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"A Scepter of Terror or a Sword of Freedom": Elaine Brown's Time in the Black Panther Party

Maeve Plassche
Providence College

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Elaine Brown's Time in the Black Panther Party

By
Maeve Plassche
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Elaine Brown

Courtesy of the Oakland Public Library

Figures

Table of Contents

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Introduction

The names most often associated with the Black Panther Party include Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, Eldridge Cleaver, David Hilliard, and Fred Hampton, among other men. Yet the name Elaine Brown does not often come to the mind. The female Panther members have so often been brushed aside in histories of the organization that spearheaded the Black Power Movement in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Historians and our society have pushed an image of the Black Panthers as a highly masculine and aggressive group that advocated for violence against police, yet a closer look at its history displays a much different picture. It shows community survival programs that depended upon its female members to keep them together while local police forces and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) targeted the male Panther members. Elaine Brown's story offers another side to the narrative of the Black Panther Party. It is not always appealing, but her story encapsulates the determination of a woman who would not be pushed to the sides but rather demanded the respect of her male colleagues.

A question that plagued Brown during her time with the Black Panther Party was how could she use her power? Would she use it as a scepter of terror or a sword of freedom?[1] From the time that she joined the Black Panther Party in 1967, there was a sense of power that radiated off the men from the Central Committee and from Party in general. The Black Panther Party came onto the scene near the end of the non-violent Civil Rights Movement, and they made their presence known immediately. This idea of a scepter of terror was something that the Black Panthers were very familiar with throughout their existence. Huey Newton described the meaning behind choosing a Panther to represent their organization. He said, "it is not in the Panther's nature to attack first, but when he is attacked and backed into a corner, he will respond

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[1] Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2016), 174.

viciously."[2] In the beginning, the Panthers used this scepter of terror as a way to defend themselves. But as the Party developed and society around them continued to put them down by any means necessary, this scepter of terror took on an entirely new meaning, especially within the Party itself.

When Brown took over as chairperson of the Black Panther Party in 1974, she was forced to decide how she would use her power. Would she wield the scepter of terror that her predecessors had done, or would she use her power as a sword of freedom? As there had never been a female in this high of a position within the Party before, she was stepping into unchartered waters. The experiences she had for her first seven years as a Panther demonstrated how men believed they were superior to women. Therefore, she understood that there would be backlash, and some men within the Party would not take kindly to taking orders from a woman. Men within the Party and its leaders claimed to be all in favor of gender equality, yet this was not always practiced on a Party-wide level. In her autobiography, Elaine Brown recognized the difficulty that would come with being promoted to the chairperson:

> A woman in the Black Power movement was considered, at best, irrelevant. A woman asserting herself was a pariah. A woman attempting the role of leadership was, to my proud black Brothers, making an alliance with the 'counter-revolutionary, man-hating, lesbian, feminist white bitches.' It was a violation of some Black Power principle that was left undefined. If a black woman assumed a role of leadership, she was said to be eroding black manhood, to be hindering the progress of the black race. She was an enemy of black people.[3]

Brown seemed to recognize that she would not be taken seriously as a leader due to the rampant male chauvinism in the Party. Therefore, she chose to use her power as both a scepter of terror and a sword of freedom. For Brown, the scepter of terror was used as a tool to command respect

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[2] D.S. Gaikwad, "The Black Panther Party of USA: Rise and Fall," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 64 (2003): 1326.

[3] Elaine Brown, *A Taste Of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1994), 357.

from male panther members. She was their leader and as their leader she would not tolerate chauvinistic attitudes. However, this would have to be handled delicately. If she came down too hard on some men, they would think she was emasculating them. For this, "she relied upon Chief of Staff Larry Henson, one of [Huey] Newton's most notorious bodyguards, to silence her critics and assert authority over the ranks in the wake of Newton's departure."[4] By doing this, Brown made sure that the men understood that she was in charge but she was not doing it herself so they would not be as disgruntled about it since it was coming from a man.

Brown's sword of freedom can be seen throughout the work she did within the community. As chairperson, she "crafted a public image of respectability and advocated electoral politics and local community organizing."[5] Brown continued the Panthers objective of racial equality but by propelling the Party to the forefront of the political and social worlds, the Panthers received a new wave of respect from the rest of the country. Her sword was used to liberate not just the black people of the country but to liberate and empower all that were oppressed, including Panther women. Brown redefined what it meant to be a woman in the Black Panther Party and what it meant to be an African American woman in the United States during this time. Yet, the history of these women, including Elaine Brown's, has often gone undiscussed by historians.

Historiography

In October of 1966, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale began their work on the Black Panther Party, a self-proclaimed self-defense organization that sought to protect the black community members of Oakland. In a few short years, these two men had built a solid

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[4] Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*,174.

[5] Ibid.

foundation for the Black Panther Party and continued to patrol the streets of Oakland with guns

under their arms. The Black Panther Party operated from 1966 until about 1985, amid the larger

Civil Rights Movement.[6] While the Black Panther Party is often categorized within the more

violent side of the movement, after the first three years of operation the Panthers shifted away

from the violence that is often associated with the Party even today. The Party turned towards

what members call survival pending revolution.

There is no shortage of research on the Black Panther Party, sources that range from first-

hand accounts from former Panther members such as Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice (1968)*,

David Hilliard's *This Side of Glory (2001),* Aaron Dixon's *My People Are Rising: Memoir of the*

Black Panther Party Captain (2012) to journal articles dedicated to understanding the history of

the Panthers such as Jessica Harris's "Revolutionary Black Nationalism: The Black Panther

Party," Carolyn Calloway's "Group Cohesiveness in the Black Panther Party," and D.S. Gaikwad's

"The Black Panther Party of the USA: Rise and Fall."[7] These sources highlight different

elements of the organization, however, there is a narrative that is either missing entirely or only

briefly mentioned: the experiences of Panther women.

To better understand the role women played in the Party, it is necessary to break down

the arguments and works that have been made about the Black Panther Party in general.

Historian D.S. Gaikwad's article examines the earliest days of the party and insists that by doing

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[6] *See* Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233 - 1263. In this piece, Hall "traced the contours of what she takes to be a more robust, more progressive, and truer story-the story of a 'long civil rights movement' that took root in the liberal and radical milieu of the late 1930s, was intimately tied to the 'rise and fall of the New Deal Order,' accelerated during World War II, stretched far beyond the South, was continuously and ferociously contested, and in the 1960s and 1970s inspired a 'movement of movements' that def[ies] any narrative of collapse."

[7] Jessica Harris, "Revolutionary Black Nationalism: The Black Panther Party," *The Journal of Negro History* 86, no. 3 (2001): 409 - 421; Carolyn Calloway, "Group Cohesiveness in the Black Panther Party," *Journal of Black Studies* 8, no. 1 (1977): 55 - 74; Gaikwad, "The Black Panther Party of USA."

so we will arrive at a better understanding of the Black Panther Party. Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale began the Party in 1966, which was on the heels of a major nonviolent Civil Rights Movement that was spearheaded by the work of Martin Luther King Jr. and two years after the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which ended segregation in public places. However, there were still many issues facing the Black Community when the Black Panther Party first stepped onto the scene. Donning black berets, leather jackets, and guns, Newton, and Seale, began their mission which "in the beginning [saw] the Black Panthers patroll[ing] the Black ghettos with guns and law books to protect Blacks from Police harassment."[8] Gaikwad investigates the influences of the Black Panther Party, noting that the structure of the Party was similar to the Communist Movement. The Party even "raised money from selling Mao [Tse Tungs] books."[9]

The author discusses the obvious struggles facing the Party with many members ending up in jail and some even being killed. The article acknowledges the fact that at the rate they were going at and being constantly scrutinized by the public and the police forces they could not retain high numbers. Therefore, "the message was clear to change. The Black Panther Movement began to shift from violent to non-violent methods of their struggle."[10] Yet, Gaikwad does not include the fact that women were a major part of this shift and essentially kept the Party afloat while many male members were in prison.

Similar to D.S. Gaikwad, Carolyn Calloway's article "Group Cohesiveness in the Black Panther Party" offers little mention of women throughout the entirety of the history of the Black Panther Party. However, Calloway's article "is an attempt to discuss the similarity among

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[8] Gaikwad, "The Black Panther Party," 1327.

[9] Gaikwad, "The Black Panther Party," 1329.

[10] Gaikwad, "The Black Panther Party," 1331.

members, group goals. Group activities, and leadership as factors related to the degree of cohesiveness within the Black Panther Party."[11] Calloway's article is critical for the understanding of women because even though there is not a real mention of women, it allows one to recognize the types of women that may have been more attracted to the Black Panther Party over other Black Nationalist groups of the time. Newton and Seale came from similar backgrounds before the Party and completed similar training at Merritt College which prepared them for leadership. When recruiting members for the Black Panther Party, "Seale states that one of the initial methods of gaining recruits for the party was to talk to 'brothers and sisters in colleges in high schools, who were on probation, who'd been in jails, in high schools, who were on probation, who's been in jails, who'd just gotten out of jail, and brothers and sisters who looked like they were on their way to jail.'"[12] This similarity bonded both male and female members as well as the overall goals of the Black Panther Party.

Yet, when Calloway devotes a portion of her article to the community survival programs, similar to Gaikwad, she leaves out the work that was done by the women of the Black Panther Party. It is interesting that both Gaikwad and Calloway's articles are devoid of any true mention of the work that women did on these community survival programs, especially considering the fact that these programs became the cornerstone of the Party.

Black women were major contributors to the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement and the work done by these women is revered in specific works. *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement* edited by Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin chronicles the lives and contributions of African American women

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[11] Carolyn Calloway, "Group Cohesiveness in the Black Panther Party," *Journal of Black Studies* 8, no. 1 (1977): 56.

[12] Calloway, 58.

prior to the Civil Rights Movement and extending to the legacy of the movement that can be seen in our modern world. They highlight their information by including personal narratives from prominent black women across different sections of 20th century.[13] Tracye Matthews chapter, "No One Ever Asks What a Man's Role in the Revolution Is" delves into the different ideologies that would come to influence the Panthers and their gender politics. Matthews breaks down her analysis into three major groups highlighting the notion that gender politics was an everchanging idea. She discusses how prior to the start of the Panthers, there were other black nationalist and black power groups operating in similar areas which caused some of their ideas to be transferred to the Panthers. For example, the US organization, which was run by Maulana Karenga, "Stressed the necessity for cultural awareness among blacks to be gained primarily through the revival of African traditions … as well as the rejection of white supremacy."[14] However, the US organization had a more limited view on women and their role in the revolution, according to Matthews, "One major component of US rhetoric called for women's submission to traditional male 'authority,' and promoted the notion of complementary gender roles."[15]

As the Party expanded, so did the diversity amongst its members, which in turn caused the Panthers themselves to change their own outlook on certain issues, including gender. Matthews analyzes the Panthers in context with other major movements in the United States,

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[13] Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin, eds., *Sisters in the Struggle African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2001).; See also, Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2001).

[14] Tracey Matthews, "'No One Ever Asks What A Man's Role in the Revolution Is': Gender Politics and Leadership in the Black Panther Party, 1966-1971," in *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2001), 235. See also Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Want To Start A Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2009).

[15] Matthews, "No One Ever Asks," 235.

such as the White Women's Liberation Movement. Matthews chapter offers a more overarching look into the Panthers and its gender politics, yet there is very little mention of Elaine Brown and her role in the Panthers.

