Melvin engaged everyone who walked by with humor and sincerity, and soon enough so did I. One woman literally stumbled by, barefoot, her face marred by addiction. She ignored my hesitant "Excuse me, sis" as she went by. She went into a liquor store and emerged minutes later with a brown paper bag. As she went by this time, I caught her eye again and she stopped. "Ya'll the Panthers?" she asked. "Yeah" seemed to be the simplest answer. There was a long pause as she took us in from head to toe. "Well, right on," she said. "We need you out here." Then she dropped a fistful of precious coins into the can. Later Melvin and I went to the nearby housing project and knocked on doors to offer people services at a free health clinic. Explaining to people that the clinic, with limited hours and a modest array of services, was 100 percent free, remains one of the most politicizing moments of my life. That summer I met almost a dozen Panthers and logged seven hours a day going through the newly deposited Huey P. Newton Foundation records and visiting other local archives. I earnestly wrote in my journal, "I feel like I am writing a book for the first time." I could never have imagined that half my life would unfold between that first unforgettable summer and the year of this book's publication.

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My parents were my first teachers. It pains me not to be able to put this book into my father's hand. His passion for politics and abiding love for black history and culture planted seeds that grew into this book. My mother has championed my educational goals from kindergarten and made innumerable sacrifices to ensure that my upbringing provided more opportunities than she was afforded. She has supported me in immeasurable ways. It is only because of her help with child care that I have been able to do the traveling, reading, and writing that I needed to complete this book. I thank her for shouldering some of the workload of solo parenting and for her unflagging patience and love.

My daughter, Sira Imani, has lived with this book for a decade and has tolerated the space it has occupied in our home life. I have coped with balancing the joys and demands of parenting with the realities of research and writing by incorporating her into as much of my work world as feasible. Her sticky fingers and muddy footprints are all over this book. I want to thank Sira for sharing me with this book. Through the travel we do and the political meetings we attend, I have tried to show her that this book is not just an individual quest. It is a contribution to the collective history of black resistance. Decades ago it was conceived in the context of the outrage and activism spurred by the Rodney King beating, the Gulf War, Clarence Thomas's nomination to the Supreme Court, torture in Guantanamo Bay, the campaign to free the political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal, the afterlife of apartheid in South Africa, the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, and the execution of Shaka Sankofa (Larry Graham). It is being published in the context of a movement proclaiming "Black Lives Matter" and "#SayHerName." This is the world that Sira has inherited. As the onslaught of state-sanctioned killing of black women, men, and children has increasingly dawned on her young consciousness, the need for Mommy's book has become less and less abstract. She is my greatest inspiration. I wrote this book to make it possible for ten-year-old black girls like her to imagine themselves seizing the time.

Introduction

In the summer of 2014 I visited Broad Street Historical Park in Greenwood, Mississippi, the site where Stokely Carmichael threw the phrase *Black Power* into a crowd of movement activists and the echo that roared back was heard around the world. Despite the fact that the site had been immortalized in popular memory, documentary films, and oral history accounts, a Freedom Trail marker had been placed there only in 2013. It was that marker that drew my attention and had likely resulted in a trickle of visitors through the black side of town. While scholarly research and oral history had long decentered the place and time of Carmichael's call in favor of alternative chronologies and genealogies, there was still something momentous about being there. Then and now the scene was framed by a poverty line that was almost tangible. Shotgun houses, abandoned storefronts, and unpaved roads told a story clearer than any statistics. It was easy to imagine that there hadn't been much change between the call for Black Power in 1966 and 2014. In the waning years of the first black presidential administration, which some had argued represented one of the greatest symbols of black progress, Greenwood, known as the "Mississippi of Mississippi," stood as a stark testament to the changing same. It was a place that raises questions about Black Power then and now. The movement for Black Power was a response to the crises and opportunities in working-class black America in the 1960s and 1970s. It was irreverent, bold, and brash. It was also organized, rooted in black political culture, and deeply analytical. It was as much substance as style, as much intellectual rigor as revolutionary freedom dream. And it faced an almost unprecedented attack from the state. Activists developed this movement to transform places like Greenwood. A full accounting of the fate of the political organizations that grew in the wake of the cry for Black Power provides one means of

rectifying the present we live in with the past that Black Power activists struggled to transform and the future they imagined.

This book analyzes the political evolution of one of the leading Black Power organizations, the Black Panther Party (BPP), in the city where it was founded: Oakland, California. Although the BPP found expression largely in urban America, the young men and women who joined the Panthers in Oakland were the children of those who had migrated from the South to the West during World War II. When wartime opportunities closed down and state violence and economic forces conspired to push this aspirant population to the bottom rungs of the social and economic ladder, their resistance transformed politics in Oakland.

Today Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, the founders of the Black Panther Party, might be written off as stereotypes or statistics. Newton was an ex-convict and a seasoned hustler who straddled the formal and informal economy with ease. Like many youth seeking skills and an income, Seale had spent time in the military. Both men were community college students who grappled with international political theory, activists who debated strategies for revolution, and employees at a local War on Poverty program office. Neither was a stranger to guns, alcohol, or marijuana. In the richness of their lived experiences, none of these social, economic, or political positions was mutually exclusive or contradictory. Newton and Seale lived the complexity of everyday life in working-class black America.