Paula J. Giddings book *When and Where I enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* extends beyond the Civil Rights and Black Power movements by including women such as Ida B. Wells. Yet, this work aims to expand upon already written scholarship regarding this period in history by focusing on the contributions of women like Ella Baker, Shirley Chisolm, and Fanny Lou Hamer.

There are few historians who have tackled the idea of gender in the Black Panther Party while emphasizing Elaine Brown's role within the Party. Historians Antwanisha Alameen-Shaver's article "The Woman Question: Gender Dynamics within the Black Panther Party" and Robyn C. Spencer's book *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* fall under that category. Alameen-Shavers notes that "the Black Panther Party's view on male and female equality came at a time when women themselves were demanding equal rights and equal pay, yet in the eyes of some, the Panthers' position on these matters was out of step with the majority of American men."[16] Alameen-Shavers' article does highlight the importance of Elaine Brown's time as chairperson of the Party, something that has not been done in many other sources. While it was only three years, the difference was notable. Other former Panther members commented on life under Elaine Brown and stated that "the Central Committee had bec[a]me more balanced along gender lines."[17] Ericka Huggins, who was one of the few women in the early years of the Black Panther Party to reach high rank,

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[16] Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers, "The Woman Question: Gender Dynamics within the Black Panther Party," *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men* 5, no. 1 (Fall 2016): 38.

[17] Alameen-Shavers, "The Woman Question," 45.

commented on what Brown's leadership meant for the rest of the party. She "believed that the addition of more women on the committee actually served to balance out the masculine energy that had once dominated: 'The reason why women were placed on the Central Committee of the Black Panther Party is to give it greater balance. . . Before there were women on the Central Committee of the Black Panther Party, it was all like "let's just do it like this" (imitating male voice) and it wasn't always the best.'"[18] Alameen-Shavers' work is necessary to restructuring the usual history that is associated with the Black Panther Party as she sheds a light on the innerworkings of the Party.

Robyn Spencer's *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* goes hand-in-hand with Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers' article. Spencer traces the story of the Black Panther Party in a chronological manner but places an emphasis on the role of gender within the Party. The central argument of this book centers around the idea of expanding how we understand the Black Panther Party. Spencer shows that there was much more to the Party and its members than just the original goal of self-defense. Spencer's argument hinges on the idea that gender played a crucial role in the Party and its survival because with many of its leaders imprisoned or killed throughout the years, as women stepped up and were a stable backbone through all levels of the organization. The Black Panther Party became heavily involved in the community and its politics which elevated its status from just a militant group.

According to Spencer, the turning point for the Black Panther Party was the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Spencer quotes Kathleen Cleaver who "called King's murder 'probably the single most significant event in terms of how the Panthers were perceived by the

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[18] Erika Huggins qtd in Alameen-Shavers, "The Woman Question," 47.

black community . . . So, it's like the Panthers were all of a sudden thrust into the forefront of being the alternative.'"[19] Spencer surmises that "King's death forced a reevaluation of the Panthers by those who had dismissed them as irresponsible radicals."[20] This shift was not only significant for the Party but also the women of the Party. Thrust into the forefront of the fight for equality, the Panthers saw fit to somewhat rebrand themselves and many of their community programs began to arise after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Programs such as the Free Breakfast Program, the Free Prison Busing Program, and the People's Free Ambulance Service was run by women like "Ruth Beckford, a community activist and a member of the Panthers' Advisory Committee who became involved in the planning and implantation of the Breakfast Program, helped plan the logistics of the program: the food, frequency of donations, and staff."[21] Stories such as Ruth Beckford's were not unheard of within the Black Panther Party and Spencer highlights these stories throughout her work.

Spencer provides first-hand accounts from many different Party members throughout the book and personal statements from women like Erika Huggins and Elaine Brown (and many others) to make one understand what life was like within the Party and how its members reacted to the ebbs and flow of the Party. Despite the fact that the Black Panther Party was short-lived, Spencer makes it obvious that this organization was crucial to the national and international connection of the Black Power Movement. The Black Panther Party was able to connect with so many members due to the relatability of its founding members and it was able to flourish due to a deep commitment to the cause of racial equality. This book provides a new way to understand

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[19] Kathleen Cleaver qtd in Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 61.

[20] Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 61.

[21] Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come,* 85.

the Black Panther Party as a whole and a new way to understand the struggles of African American women.

Elaine Brown's autobiography *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* details her journey from urban Philadelphia to Oakland and eventually her time as chairperson of the Black Panther Party. Brown was the only woman to ever lead the Black Panther Party, yet her time as leader is often not discussed in other histories of the Party. Brown bounded around Oakland for a time moonlighting as a singer, and she signed her first record deal. It was when Brown witnessed the Sacramento March on her television that she decided to join. Brown joined as a rank-and-file member where she cleaned guns, sold newspapers, and did other tasks designated for rank-and-file members. Brown describes in detail the beginnings of her time in the Black Panther Party, and she noted in her work that the Central Committee "which governed the party" was led by all men. After her orientation, she notes that they "broke into small groups according to gender."[22] There were little inconsistencies similar to this one that Brown notes throughout her book. While to some it may not appear to be the act of male chauvinism, it was the fact that the Party claimed to be progressive in terms of gender equality but then continued to separate based on gender that was an issue.

Unlike most women within the Party, Brown soon began to climb up within the ranks. She became the editor of *The Black Panther* newspaper in 1970 and eventually ran for Oakland City Council in 1973 alongside Bobby Seale who was running for Mayor of Oakland. This campaign gave Brown status within the Party and the Community; however, it was not without its struggles. Increased notoriety lead to increased scrutiny, especially from the male members of the Party. When Huey Newton jumped bail in 1974, Brown stepped into the position of

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[22] Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 135.

chairperson and stayed in that role until 1977. She struggled during her time as chairperson, starting with the fact that she installed more women within the Central Committee. She recalls in her book "I had introduced a number of women in the Party's administration. There were too many women in command of the affairs of the Black Panther Party, numerous men were grumbling. 'I hear we can't call them bitches no more,' one Brother actually stated to me in the middle of an extraordinarily hectic day. 'No, motherfucker,' I responded unendearingly, 'you may not call them bitches 'no more.'"[23] It was comments such as these that proved troublesome for Brown during her time as chairperson, as the men of the Party were not necessarily comfortable with doing away with certain language or actions that had been acceptable under male leaders. While Brown was able to push the Black Panther Party into the political and social world that it had not ever been in under male leadership, the grumblings seemed to have become too loud for Elaine Brown to ignore.

When she resigned in November 1977, she wrote a note to Huey Newton that stated, "but it seemed too much of a man's world for me."[24] Her resignation and reasoning for leaving the Party demonstrate the struggle for gender balance within the Party. Many female Panther members and black women during this time felt as though they were "forced to choose between pledging membership to a movement against racism or chauvinism."[25] For some, including Brown, there was not truly a choice, with black people being killed on the streets and facing constant harassment from the police. In this context, ignoring male chauvinism seemed as though

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[23] Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 362.

[24] Elaine Brown, "Resignation Letter," November 1977, Series 2: Black Panther Party Records, Subseries 7: Individuals, Folder 5, "Elaine Resigns From the B.P.P. 1977," Box 41, Huey P. Newton Foundation Papers, Special Collections, Green Library, Stanford University (hereafter HPN Papers).

[25] Ula Taylor, "The Historical Evolution of Black Feminist Theory and Praxis," *Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 2 (November 1998): 240-1.

it was the obvious choice. However, some women including Brenda Bay, felt that the Party needed to "take a close look at our internal issues for it is a threat to [the] movement."[26] Despite this lack of true equality within the Party, it is key to acknowledge how much the women contributed towards the success of the Black Panther Party. The shift towards a political and social organization was made possible by the work of women such as Elaine Brown, Kathleen Cleaver, and Ericka Huggins yet, their work goes unrecognized in many retellings of the history of the Black Panther Party.

Black women of the Black Panther Party were faced with a three-front struggle. Racism, sexism, and classism all went into how these women operated on a daily basis. The sexism that was rampant in the United States was embodied by the black men of the Party and while women were struggling and not necessarily achieving the same respect as their male counterparts, the issue of male chauvinism was more or less pushed to the back burner. Even in today's understanding of the Black Panther Party, the women and their struggles and successes are left out of the narrative, yet they played a crucial role in its success. In order to fully grasp the impact that the Black Panther Party had on the political and social world of the 1960s and 70s it is essential that the stories of women be told. Their lives mirrored that of other black woman living in the United States during the Civil Rights era and acknowledging their existence and contribution to this time will shape the way black women are understood in the context of the Civil Rights era. Even though female Panther members were somewhat thrust into roles of leadership due to the fact that the men were either in prison or killed, they were able to sustain the Party and sustain it in a way that was not realized under the male leadership.

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[26] Brenda Bay, "Memo to Central Body," n.d., Series 2: Black Panther Party Records, Subseries 2: Internal Documents, Folder 2, "Central Committee Info. [1 of 4] 1969 - 1974, Box 4, HPN Papers.

Scholarship on the subject of women and gender in the Black Panther Party are apparent, historians have demonstrated the lack of true equality within the Party. However, what is missing is a true in-depth look at Elaine Brown and how she confronted the issues of gender and chauvinism within the Party. Brown's three years as Chairperson of the Black Panther party demonstrate a true shift in Party politics, but it is not really centered upon in the scholarship that is focused on the Black Panther Party. Yet, Brown's rise to leadership within what many consider a male dominated organization needs to be considered when analyzing the Black Panther Party. An in-depth look at one of the most influential black women during the black power movement provides an entirely new perspective on what black power actually meant for those who maybe were not in the forefront of the movement. Brown's time as chairperson of the Panther's forces a reexamination of one of the most controversial organizations of the 20th century and makes one wonder whether or not the Panther's would have survived past 1974 without Brown.

This thesis is a chronological look at Elaine Brown's time in the Black Panther Party and it will examine how she went from outsider of the Party to the chairperson. Chapter One focuses on Elaine Brown's first five years within the Party (1968-1973). It examines different avenues of importance from how Brown first became involved with the Party, to her first taste of power, to her political beginnings, to her involvement with the social programs, and to her challenges as a black woman in the Black Panther Party. Understanding the early years of Brown within the Party is crucial to understanding how she took on leadership. The chauvinism, state oppression, and other experiences dictated how Brown saw the Party and those outside the Party, which impacted how she approached things.

The focus of Chapter Two begins in 1974, when Brown became chairperson of the Party, and conclude in late 1977 when Brown resigns from the Party. This chapter places Brown's leadership in context with the political and social actions taken by the Party and argue that her time as leader allowed for gender balance in the Party. Brown continued to expand upon the work she had been doing as a rank-and-file member. She kept pushing for political and social change but as a female leader, it was difficult to be taken seriously in these areas. Despite the internal and external opposition, Brown was able to elevate the Panthers to a status of respectability that had not been seen under any of the male leader.

CHAPTER ONE

Fighting for the Right to Fight for Freedom

A key component of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense were its police patrols,

where "members of the BPP would listen to police calls on a short-wave radio, rush to the scene

of the arrest with law books in hand and inform the person being arrested of their constitutional

rights."[1] At these stops the Panthers carried loaded weapons and, in an effort to comply with

California's gun laws in 1966, they did not conceal them. The Panthers were complying with the

restrictions of the state law; however, California's state legislators drafted the Mulford Act in

response to their activism. Written by Republican Don Mulford, a state assemblyman, the

Mulford Act in the simplest of terms banned citizens from carrying loaded firearms in public

spaces. Exasperated by the proposal of this law, the Panthers decided to take matters into their

own hands.

On May 2nd, 1967 "carrying rifles, pistols and shotguns, and wearing dark glasses, leather

jackets and berets, they marched up the front steps and into the Capitol to demonstrate their

opposition to [the] anti-gun bill."[2] The scene that unfolded that day saw "30 members of the

Black Panthers protest on the steps of the California statehouse armed with .357 Magnums, 12-

guage shotguns, and .45 caliber pistols."[3] The Panthers stood in the building and "announced,

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[1] "State Capitol March," PBS, n.d.

[2] Chuck McFadden, "Armed Black Panthers in the Capitol, 50 Years On," Capitol Weekly, April 26, 2017, https://capitolweekly.net/black-panthers-armed-capitol/.

[3] Thaddeus Morgan, "The NRA Supported Gun Control When the Black Panthers Had the Weapons," *The History Channel*, August 30, 2018.

'the time has come for black people to arm themselves.'"[4] This would later be known as the

Sacramento March, a moment that cemented the Panthers on the national stage.

Panther Bobby Seale "planned to read a statement (Executive [Mandate] #1) written by

Newton declaring the right of black people to arm themselves in self-defense."[5] The mandate

claimed that the black community must arm themselves "against this terror before it is too late.

The pending Mulford Act brings the hour of doom one step nearer."[6] After reading the

statement, the Panthers went inside the building and after a brief confrontation with police, the

Panthers left. As the Capitol was swarming with reporters, the media coverage on the incident

was rapidly spread to the rest of the country. The media at the time skewed the story of the

Panthers march, including the *New York Times* who published an article with the headline

"Armed Negroes Protest Gun Bill: 30 Black Panthers Invade Sacramento Legislature."[7] While

the Panthers were certainly getting the attention of the country, it was not always positive.

Therefore, they took matters into their own hands and published the following statement in their

newspaper:

> To get a clear picture of the significance of Black Panther day – May 2, 1967 –
> we will quickly run it down, since the mass media has indulged itself in an orgy
> of distortion, lying, and misrepresentation seldom equaled in the history of racist
> U.S.A. Uniformly, the mass media has refused to report the chain of events that
> led up to the visit of the Black Panthers to the capitol ... NEGROES WITH
> GUNS! That was the only issue at the Capitol. The antique racists in the power
> structure were 'disturbed' not because of any overt or threatening action by the
> Black Panthers; they were disturbed by their own guilt-ridden white racist
> psyches in which they suffer nightmares of armed masses someday rushing upon

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[4] Morgan, "The NRA."

[5] Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 53.

[6] Huey Newton, "Executive Mandate No. 1" (Pamphlet titled Essays From the Minister of Defense published by the Black Panther Party, May 2, 1967).

[7] "Armed Negroes Protest Gun Bill: 30 Black Panthers Invade Sacramento Legislature," *The New York Times*, May 3, 1967.

them while they are in the act of plotting their characteristic assaults upon the Life, Liberty, and Pursuit of Happiness of the people.[8]

The Panthers recognized the type of coverage this event was getting, and this publication demonstrated that the Panthers were there to stay. The Sacramento March altered the course of the Black Panther Party, who were put on the national stage and the radar of politicians everywhere but especially in California. For Elaine Brown, a young waitress in Watts, Los Angeles, this day changed her life.

On the day of the Sacramento March, Brown watched her local evening news and a story about the Black panthers came across her screen. Brown "saw the celebrated march through the state capitol in Sacramento by armed members of the Panther Party. That impressed her. 'That was a powerful statement,' [Brown] said. 'Here was some Black Folks that reminded me of some of the Philadelphia street gangs, but they had a purpose.'"[9] This display of power and hope from the Black Panther Party struck a chord within Brown, and even though she joined the Party "because they 'scared her,' [she recognized that] 'they were doing something'"[10] Unlike what she was used to anywhere else, the Panthers had a goal and mission when they marched on the Sacramento Capitol. Brown saw members of the black community unite against their oppressors and force them to listen to their protests.

Brown was still coming to terms with her life in Los Angeles when three shattering changes hit the city and the black community, especially. First, on April 3, 1968, there was a massive earthquake in Los Angeles, which looking back was almost foreshadowing to what was

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[8] "The Truth About Sacramento," *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service*, May 15, 1967, Vol 1 No. 2 edition.

[9] Sharon McGriff, The Evolution of Elaine Brown, August 26, 1976, Series 8: Newspaper Clippings, Folder 28, "[Newspaper Clippings] [2 of 2] 1976 - 1978," Box 4, HPN Papers, 2.

[10] Ibid.

to come the next day. An earthquake in different respects, shortly after 6:00 pm on April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was shot and killed in Memphis, Tennessee. The aftershocks of this event spread rapidly across the black community throughout the country and ended the nonviolent movement that King had spearheaded for the last thirteen years. As protests ripped across the nation, the Panthers were once again thrust onto the national stage when seventeen-year-old Panther Bobby Hutton was shot dead in an altercation with police on April 6th, 1968.[11] These events, coupled with Brown's admiration for the Panther's march on the Sacramento state capitol a year earlier, led Brown to be pulled into the circle of black power and black nationalism. The people she met in this world encouraged her to go down "'to the Black Congress sometime. Maybe [she] could do something for the black people. You know, get involved.'"[12] The Black Congress, or "the Congress, as it was called, was an umbrella group, made up of virtually every organization in the area. It was administered by an executive committee composed of representatives of each member organization."[13] After she attended a few meetings, Brown joined the Southern California chapter of the Black Panther Party.

The next five years of the Black Panther Party were filled with successes and downfalls. From 1968 through 1973, the period that this chapter focuses on, Elaine Brown went from stranger and bystander to the Party to the center of all its biggest achievements, serving as the right hand of Huey Newton. The gender discrepancies, state oppression, development of social services and political campaigns shaped Brown as a person and member of the Party. This

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[11] Brown, *A Taste Of Power*, 131.

[12] Brown, *A Taste Of Power,* 106.

[13] Ibid.

chapter will argue that the lessons she learned, experiences she gained, and struggles she endured were crucial to the making of the only female chairperson of the Black Panther Party.

The Gender Reality

Despite Brown's clear dedication to the Party from the beginning, she was made aware that there was a certain way of doing things within the Party and it did not always line up with what the Party preached, particularly when it came to gender. The Eight Points of Attention that the Panthers abided by were lifted from Mao Tse Tung's Red Book *Quotations of Chairman Mao*. "One of the eight points was Do Not Take Liberties With Women."[14] This served as a warning to the men of the Party: that not asking for permission when it comes to relationships with women would not be tolerated. Unfortunately, this was a deterrent that was necessary because sexual assault was a common occurrence for Black women throughout the Jim Crow and Civil Rights Era. Historian Danielle McGuire notes in her article, "It Was like All of Us Had Been Raped: Sexual Violence, Community Mobilization, and the African American Freedom Struggle," that the sexual exploitation of Black women can be traced back to slavery. McGuire argues that in order to comprehend gender politics and the role of gender in the Civil Rights era, "we must explore these battles over manhood and womanhood, frequently set in the context of sexualized violence, that remain at the volatile core of the modern civil rights movement."[15] Therefore, when Huey Newton and Bobby Seale promoted the idea of not taking liberties with

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[14] Safiya Bukhari-Alston, "On The Question Of Sexism Within The Black Panther Party," March 9, 1995, 3.

[15] Danielle McGuire, "It Was like All of Us Had Been Raped: Sexual Violence, Community Mobilization, and the African American Freedom Struggle," *Journal of American History* 19, no. 3 (2004): 931. See also, Danielle L. McGuire, *At The Dark End Of The Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance: A New History Of The Civil Rights Movement, from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*, 1st ed (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010); Carolyn West and Kalimah Johnson, "Sexual Violence in the Lives of African American Women," *VAWnet: The National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women*, March 2013.

women, it was seen as a step forward for black women because finally men were addressing the

treatment of women.

Yet, there were many instances of Seale and Newton, along with other rank-and-file male

Panthers, engaging in everyday life with a sexist or chauvinist attitude. From the beginning there

were patriarchal norms brought to the Party by the male members and "gender bias was

particularly evident during the formative years (1966-68) of the BPP. A gender-based

organizational structure (Panther/Pantherette) and frequent male chauvinistic behavior are but

two outcomes of early gender bias within the BPP."[16] For example, gendered expectations and

assumptions appeared in *The Black Panther*, the Party's newspaper and a major cornerstone of

the Black Panther Party and its communication with the public. *The Black Panther* regularly

published essays and articles written by Newton that demonstrate sexism within the Party. In

1968, the paper published his essay entitled "Fear and Doubt," in which he assesses the structure

of the Black family:

> He [the black man] feels that he is something less than a man . . . Often his wife
> (who is able to secure a job as a maid, cleaning for White people) is the
> breadwinner. He is, therefore viewed as quite worthless by his wife and children.
> He is ineffectual both in and out of the home. He cannot provide for, or protect his
> family . . . Society will not acknowledge him as a man.[17]

For Newton and other Panther men, their definition of manhood was pretty stereotypical with

what society thinks is a man's job. They were supposed to provide for their wives and kids and if

the wife was working, they were going to be considered less of a man. Newton seemingly places

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[16] Charles E. Jones and Judson L. Jefferies, "'Don't Believe the Hype': Debunking the Panther Mythology," in *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2005), 33.

[17] Huey Newton, "Fear and Doubt" (Essay, Oakland, May 15, 1967), qtd in Tracey Matthews, "No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Place in the Revolution Is: Gender and the Politics of The Black Panther Party 1966 - 1971," in *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered),* ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2005), 276.

a large stake in what society thinks of men and black men within the Party were clearly influenced by Newton. His influence on the thinking of male Panthers can be dangerous, as it can have detrimental impact on women by discouraging them from getting a job due to the fact it may make their husband or partner feel like less of a man. Newton appears to suggest that women are responsible for making the men of the family feel like more of a man and they should do so by not retaining a job. Rather, these women were going to be responsible for raising the children, who Newton saw as the next generation of the revolution.

Within the Party, women were more or less expected to behave in a similar manner. They were seen as a "a tool of the revolution. [They] had the task of the task of producing children, progeny of revolution who would carry the flame when [others] fell, knowing that generations after us would prevail."[18] Newton's beliefs about black women were carried into the ideology of the Party and helped create the structure of daily life within the Party.

The African American family came under scrutiny in the 1960s after the release of the Moynihan report. Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Moynihan, a white man, released a report on African American families entitled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." Throughout the report, Moynihan "used sociological, historical, anecdotal, and statistical information regarding the status of Black families to draw the conclusions that Black families were matriarchal, that black men were unable to fulfill the roles required of men in a patriarchal society, and that the resulting pattern of female-headed households was largely responsible for the 'tangle of pathology' in which Black people found themselves."[19] This line of thinking was similar to how Newton described the failings of Black men in his own essay, which was

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[18] Brown, *A Taste Of Power*, 137.

[19] Matthews, "No One Ever Asks," 275.

published three years after the Moynihan report. This suggests that Newton may have been influenced by the ideas of Moynihan and the societal weight they held, especially the ideas surrounding the black family and role of black women.

The Moynihan report has largely been criticized, for a number of reasons, in the years following its publication. For example, Moynihan made generalizing statements about the structure of the black family. He stated, "the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male, and in consequence on a great many Negro women as well."[20] Not only is he suggesting that the black community is behind or less than the rest of 'American society,' he blames this on female-headed households. Blaming black women for the current status and treatment of the black community took away from the fact that racism was rampant across the United States and had found its way into every aspect of life. Moynihan's words added fuel to the ever-growing disrespect and hatred towards black women in America. The influence of the Moynihan document proved to be substantial, as it reached men such as Newton, who had an upbringing similar to what Moynihan suggested was better for the black community: a family with a strong father figure and a stay-at home mother. Newton's views on black women and their role within the family very much mirrored that of Moynihan.