They were part of the nationwide decision by grassroots activists to address pervasive police brutality against men and women in their communities. Los Angeles activists had been early pioneers of this approach in the wake of the Watts riots. Inspired by activists in other cities, the Panthers launched armed patrols of the Oakland police. One incident at a time they refashioned the fear, intimidation, and anger caused by daily indignities from the police into empowerment, education, and street theater. In the process they turned strangers into comrades and built community. When the state retaliated by removing the legal foundations of their public arms, the BPP adopted many other tactics. Self-defense was not their only solution to police violence. The gun turned out to be a weapon turned on them more than they ever turned it on others, and the BPP existed as an organization under siege for much of its history. However, they also launched ideological warfare and sought community-based and public policy solutions to the brutality that faced black communities. They issued political statements against police violence and on many different occasions sought

to connect the daily brutality of life in black America to the heightened surveillance and repression its membership faced, much as contemporary activists in the movement to free political prisoners have continually connected with the larger movement against mass incarceration in the early twenty-first century. The solutions the Panthers sought, such as community control of the police, freedom for political prisoners, and an end to poverty and war, remain central in many struggles for justice today.

Although this book centers on Oakland, I argue that the BPP's commitment to making linkages with revolutionaries in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and the Caribbean made it one of the most effective ambassadors for Black Power. African and Asian decolonization and the Vietnam War framed the Panthers' attempt to provide an organizational vehicle and an ideological framework to allow working-class black people to explore linkages between antiracism and anti-imperialism. At the same time, the Panthers understood Black Power as home-grown resistance inspired by the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. They tried to hold America accountable to its most democratic promises and dared to suggest that justice for black people would be the beginning of a revolutionary overhaul that would free everyone at the bottom of society. In 1970 the Panthers brought between ten thousand and fifteen thousand people from the movements for gay and lesbian liberation and women's liberation and those representing Third World politics, anticapitalists, Native Americans, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, radical whites, and other people of African descent to Philadelphia to rewrite the Constitution. Their ability to highlight areas of cross-pollination between social movements, embrace a diversity of allies, and connect to global struggles and worldwide challenges negates any simplistic condemnation of Black Power as racial chauvinism or the politics of exclusion. It suggests that the legacy of Black Power is rooted in black America but remains relevant to marginalized people in all communities.

The BPP's activities were framed by state political repression nimble enough to go from the sledgehammer of arrests, shootouts, and raids to the delicacy of planting infidelity accusations between husband and wife. The FBI's Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) had an indelible impact on the lives of leadership and the rank and file and eroded the political community the Panthers sought to build and that was its greatest strength. Hundreds of young people came to political awareness and journeyed to adulthood under the aegis of the Black Panther Party, and their raw and

youthful energy brought the organization to life. Rank-and-file members interpreted, implemented, and influenced party ideology and programs and helped shape the growth and development of the organization. The Panthers believed that revolution was both internal and external and strove to create an organization that would be a microcosm of the world they were trying to create. Party members grappled with sexism, classism, individualism, and materialism and attempted to create alternative structures, institutions, and lifestyles. Their goal was not only to challenge and change the conditions in America but to politicize their membership and their mass following. In short, Black Panther Party members not only tried to transform the world; they tried to transform themselves. This struggle within the struggle unfolded in the day-to-day realities of the rank and file—those who occupied the most democratic layer of the organization. For many of these members the attempts to shed individualism, confront ingrained ideas about gender and sexuality, build genuine bonds of mutual trust and respect with comrades, and provide social services to both comrades and communities in need were some of the most politicizing experiences of Black Power. Panthers grappled with social reproduction, collective living, housework, individual autonomy, and leisure. While the resolution of these struggles was not always egalitarian, the debates speak to how women and men sought to define their freedom-within-a-freedom movement.

Facing the organized power of the state, the Panthers pursued electoral political and community survival programs in the 1970s, with some striking successes. They faced organizational revitalization under the leadership of women and experimented with truly collective organizational structures for health, child care, and education. This era has been the least studied aspect of their history, but their engagement with urban renewal, alternative education, and community control reflects a continuation of their quest for Black Power. The impact of mass incarceration, the growing drug epidemic, and the adaptability of political repression would continually shape the possibilities for social change that the Panthers pursued. The party came to an end in Oakland in 1982 with the closure of its last community program, the Oakland Community School. Fifty years have passed since the founding of the Black Panther Party. The economic downturn for black and brown Oakland has continued unabated, and the cry for Black Power and the need for "land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace" is echoed in contemporary activists' insistence that "Black Lives Matter."[1]

Today's activists are seeking lessons from the past with the urgency of now. What does Black Power have to offer in the context of drone warfare, deepening poverty, unemployment, immigrant detention, and a criminal justice infrastructure that is an engine of destruction in black and brown communities? The study of Black Power doesn't just fill holes in the scholarly literature; it fills holes in the tapestry of the American past. It fills bullet holes. The young black men and women who joined the Black Panther Party attempted to create a revolutionary political vehicle in the context of a burgeoning movement for Black Power that unfolded within the context of deindustrialization, state violence, and global revolution. It is time to examine the roadblocks they faced, the tune-ups needed, the drivers (including those who steered even when they were not in the driver's seat), the devastating breakdowns, and those moments of joy and optimism when the road, and the possibilities, seemed endless.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1 Black Panther Party, "What We Want–What We Believe," October 1966, carton 18, folder 4a, Social Protest Collection, BANC MSS 86/157 c, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Black Lives Matter, accessed 24 May 2016, http://blacklivesmatter.com/.

1. SEIZE THE TIME

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6 Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 160–64.
7 Editorial, *Flatlands*, 12 March 1966.
8 Johnson, *The Second Gold Rush*, 215.