In 1973 Newton gave an interview with *Playboy* Magazine on all aspects of the Black Panther Party, including the impact of his upbringing on his understanding of gender. Newton was raised by what he described as "a strong, proud man who had very few fears" and a mother

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[20] Daniel Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case For National Action" (Office of Policy Planning and Research: United States Department of Labor, March 1965), 29.

who never worked.[21] After discussing his mother, the interviewer turned to black women and the

Black Panther Party:

> It just happens that in the party, women hold more official positions than men do-
> and also higher offices, in general. All of which gets the black male pretty upset.
> There's no black male superiority complex, as you have with the white male.
> Really, it's because of an inferiority complex that he feels threatened, because the
> woman in his house is always the master, anyway, and he wants to cut the cord.
> So, we get some disagreements in the party about women holding more of the
> positions; some of the brothers don't like it.[22]

This is a clever statement by Newton. First, he makes sure in the beginning to remind the readers

that women are being promoted to higher rankings within the Black Panther Party before he goes

onto describe how men within the Party have an issue with women being in these positions.

Newton is placing the blame of this chauvinist behavior on other men of the Party, while he

portrays himself as remaining true to the original Party feeling of respecting women. Published

in 1973, this interview came out months before Newton fled to Cuba and Elaine Brown assumed

the role of chairperson. Sexism within the Party was a cause of tension within the organization

for a few years, even prior to Brown becoming leader.

Bobby Seale also had a large influence over the men and women of the Party. Given his

charisma and charm, it was difficult to not listen and want to fall in line with what he was saying.

For example, in 1968 a few Los Angeles Panthers were gathered in a room watching the news,

and Brown and Seale were having a conversation in another room. During this conversation,

Seale called over the only other woman in the room. Seale demanded that this woman, Sister

Marsha, "tell Sister [Brown] what a Brother has to do to get some from you.' [to which she

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[21] Playboy, "Huey Newton: A Candid Conversation with The Embattled Leader of the Black Panther Party," May 1973, Series 2: Black Panther Party Records, Subseries 8: Reference Materials, Folder 6, "Articles General [1 of 2] 1971 - 1973," Box 57, HPN Papers, 6.

[22] Ibid.

responded] 'First of all, a Brother's got to be righteous. He's got to be a Panther.'" After a brief pause, she added "'can't no motherfucker get no pussy from me unless he can get down with the party.' She added without prompting."[23] Seale demonstrated that women within the Party felt as though they could only have relationships with men within the Party. If that had been a personal choice, it would have been different but Sister Marsha and other women almost seemed trained to think this way. Sister Marsha felt the need to add the comment about the sexual relations unprompted, which also signals the way that women were trained to believe that the only qualification a man needed was that he was 'down with the Party.' While it is not the highest of standards needed, it seemed as though the Panther men were worried about non-Panther men corrupting Panther women, therefore Panther women felt as though they had to say a man had to 'get down with the Party.' The fear of retaliation can almost be seen in those statements from Sister Marsha in front of head Panther member Bobby Seale.

Eldridge Cleaver, married to BPP member Kathleen Cleaver, was a very prominent figure in the early years of the Black Panther Party, and despite eventually being exiled from the organization, he had a very strong influence over the group and its ideology. In his 1968 book, *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver eloquently delved into the issues of racism within the country and the political world. However, as historian Robyn C. Spencer aptly argues, "the book was also a paean to machismo and heterosexual manhood that excused the violent rape of women."[24] Cleaver opens this book with a few letters that he wrote in prison, the first of which came on June 25th, 1969, detailing his mindset surrounding black women. He wrote, "I became a rapist. To refine my technique and modus operandi, I started out by practicing on black girls in the

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[23] Brown, *A Taste Of Power*, 189.

[24] Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 44.

ghetto ... Rape was an insurrectionary act."[25] There were many other issues presented within Cleaver's memoir, most of which will not be discussed within the context of the Black Panther Party or Elaine Brown, but it is essential to remember that Cleaver, a man who openly admitted to practicing rape on black girls, became a high-ranking member within the Party.

It was not just the Oakland Panthers who were dealing with issues of sexism and male chauvinism, it was an issue across the nation, as other chapters grappled with the "gender" question. Still, it was an issue that many of the members, male or female, actively did not want to engage in within their chapters. For example, "members of the Illinois Panthers insisted emphatically that the problem [sexism and male chauvinism] was minimal in the Illinois chapter."[26] However, this was not the case. Brenda Harris, former member of the Illinois chapter "recounted how male members of the Illinois chapter's rank and file often made comments to fellow female members that were offensive."[27] "Some female members," Harris continued, "were called 'prostitutes,' comments were made about 'their big booties,' she was once called a 'banana face bitch,' and some women faced the danger of being "sexually exploited if she didn't have the wherewithal to stand up for herself.'"[28] There is the implication that it was up to the women to stop the sexual harassment, the men were not going to stop. Unfortunately, outward criticism or protest against chauvinism or sexual harassment from women was not common. Former Panther Yvonne King noted that women in the Illinois chapter "'challenged the sexism,

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[25] Eldridge Cleaver, "Letters from Prison," in *Soul on Ice* (Random House Publishing Group, 1999), 33.

[26] Jakobi Williams, "'Don't No Woman Have to Do Nothing She Don't Want to Do': Gender, Activism, and the Illinois Black Panther Party," *Black Women, Gender + Families* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 42.

[27] Williams, "Don't No Woman," 41.

[28] Ibid.

maybe not overtly, but through our belief in the Party's policy and its principle.'"[29] This statement along with other actions from female Panther members demonstrates that sexism took a backseat. The common feeling amongst women was that there was a choice between confronting racism and sexism. This dilemma continued to be ever-present throughout the Black Panther Party and their ideology.

As the BPP's founders, Newton and Seale's initial purpose was predominately protection for Black communities, hence the Party was originally called 'The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.' By taking this name, Newton and Seale were not outwardly taking a stance on gender. Instead, it appears that by concerning themselves with protection that they did not have to deal with things such as needing gender balance. However, the protection in and of itself was gendered because they felt that they, the men, were going to protect the community. Due to the fact that there were not women in the Party at this point, it can be assumed that they believed the men were going to be responsible for protecting the women of the black community. However, as the numbers of females began to increase in the organization, and they dropped the 'for self-defense' portion of their title, the Party began advocating for more than just protection of black communities. This switch made it clear to Newton and Seale that they were somewhat going to have to address the issue of gender within the Party. With the Party continuing to evolve, Newton and Seale promoted a rhetoric that was of unity amongst the Black community, and while they "theorized about the need for strong manhood [they did not] counter that with

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[29] Yvonne King qtd in Jakobi Williams, *From the Bullet to the Ballot: The Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party and Racial Coalition Politics in Chicago* (New Caledonia: University of North Carolina Press, 2013): 116.

descriptions of submissive womanhood. Black women turned these theoretical loopholes into open doors."[30]

For Elaine Brown and other women within the Party, the idea that sexism and male chauvinism existed in the Party was not lost on them. However, "sexism was a secondary problem" for Brown.[31] Brown's thinking was not that she did not believe in sexism or that sexism was not a problem. Rather, she recognized that in the fight against racism, there was a common enemy for the Panthers: "the capitalist system and the police who brutalized and murdered black people."[32] When it came to the issues of sexism and male chauvinism, there was not that same sense of unity.

Many black women did not identify as 'feminists' because it was thought to be a 'white' word and a white woman's ideology. Black women believed that they were fighting for different things in comparison to white women. Safiya Bukhari, a former member of the Black Panther Party, noted that "The white women were seeking to change their role in society vis-a-vis the home and the workplace and to be seen as more than just a mother and homemaker. Our situation was different, we had been working outside of the home and supporting our families. Our struggle was not a struggle to be liberated so we could move into the workplace, but a struggle to be recognized as human beings."[33]

For Brown, displays of chauvinist and sexist attitudes were something she and the other women took at face value, somewhat aware of the fact that it would be difficult to change it. Rather than fight it, a lot of the women unfortunately were forced to accept the chauvinism. For

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[30] Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 46.

[31] Brown, *A Taste Of Power*, 367.

[32] Calloway, "Group Cohesiveness," 61.

[33] Bukhari-Alston, "On The Question Of Sexism," 3.

example, Ericka Huggins broke down the roles for the men and the women of the Party to a

somewhat unsuspecting group of women in 1968, including Brown:

> As women, our role was not very different from that of the men, except in certain particulars. Ericka told us point-blank that as women we might have to have a sexual encounter with 'the enemy' at night and slit his throat in morning – at which we all groaned ... Our gender was but another weapon, another tool of the revolution. We also had the task of producing children, progeny of revolution who would carry the flame when we fell, knowing that generations after us would prevail.[34]

Yet, many of these women took this news and coped with it easily and did not necessarily push

back on it. They were a part of the revolution after all, any way they could do their part was

encouraging for them. Scholar Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers argues that Black Panther women

"did not completely grasp how sexism not only shaped their thinking but occupied an unhealthy

space in their lives. Some Panther women believed that sexism was not as crucial."[35] Many black

women at the time, not only in the Party but in the country in general, were essentially faced with

a choice: "…pledging membership to a movement against racism or chauvinism."[36] Due to the

intense harassment that was facing the Panthers at the hands of the Oakland Police and the FBI,

many women felt as though sexism might not be as big of a priority in the grand scheme of

things, "therefore, though sexism in the party was evident, state repression proved even direr."[37]

Elaine Brown's Growing Responsibilities

Despite the prevalence of chauvinistic thinking, Brown was not deterred from

participating within the Party as she rose quickly through the ranks of the organization. Prior to

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[34] Brown, *A Taste Of Power,* 136.

[35] Alameen-Shavers, "The Woman Question," 55.

[36] Taylor, "The Historical Evolution," 241.

[37] Alameen-Shavers, "The Woman Question," 47.

joining the Black Panther Party, Brown had worked for the African American newspaper *Harambee*, where she wrote poems and songs about black people and their struggles. Her love for writing and advocating for black Americans stuck with her as she ventured towards the Black Panther Party. Once Brown joined the Black Panther Party in 1968, she took on regular jobs such as selling newspapers to surrounding communities, but she aimed higher. In 1970, Bobby Seale had taken over administration of the Party's newspaper and Elbert Howard (aka Big Man) was the newspaper's editor. This year for the Panthers saw members such as David Hilliard, who were influential in the next few years, come onto the Central Committee. Hilliard quickly rose through the ranks of the Party and become the Party's Chief of Staff in 1968, at which point he was "responsible for administering the organizational affairs."[38] Through this role, Hilliard became a close confidant of Huey Newton. According to Kathleen Cleaver, prominent member of the Party, "David Hilliard had implemented a harshly authoritarian policy that engendered intense resentment."[39] Hilliard's appointment within the Party altered its very landscape in which it was operating. The later paranoia of Newton in 1973 demonstrates that he took notice of the implementations Hilliard had made. Around the time that Hilliard was introduced as high-ranking member, Newton decided to replace Big Man as editor of the newspaper, selecting Brown to take over.

Unfortunately, this decision was not met with resounding support. In her autobiography, Brown noted "he [Seale] hated my presence at the newspaper the minute Huey placed me there,

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[38] Angela LeBlanc-Ernest, "'The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job': Black Panther Party Women, 1966 - 1982," in *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2005), 310.

[39] Kathleen Cleaver, "Back to Africa: The Evolution of the International Section of the Black Panther Party (1969 - 1972)," in *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2005), 236.

though he never challenged Huey about it."[40] Brown was not swayed by Seale's distaste for her,

it actually seemed to encourage her. Alongside Joan Kelley, Brown worked on broadening the

scope of the newspaper.

Figure 1: Excerpt taken from *The Black Panther* Newspaper published on November 23rd, 1967.

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[40] Brown, *A Taste Of Power*, 273.
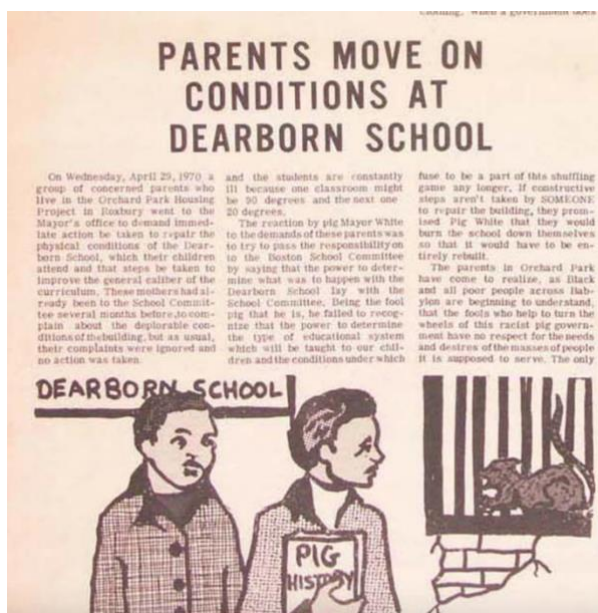
Figure 2: Excerpt taken from *The Black Panther* Newspaper published on May 31st, 1970.

Figure 3: Excerpt taken from *The Black Panther* Newspaper published on January 23, 1971.

For example, illustrations in a 1967 issue (fig. 1), published under male editorship, sent very particular messages about gender and the revolutionary struggle, advertising revolutionary posters that were for sale. The illustrations show H. Rap Brown, a known civil rights activist, a man, LeRoi Jones, who appears to be in a prisoner's jumpsuit, and a mother holding a child. While there are no words associated with these drawings, the message that is being sent to the readers and potential buyers of these posters is clear: The role of women in the revolutionary struggle is as mothers. While for many that was a key part of the revolution, it is somewhat of a limiting manner to portray women in within the Party. Both men who are portrayed are actual

people that were involved in the Civil Rights movement, depicted in their likeness. Yet, the woman is unnamed, anonymous, and is depicted from the back with a child in her arms.

In one of the earliest editions of *The Black Panther*, there was a recruitment call for new members. It began by stating "The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense really has something going. These brothers are the cream of Black Manhood. They are there for the protection and defense of our Black Community."[41] The advertisement ends with "BLACK MEN!!! It is your duty to your women and children, to your mothers and sisters, to investigate the program of the PARTY. There is no other way."[42] In this advertisement women are portrayed as something to be protected and shielded alongside their children, by referring to the 'brothers' as 'the cream of black manhood' it reinforces the stigma that the men were the protectors, and the women were just meant to be mothers. Women can be both mothers and part of the revolution in other ways, however, this campaign sees women as one-dimensional. Brown herself was a mother and eventual leader of the Black Panther Party.

In contrast, articles and drawings published under Brown's time as editor, emphasize the Party's community programs (fig. 2) and parent activism (fig. 1). As editor of *The Black Panther* newspaper, Brown essentially had control over what the public was reading. She demonstrated to the community that the Panthers were concerning themselves with what was happening outside of the Party and taking steps to benefit the community and by doing so she garnered more community support, which would prove necessary in a few years when she ran for office.

As editor of *The Black Panther*, Brown was being pulled into more of the inner politics of the Party, which was complicated by her loyalty to Newton. Newton, who was the Party's

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[41] Black Panther Party For Self Defense, "Armed Black Brother in Richmond Community," *The Black Panther*, April 25, 1967, 1 edition.

[42] Ibid.

"servant of the people," had made Brown editor of the paper and told Brown that "we can't have Bobby actually running the paper."[43] Seale, however, was chairman of the Party and he made Brown's life difficult while she was editor. Brown noted that "the newspaper had to be ready for the press precisely at twelve noon on Wednesdays, Bobby suddenly orders. After that, Bobby began showing up on Wednesday mornings with last minute articles. He would demand that an article be pulled leaving a big hole. Then he would add insult to injury by standing over us at the layout tables until we finished, threatening 'discipline' for failure to get the paper out on time."[44] Under the watchful eye of Seale, Brown and Kelly struggled to get the paper out which led to Seale punishing her. She detailed how she received whip lashes from John Seale, the younger brother of Bobby Seale, after the paper was an hour late. Brown was determined not to show weakness in this instance; But after receiving her discipline she approached Newton and demanded that something be done about Seale. Newton eventually moved him to the Community Survival programs, which forced him to turn his attention away from the paper and Brown.

Brown had established herself within the Party as someone who demanded respect. Out of the fifteen names listed on the Party's Central Committee, Brown was just one of four women listed, alongside Ericka Huggins (Deputy Chairman), Joan Kelly (Asst. Secretary of the Central Committee), and Gwen Goodloe (Secretary of the Central Committee).[45] Brown was listed as the Minister of Information (MOI), a role that had been held by the now expelled Eldridge Cleaver. According to internal documents of the Black Panther Party, the MOI's job "is to coordinate and represent the Black Panther Party functions wherever it is deemed politically necessary and to

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[43] Brown, *A Taste Of Power*, 274.

[44] Brown, *A Taste of Power,* 275.

[45] "The Central Committee of the Black Panther Party," n.d., Series 2: Black Panther Party Records, Subseries 2: Internal Documents, Folder 2, "Central Committee Info. [1 of 4] 1969 - 1974," Box 4, HPN Papers.

edit the paper as well as coordinate literature and other revolutionary material."[46] From 1970-1973, Brown and other Panther women was responsible for holding the Party together as Newton and Seale were both in and out of jail for periods of time and they were under increasing scrutiny from the FBI and Oakland Police. In just five years, Brown had become one of the top women within the Party, but her work within the Community Survival programs continued to move the Party in a new direction, one that involved a different sort of protection for the community.

Survival Pending Revolution

The initial aim of the Black Panther Party was simple: protect the black community. Patrolling the streets of Oakland was an effective tool that earned the Panthers respect within their community yet, the community was still suffering. In addition to protection from police brutality, the community needed free meals, a better all-encompassing education, access to more affordable clothing, and medical care, especially considering that in comparison to the white community good medical care was non-existent. The survival programs were adopted to "satisfy the immediate needs of the people while simultaneously raising their level of consciousness."[47] Newton and the Panthers recognized the long fight they had ahead of them in terms of racism, but children who were hungry was something that they could address more immediately. However, Newton did acknowledge that these programs were "not solutions to [their] problems. [He noted] that is why we call them survival programs, meaning survival pending revolution. They will help us organize the community around a true analysis and understanding of their

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[46] "Different Roles of the Black Panther Party," n.d., Series 2: Black Panther Party Records, Subseries 2: Internal Documents, Folder 5, "Black Panther Party - Publicity and Miscellaneous [1969] [2 of 4]," Box 5, HPN Papers.

[47] Charles E. Jones, "Reconsidering Panther History: The Untold Story," in *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2005), 9.

situation."[48] Essentially, the black community needed to survive while they awaited revolution. Newton and the Panthers were ensuring their survival through different services that also prompted radical education.

One of the earliest and most successful programs was the Free Breakfast for Children Program. This program was meant "to feed children a free, hot, breakfast before school in the morning."[49] The Panther argued that "Children cannot function in the classroom situation if they are hungry. The Free Breakfast Program provides a much-needed diet that is adequate in vitamins, iron, and protein."[50] Newton and the Panthers were not just feeding hungry children, as "the Service to the People Programs also educated Black communities on the nature of their oppression in American society."[51] The Panthers created these programs that provided basic needs to its community members due to the fact that they were not receiving these services from anyone else, particularly the local or federal government. These programs had another served purpose, which was to raise the consciousness levels of the members of the community. As the Panthers were providing basic needs such as education and meals to the children of the community, there was a recognition that Panthers were providing a service that no one else would. In turn, this created a sense of trust and loyalty amongst the community which helped solidify the base of the Panthers. However, this was why the FBI and director J. Edgar Hoover were so threatened by the Panthers and their programs. They were just providing meals and education to children, which certainly was important, but they were showing the other members

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[48] Husain Lateef and David Androff, "Children Can't Learn on an Empty Stomach," The Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast Program," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* 44, no. 4 (2017): 11.

[49] "The Black Panther Party Programs," n.d., Series 2: Black Panther Party Records, Subseries 2: Internal Documents, Folder 4, "Notes/Speaking Engagements," Box 12, HPN Papers.

[50] "The Black Panther Party Programs."

[51] Husain Lateef and David Androff, "Children Can't Learn on an Empty Stomach," 11.

of the community that the Panthers were on the right side of things. The FBI recognized that the Panthers could not successfully run these programs if they did not have a sense of trust amongst the base of the Panthers.

In response to the Free Breakfast Programs, FBI Director J. Edgar sent a memorandum to other FBI offices that stated that the organization was being "instructed to immediately utilize counterintelligence measures to bring to the attention of the general public the real purpose behind this breakfast program, and to neutralize any favorable publicity the BPP gains from this."[52] The Counterintelligence Program, better known as COINTELPRO "[was developed] in 1956 to disrupt the activities of the Communist Party of the United States. In the 1960s, it was expanded to include a number of other domestic groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, the Socialist Workers Party, and the Black Panther Party"[53] FBI documentation from the 1960s demonstrates the questionable and unethical manner in which the FBI and police forces went about achieving disruption. A memo dated February 10, 1971, detailed "authority granted for mailing of communication to Brother of Huey Newton implying threat to Newton's life. Insure mailing cannot be traced to the Bureau. Advise of any positive results."[54] In that same memo there is a note at the bottom that says, "it appears Newton may be on the brink of mental collapse, and we must intensify our counterintelligence."[55]

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[52] FBI, "Counterintelligence Program: Black Nationalist - Hate Groups Racial Intelligence: Black Panther Party (BPP) (Breakfast for Children Program)," July 1969. COINTELPRO Files.

[53] "COINTELPRO," FBI Records: The Vault, n.d., https://vault.fbi.gov/cointel-pro.

[54] "COINTELPRO - Black Extremists, Racial Matter," February 10, 1971, Series 4: Freedom of Information Act File, Folder 10, "Counterintelligence Program Case Histories - FBI Files [4of 5]1968 - 1971," Box 10, HPN Papers.

[55] "COINTELPRO."

Another memo, dated October 19, 1970, recommended the "approval of a counterintelligence proposal aimed at disrupting relationships between high-ranking Black Panther Party (BPP) officials, including Huey P. Newton."[56] It was clear that the Panthers were the biggest target for the FBI and COINTELPRO. The Panthers were considered a major threat and "they became the target of 233 of the total 296 authorized actions that COINTELPRO conducted against 'black nationalists' groups."[57] At every turn it seemed as though the FBI had information on the innerworkings of the Party and plans in order to disrupt them or cause paranoia within the Party.

Despite the pressure of the FBI and male Panthers like Seale and Newton, Brown decided to expand upon the success of the Oakland Free Breakfast Program. As the Panthers in Los Angeles experienced intense police assaults, the number of incarcerated Panthers increased. The community and the Panthers were on edge. At this point in late 1969-early 1970, there were thriving breakfast programs in the San Francisco Bay area yet, Brown notes "there was no such program in L.A. ... although we had served free dinners from time to time in the L.A. black community, we had found it virtually impossible to feed hungry black people with any regularity, much less to institute a breakfast program."[58] The obstacles were seemingly too large to overcome. Not only did they not have a facility to hold the breakfast program, but the outside pressure from the FBI was also mounting, which forced the Panthers in L.A. and across California to focus their attention keeping Panthers out of prison and the community safe. Yet, this did not deter Brown, who during her time in L.A. sought creative methods in order to get

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[56] G.C. Moore, "Counterintelligence Program: Black Nationalist-Hate Groups," October 19, 1970, Series 4: Freedom of Information Act File, Folder 4, "FBI Files: Internationally Counterintelligence Programs [Exhibits A - H]1970 - 1971," Box 9, HPN Papers, 1.

[57] Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 89.

[58] Brown, *A Taste Of Power*, 157.

around these issues. First, she started with access to food. She turned to UCLA's campus and decided "there ought to be a way to obtain the excess food that was being dumped into UCLA's garbage bins every night."[59] After securing the commitment from Weyburn Hall, the off-campus residency hall, and its director that they could have access to the leftover food, Brown turned to the local Seventh Day Adventist church to serve as a base facility for the program. According to Historians Dr. Elizabeth Masarick and Dr. Averill Earls, "in 1969 alone, the Panthers fed more than 20,000 children nationally and by 1971, 36 cities had Black Panther Party breakfast programs."[60] Once Brown was able to kick off the Breakfast for Children program in Los Angeles, she began tackling other survival programs.

One of the largest programs developed by the Panthers was its Free Prison busing program. According to Brown the "busing-to-prisons program [was] the first in the party. It provided transport and expenses to black families without means to visit relatives in the vast California prison network-which could have included every black in L.A."[61] The program became so successful that it expanded across the country to different states such as Washington. The *Black Panther* newspaper published an article in August of 1970 where they detailed that this program was designed to "visit the brothers and sisters in prisons, state and federal institutions, to establish a close relationship between the community and the prisoners."[62]

Despite the fact that Brown was not technically chairperson of Black Panther Party yet, she demonstrated true leadership during 1970 through 1973. Brown noted in an interview that

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[59] Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 157.

[60] Elizabeth Masarik and Averill Earls, "The Black Panther Party and the Free Breakfast Program: Feeding a Movement," *Dig: A History Podcast*, July 19, 2020.

[61] Brown, *A Taste Of Power*, 181.

[62] "People's Free Bussing Program," *The Black Panther*, August 8, 1970, Vol. 5 No. 6 edition.

"from 1970 to 1973 [that] she was an important force in trying to hold the Party together as Newton and Seale were in and out of jail, and as local police and the FBI carried on programs of harassment against the Party."[63] This time for Brown offered a glimpse of what was to come in the years of her time as chairperson, a focus on bolstering the already functioning survival programs as well as adding new ones. The key to the Party's programs were the fact that they were free and that they were providing basic amenities to its surrounding communities, including educating the next generation through the Intercommunal Youth Institute later renamed the Oakland Community School.

The fifth point of Newton and Seale's 10-point program, the cornerstone of the Black Panther Party, read "we want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in present-day society."[64] The desire to educate the youth of the Black Panther Party and those in its communities was present from its founding but it took some time before these plans were put into motion. The Oakland Community School "taught a variety of subjects, such as math, language arts, science, people's art, environmental students, and political education. Field experience and critical thinking were central to the Panthers' approach."[65] In 1973 the Panthers created the Educational Opportunities Corporation (EOC) which "was a tax-exempt, non-profit, community-based corporation, is responsible for funding for the school."[66] Brown became the

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[63] McGriff, "The Evolution of Elaine Brown," 3.

[64] "What We Want Now! What We Believe!" *The Black Panther*, May 15, 1967, Vol 1, no. 2 edition, 3.

[65] Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 119.

[66] "OCS Brochure, For 1977 School Year," 1977, Series 2: Black Panther Party Records, Subseries 3: Programs, Folder 2, "OCS Brochure 1977 - 1978," Box 16, HPN Papers.

director of the EOC, which was widely considered to be the parent organization of the Oakland

Community School.

The Oakland Community School continued to be one of the Party's most successful

programs, even during Brown's eventual time as leader. The School graced the cover of *Jet*

magazine in 1976, which was arguably one of the most popular magazines in black America.

The article featured an in-depth piece on the school, including an interview with Elaine Brown in

which she delves into the particulars of the school:

> 'We have been given all kinds of citations from educators, saying we have a fine
> school,' Ms. Brown offered, 'because we emphasize the basic skills – reading,
> writing, speech and language, and math concepts. We try to teach the children, in
> essence, how to think as opposed to what to think ... Staffed with 27 full-time
> teachers, [it is] revealed that there were no more than 10 pupils per teacher. And
> there appeared to be none of the disciplinary problems one encounters in most
> ghetto public schools. [67]

Brown's work within the school and the EOC made it possible for it to thrive as it did. It had

earned a sense of respect within the community and "by 12 May 1976 approximately 125

children attended the OCS [Oakland Community School]."[68] Alongside the Oakland

Community School, the community survival programs, which had been operating before

Brown's time as leader, continued to flourish and provide services to the community. Brown

noted that "this is not a Black Panther Party school, per se, and it's not a 'freedom school' or

'liberation school' in the sense that we teach the children rhetoric. The idea is to produce a model

along the lines of showing that Black, poor children are 'educable'."[69] Brown had the Party's

interest in her mind, but it was clear that when it came to the next generation that she wanted to

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[67] Bob Lucas, "Education," *The Jet*, February 5, 1976, https://revolution.berkeley.edu/assets/JET-article.pdf.

[68] Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 184.

[69] Bob Lucas, "East Oakland Ghetto Blooms With Growth of Black Panther School," *JET Magazine*, February 5, 1976.

educate them in a different way. Having dealt with the idea of 'revolutionary mothers' where the children were seen more as the next fighters for the revolution, for the past few years, Brown seemed to want to take their education further.

Brown Gets Political

From 1969 until 1977 the United States had a Republican President, Richard Nixon. Congress maintained a Democratic majority during this time and in 1968 Shirley Chisolm became the first black woman elected to the United States Congress. The landscape of California politics was consistent during this period, as Republican Governor Ronald Reagan was entering his seventh year in the position and considering a potential move to the national stage as Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned and the Nixon administration was in shambles. In 1973 Brown's name entered the arena for Oakland City Council. However, this was not entirely all Brown's decision, Newton pushed her into that direction.

Bobby Seale was a well-recognized figure in Oakland and in the world of politics being recognizable was all that mattered whether it be good or bad. 1973 was the perfect time for Seale to run for office, and Newton placed Seale's name in the contention for Mayor of Oakland. Brown and Newton discussed this nomination and Brown was in for a shock when Newton turned and stated "and just to make the thing sweeter, if you don't mind saying so. I want you to run with Bobby, for a City Council seat. You'll not only soften the blow, you can keep Bobby in check."[70] Given the rocky relationship that Brown had with Seale and Seale's chauvinism towards Brown, she was less than thrilled about this idea. Brown rejected Newton's proposal immediately: "No, Huey, No! I'll orchestrate the thing if you want. I'll manage the campaign,

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[70] Brown, *A Taste Of Power*, 314.

even. But don't put me face-to-face with Bobby every day."[71] To which Newton responded "If

you believe in me, you'll do it. And if you think about it, you'll see the wisdom in it. I can't let

Bobby go out there alone."[72] The unwavering loyalty that Brown had towards Newton and the

Party was perfectly demonstrated throughout this interaction. Newton knew how Brown felt

about Seale, yet he told her 'if you believe in me, you'll do it' which essentially forced her hand.

With very little protest, Brown took on the responsibility and once this decision became public to

the Panthers and the rest of the country, the campaign went into overdrive with Seale and Brown

hitting the streets in an effort to garner support.

Brown and Seale's platform included a plan to raise revenue which would work to

improve things such as education, housing, the child-care situation, and other community

improvements. Their 7-point revenue raising plan promised that "in combination with revenue

sharing funds, will give a boost to both business and the middle- and low-income property owner

in Oakland."[73] The combination of the revenue raising and revenue sharing plans made it

possible for millions of dollars to be leftover in order to provide services for the city and other

major community programs (fig. 4).

When it came to their platform Seale and Brown laid out step by step how they would

work to improve each aspect that they mentioned as part of their platform. For education, the

money would be used to provide "schools with bi-lingual education, up-to-date curriculum,

textbooks, and other needed supplies and materials."[74] For housing rehabilitation the money

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[71] Brown, *A Taste Of Power,* 314.

[72] Ibid

[73] "Vote April 17th: Polling Places Open at 7am," n.d., Series 2: Black Panther Party Records, Subseries 7: Individuals, Folder 3, "Bobby Seale Campaign Info. [4 of 9]1972 - 1973," Box 46, HPN Papers.

[74] Ibid.

would "enable 400 homes and apartments to be rehabilitated and would create 500 jobs per year in the construction trades."[75] They sought to turn "child-care centers into child development day care centers."[76] Seale and Brown wanted to facilitate "social programs such as parks and recreation, programs to aid those struggling with drug abuse and mental health."[77] Brown and Seale were both registered and running on the Democratic platform; Still, Brown noted that she was "certainly more of a Black Panther than a Democrat."[78] Brown, being the "only woman candidate for City Council" was facing an uphill battle, yet that did not stop her from making her points heard throughout the entire campaign.[79]

In an open letter to Mayor John Reading and the Oakland City Council, Brown urged for City Council to pass a law that "would require all municipal police and firemen to be residents of the city."[80] Brown offered three reasons as to why the law should be passed but the second is in direct correlation to her and Seale's platform:

> Second, almost 70% of the city's total uniformed policemen and firemen – approximately 1,000 employees paid by city taxpayers – live outside the City of Oakland. Assuming an average wage of $16,000 for policemen and firemen, this means that $16 million of the city taxpayers' money is being spent to subsidize outlying suburban communities. At a time of increased city 'belt-tightening' brought on by massive federal cutbacks, even half of this $16 million is urgently needed within the community. A residency requirement would, if adequately enforced, return these additional and much needed revenues to the people of Oakland.[81]

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[75] "Vote April 17th."

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Brown, *A Taste Of Power*, 374.

[79] Elaine Brown, "Oakland City Council Candidate Elaine Brown Proposes Law to Require Firemen and Policemen to Be City Residents," March 29, 1973, Series 2: Black Panther Party Records, Subseries 7: Individuals, Folder 1, "Bobby Seale Campaign Info. [2 of 9] 1972 - 1973," Box 1, HPN Papers.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid.

Brown was clearly dedicated to the city of Oakland, which would prove to be beneficial in the

coming years and influence the way in which Brown would operate as leader of the Panthers.
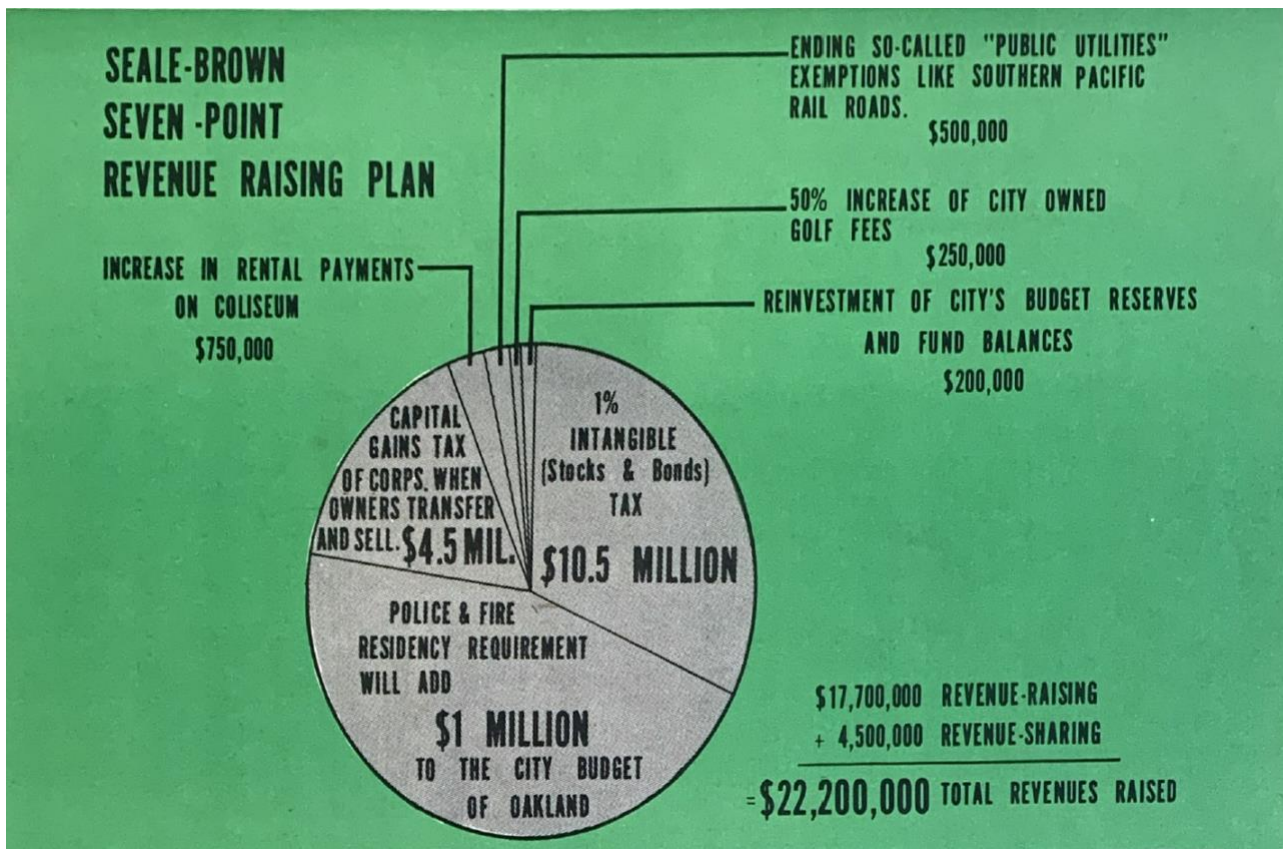

Figure 4: Breakdown of Seale and Brown's Seven Point Revenue Raising Plan includes revenue-raising and revenue-sharing. Series 2: BPP Records, Subseries 7: Individuals, Folder 3, "Bobby Seale Campaign Info. [4 of 9] 1972 – 1973, HPN Papers.

One of the biggest initiatives started a few months earlier but was a cornerstone of the campaign, was the Seniors Against A Fearful Environment (S.A.F.E.) Program, which was responsible for protecting the elderly members of the community. The program was kickstarted by a "request [from] a group of senior citizens for the purpose of preventing muggings and attacks upon the elderly, particularly when they go out to cash their meager social security or pension checks."[82] Similarly to the Free Breakfast initiative, this was started as a way to fill a need in the community because it was not being met by the police or the federal government. There was a need due to the fact "that 33 percent of all crimes committed in the city of Oakland are committed against senior citizens."[83] The senior citizens who placed the request to the BPP had first tried the Oakland Police Department, yet the seniors "were told to their dismay and outrage, that they 'should walk close to the curb' in the future."[84] Senior citizens within the community were in more danger of being attacked and "one study reported that over a six week period 'of the combined totally of 249 victims of strongarm robbery and purse snatching, 48% of the victims (118) were over the age of 50.'"[85] This program and the plans for the community were another example of Brown and the Panthers turning the efforts of the Party towards social development.

As election day approached, Brown and Seale continued to hit the streets of Oakland, getting to know their constituents. However, behind the scenes, women were at the forefront of the voter registration campaign. Former Panther member Steve McCutchen, also known as Lil'

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[82] David Hilliard, *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs* (University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 17.

[83] Hilliard, *The Black Panther Party*, 17.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Jones, "Reconsidering Panther History: The Untold Story," 180.

Masai, spoke on the importance of women during the campaign process. McCutchen stated how "Phyllis Jackson coordinated the voter registration campaign of the Party. She orchestrated the process that enabled Party members to become voter registrars and mapped out the areas in the communities to target potential voters."[86] The campaign of Seale and Brown took a village; the Panthers were not well-liked everywhere. Therefore, Brown and Seale needed to be out in the streets, leaving organizing up to other members of the Party. McCutchen noted that "Panther women were involved in door-to-door precinct work, get out the vote activities, and voter education. Activities also included telephone trees, leaflet distribution and fund-raising events."[87] The Panther women worked at a grassroots level to help mobilize the black voters in Oakland and "registered over 30,000 new voters in Oakland."[88] Despite all their efforts both Seale and Brown lost their election bids. However, these losses were seen as a big step forward as Brown "garnered over 34,000 votes."[89] The influence of the Panthers had expanded and Brown noted the feeling of watching the results come in, "we did win. We won the votes of approximately 40 percent of the electorate. We won the solid support of black people in Oakland. The Panther constituency had indeed expanded. We had planted our ideas a little deeper. We had established a foundation."[90]

To everyone in the Party, this was a new phase of the Panthers. They had established numerous community survival programs that were thriving, they had expanded into electoral

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[86] "What You Need to Know about the Black Panther Party's History of Electoral Activism on Inauguration Day (and Beyond)," *Intersectional Black Panther Party History Project*, January 20, 2017.

[87] "What You Need to Know"

[88] "A People's Victory On May 15th in Oakland," *The Black Panther*, May 19, 1973, Volume 10, No. 1 edition.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Brown, *A Taste Of Power*, 327.

politics with clear support from the community, and they had drawn national attention to the issues of black people in Oakland. Unfortunately, the next few months saw the Panthers take a downward spiral to rock bottom.

The Unraveling

From the end of 1973 and the beginning of 1974, the Oakland Panthers dealt with a multitude of changes and inner-party turmoil. Having led the Party for the previous eight years, it was clear that Huey Newton expected strict discipline from his members, and any indication of disobedience could result in punishment. As the Party grew in popularity, the consequences became more severe. From its inception, the Black Panther Party operated under strict guidelines; each member knew their responsibilities and the hierarchy was heavily enforced. Members knew what they were getting into when joining the Party and "accepted the discipline of the organization in all of its forms, including the physical [and many argued that] 'the Black Panther Party only functioned because people submitted themselves to that type of leadership.'"[91] However, as time went on, this type of discipline became problematic, and Newton's leadership began to unravel.

It is important to place Newton's behavior in context with what he was dealing with on a personal level. In 1967 Newton was arrested and charged with the murder of an Oakland Police Officer. Newton was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter in 1968 and sentenced 2 to 15 years in prison. While in prison the 'Free Huey' movement swept the Party and its supporters into a state of action. While Newton was later released "in 1970 following the reversal of his conviction by the California Appellate Court," it was made clear to Newton that in these three

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[91] Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 162.

years the Party was bound to go through some changes.[92] When Newton returned to the organization he was welcomed as a hero, but the changes in his personality were seen by the members. Despite the fact that Newton had been participating in Party life while in prison and was now back with the organization "he was out of touch with the B.P.P.'s day-to-day operations. Being the object of a cult personality gave him tremendous power in the Panthers' hierarchical organizational structure, yet it also created and reinforced a set of expectations that he could never measure up to."[93] This was not the same Party that Newton had left three years prior, these periods of him not being present would continue throughout the time of the Party's operation.

In the midst of Newton's return, Party members "began to object when discipline was used in a punitive and arbitrary manner to silence critical voices and to buttress the authority of the leadership."[94] Newton also began using his security detail as his personal fight group. Anyone who disagreed with the Central Committee, or its actions, faced the risk of being physically disciplined. On March 31, 1973, the Central Committee issued a memorandum in response to questions about discipline:

> This statement is to make it clear to all comrades that our Party can not function without organizational discipline, discipline within the collective and the attainment of self-discipline within each one of us.
>
> We stand firm on our decision from long ago to suggest different forms of correction for particular and specific violations of policy and principle. There is no way, however, that any comrade may arbitrarily receive any restriction or method of correction without having a policy, directive, or principle that we adhere to as members of the revolutionary organization, the Black Panther Party. The more serious and consistent the violation, the more stern the correction. It is

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[92] J. Herman Blake, "The Caged Panther: The Prison Years of Huey P. Newton," *Journal of African American Studies* 16, no. 2 (June 2012): 236.

[93] Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come,* 97.

[94] Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 163.

expected that this will clarify much of the confusion about organizational discipline and its necessity.[95]

This document could be viewed as the Central Committee attempting to actually list out the rules of the Party in terms of discipline. It is states that no arbitrary punishment will be given out, however, there were still concerns of Panther members as Newton's brazen approach to discipline got out of hand. This document rather reinforced the use of corporal punishment on its members. While members understood what they were signing up for when they joined the Party, many felt that the way Newton was going about punishing people was not in line with Party policy.

In 1974, Seale resigned from the Black Panther Party. While rumors circulated as to why he left the Party, one seemed to stick more than others, which was that Newton ordered the beating of Seale. In her autobiography, Brown details at great length the scene that unfolded and the interaction of Newton and Seale:

> Huey turned to Bobby again. 'Bobby Seale, you have violated the trust of this party. You have failed to defend this party in word *and* deed. The party will discipline you.' Bob returned with a large black bullwhip. 'Take off your shirt and stand against that wall, Bobby. Do you accept the discipline of this party?'
>
> Bobby walked across the living-room floor to the designated spot. My moment of pity for him lapsed as I recalled the lashes on my own back, the numerous comrades he had ordered disciplined in the past months of craziness. [After it was over, Newton said] 'Bobby, I no longer want you in this party.'"[96]

The biggest thing that stands out about this entire interaction is when Brown notes that Seale went to 'the designated spot' prior to the beating. This implies that so many beatings took place within Newton's headquarters, that people recognized a certain area as the 'designated spot' for

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[95] Central Committee of the Black Panther Party, "Organizational Discipline Memorandum," March 31, 1973, Series 2: Black Panther Party Records, Subseries 2: Internal Documents, Folder 2, "Central Committee Info. [1 of 4] 1969 - 1974," Box 4, HPN Papers.

[96] Brown, *A Taste Of Power*, 351.

the beatings. Not only was it evident that this had occurred multiple times but the very fact that it was Bobby Seale who was receiving this punishment was astonishing. The man who had helped Newton build this Party from the ground up, stuck by Newton during the trials and tribulations of the early years, and continued to support Newton, was being beaten and expelled from the Party altogether. This behavior may be contributed in some instance to Newton's comings and goings within the Party, while it does not excuse the behavior it is interesting the think that his sense of distrust had something to do with the fact that Newton did not fully understand his Party after his incarceration.

Throughout 1973, Newton had resorted to expelling disobedient members for life from the BPP. One of the most shocking to go was Ray Masai Hewitt, who had been minister of education for the BPP and was also the father of Elaine Brown's only child.[97] Members of the Central Committee convinced Newton that expelling Hewitt, who "had criticized how power was being wielded in the organization and the lack of organization democracy," was not sensible, which led to Newton demoting Hewitt back down to rank-and-file status.[98] When Hewitt confronted Brown she "tried to convince [him] 'to see that while Huey had indeed assumed absolute leadership and was capable of brutal abuses, he was the same man who had invented the Black Panther Party ... and had challenged our common oppressor – with his own life.'"[99] Hewitt, who was being used to send a message to the rest of the Party, left the Panthers a few weeks later.

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[97] "The Central Committee of the Black Panther Party."

[98] Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 166.

[99] Ibid.

After Hewitt's departure, the Panthers were hit with another bombshell when Newton announced the expulsion of David Hilliard, a member who had been instrumental in the early success of the BPP. On February 26th, 1974, Newton distributed an inner-party memorandum discussing the reasons for Hilliard's expulsion.

> David Hilliard has resigned from the Black Panther Party and has subsequently been expelled from the Party for life. David Hilliard violated a Party directive, namely continued contact (via prison visits) with an expelled Party member, Brenda Presley. Brenda Presley had been expelled for child molesting of David Hilliard's nephew Teddy.
>
> June Hilliard has resigned from the Black Panther Party for reasons of his brother's violations of Party rules. He was unable to justify remaining in the Party and thereby going against his brother.[100]

The expulsions of Ray Masai Hewitt, David Hilliard, and June Hilliard sent a clear message that things were changing within the Party, whether or not everyone accepted it.

The Breakdown

By August of 1974, the BPP hit rock bottom. It all began when Elaine Brown was called to the Lakeshore Apartments to see Newton in his penthouse suite. Arriving at the penthouse Brown found a gruesome scene. A male panther member, who was accused of stealing from the Black Panther Party, was being beaten. Not shaken by the violence, Brown waited for her turn to speak with Newton. The man being punished by Newton's security rose from his seat to leave the room, with blood dripping from the tip of his nose and corners of his mouth. At the same time, Newton sidestepped the pool of blood and approached Brown. At this point Brown and Newton had known each other for five years: five years of standing side by side fighting for the

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[100] Huey Newton, "Innerparty Memorandum," Official Memorandum, February 26, 1974, Series 2: Black Panther Party Records, Subseries 2: Internal Documents, Folder 10, "Innerparty Memorandums 1972 - 1974," Box 4, HPN Papers.

liberation of black people, five years of being a target of police violence, and five years in a toxic love-hate relationship.

Brown and Newton were two passionate people that often brought out the best in one another but also brought out the worst in one another. Despite all the flaws and mistakes demonstrated by Newton, Brown could not help but love him. For Brown, Newton represented a strength that she had not seen anywhere else in her childhood and even in her adulthood. There were warning signs that "Newton's addiction to alcohol and drugs [which] led to increasingly erratic and violent behavior."[101] Despite this, all Brown could think was "nevertheless, [he was] still stunning. [But], perhaps I loved him too much."[102] Unsure of why she was called to see Newton, Brown began to ask him when Newton leaned over to her, almost as if to hug her, but instead spoke quietly, "'Elaine, it's important that you go back to your music. I want you to study music seriously. The Party will pay for everything.'"[103] This was the last thing Brown expected, not sure how to proceed Brown simply muttered a thank you to Newton. Without warning, he raised his hand and slapped Brown across the cheek. With her cheek throbbing, Brown felt Newton grip the side of her jaw and forced her face towards his and spoke to her once more, the smell of stale alcohol on his breath, and told her "'Don't ever thank me. When you thank me, it means you are separate from me, not with me.'"[104] The reasoning behind Newton's slap was not enough to convince Brown that this would be the last act of violence towards her.

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[101] Brown, *A Taste Of Power,* 9.

[102] Ollie A. Johnson III, "Explaining the Demise of The Black Panther Party: The Role of Internal Factors," in *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered),* ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2005), 394.

[103] Brown, *A Taste Of Power,* 9.

[104] Ibid.

As a single mother, Brown decided then and there that she would be leaving the Black Panther Party for good. She had put up with antics from Newton and other male members for five years, and while her love for Newton seemed to be able to transcend anything, Brown knew the more paranoid Newton became, the more unsafe it would be for her and her daughter to stay within the ranks of the BPP. As Brown took the elevator down to the lobby, she planned an escape. She would simply tell Newton and the Party that she was visiting her mother in Los Angeles and then never return. For an entire week, Brown was convinced that she was going to leave the Party, steadfast that nothing could change her mind. But on August 7th, 1974, Brown received news that would change her life trajectory and positioning within the Black Panther Party.

In early hours of August 6th, 1974, Newton was arrested and charged with two counts of assault with a deadly weapon. This occurred in Newton's penthouse apartment, the same place that Brown, one week prior, had decided to leave the Party. It was now a crime scene. Preston Callins, an Oakland tailor, was fitting suits when he was pistol-whipped by Newton, who according to police, "'took offense to something Callins said, a very petty type thing, and went into a rage and attacked him with a handgun.'"[105] After Newton was arrested, Brown and other members gathered together all the cash they could manage in order to post his $42,000 bail. As he was being released from his holding cell, Brown learned that the assault on Mr. Callins was not the only violence that took place on that fateful morning. Newton, as described by Brown, "strode across the room in all his late-night beauty," was suddenly halted by the Oakland Police Captain who placed Newton under arrest for the attempted murder of Kathy Smith, a 17-year-old

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[105] Associated Press, "LEADER OF PANTHERS BOOKED IN ASSAULTS," *The New York Times*, August 18, 1974, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1974/08/18/issue.html, 31.

prostitute who had been shot a few hours after Newton had attacked Mr. Callins. [106] The clinking

of handcuffs rang out in the police station and Newton was ushered back to the cell he had nearly

escaped. Brown and Newton's men sprang into action and collected money to post the $80,000

bail.

Despite her strong desire to leave the Party, Brown understood that this was where she

had to be because she felt she had to help Newton, who she did not believe he could help

himself. Brown helped raise the money and Newton was eventually released from his holding

cell. He approached Brown, who could tell that things were never going to be the same the

moment Newton enfolded her in a strong yet comforting hug and told her goodbye. This

goodbye had a different meaning, and Brown realized that if Newton were to survive this he

would need to leave, get out of Oakland, out of California, and most likely out of the country.

Brown pushed any idea of leaving the Party to the back of her mind. Although she did not know

it yet, Newton had a plan for her, which would change not only the Black Panther Party but the

greater political and social structures of the surrounding communities. As Newton fled under the

cover of darkness, the Black Panther Party was left in a state of disarray as their leader was on

the run for attempted murder.

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[106] Brown, *A Taste Of Power*, 7.

CHAPTER TWO

Power to *ALL* People!

In September 1974, Elaine Brown and two of Huey Newton's henchmen were having a meeting at the Lamp Post Bar, a regular haunt that was operated by the Black Panther Party. The meeting consisted of strategizing different ways to handle Newton's absence and preparation for the media storm that would rain down on the Party, especially since he was due to appear in court in a matter of days. As they worked on their plan, they were interrupted by a phone ringing out from behind the bar. The man behind the bar told them that the call was for Brown. It had to be Newton, it just had to be and sure enough, the man Brown had dedicated five years to spoke on the other end of the line. Without any hesitation, Newton told her "'save my party ... I won't be back, you're the only one who can do it. You are mine. I can't trust anybody else with my Party.'"[1] Those words pulled Brown back into the folds of the Party, which a few weeks before she had sworn to leave. Here was Newton, asking her to lead in his absence.

This moment of vulnerability from Newton cast aside any doubts that Brown had been having and reaffirmed how she felt about Newton. Brown recognized this but muttered "'I can't without serious backup ... you know. The Brothers will never accept it.'"[2] Brown knew the truth: no matter how much Huey trusted her, the men of the Party would not take kindly to a woman taking over, even if Newton had hand-picked her. The first few years that Brown spent in the Party, she had witnessed rampant male chauvinism and sexism as she rose through the ranks. Newton did not take accept this statement, and he said "'Let me speak to my man.'"[3] Brown

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[1] Brown, *A Taste Of Power*, 11.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

knew he meant Big Bob, but she hesitantly told him that would not work. While she knew Big

Bob was one of Newton's most trusted bodyguards, "Bob's physical size, six-feet eight inches

and four hundred pounds – combined with his emotional insecurity about it and his lack of self-

discipline, made a volatile concoction. He was simply not the stuff of generals."[4] Therefore, she

passed the phone over to Larry Henson. While Brown craned her neck to hear their conversation,

she heard Larry say "'Yes, sir, Brother. I hear you, Brother. I guarantee it.'"[5] As Brown reached

out for the phone, Larry turned away quickly and told Newton: "'With my life, Comrade. You

have my word.'"[6] Those last words hung in the air; the promises behind what Larry had just told

Newton struck a chord within Brown. As she took the phone back, she heard Newton whisper,

"'Now will you save my Party?'"[7] Without any sort of hesitation, Brown agreed, and it was

done. She was now the chairperson of the Black Panther Party.

In a few short days, Brown had experienced so many changes so quickly. She had been

preparing to leave, she was going to cut ties with the Party, and sneak off in the night just as

Newton had done. However, this was no longer possible, Newton needed her, the Party needed

her. The one thing everyone within the organization could agree upon was how much Brown

loved the Party. She would not back down; she was prepared for the challenges that would

undoubtedly come her way as soon as her promotion was announced. The seriousness of this

decision weighed heavy on Brown. She knew that she would need Larry, since the men of the

Party respected him and his loyalty towards Newton. Having him on her side would prove to be a

necessity. Brown had her job, knew what was expected of her, and decided right at that moment

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[4] Brown, *A Taste Of Power,* 11.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

that she would not let Newton down. She could not, she cared too much about him and the Party to see it collapse in his absence.

During the next three years, the Panthers encountered a new way of operating under Brown's leadership. There was a need to adjust for many members of the Party, especially the men of the organization. This chapter explores the years 1974 until the end of 1977, when Elaine Brown resigned as chairperson of the Black Panther Party. Within this timeframe, the political and social achievements by Brown as leader were front and center for the Panthers. Yet, Brown continued to face opposition and challenges within the Party as well as from outside sources such as the media and the FBI. This chapter argues that Brown's three years as chairperson allowed the Party not only to remain functioning but the social and political prominence that they achieved was unlike anything seen under a male leader. From the beginning, Brown took a new approach to leadership, which allowed the Panthers to operate within the community in a more unified manner. This chapter will tackle how Brown instead of utilizing physical discipline turned towards gaining allies in Newton's former henchmen as a way to ensure authority and how rather than directly confronting chauvinism did so by promoting female members to the Central Committee. Brown's approach to the political and social aspects was that of mass mobilization and active participation, she made sure that her personal involvement could be seen as a model for other members of organization.

Organizing the Panthers under Brown

Word spread quickly about Brown's appointment, and people did not hesitate to share their thoughts on having a woman lead what was considered to be one of the "most militant organization[s] in America."[8] Having been a member of this Party for five years, Brown

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[8] Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 3.

understood what having a woman in charge meant and the backlash coming her way. For the men of the BPP, "their membership not only afforded them their first experience with seeing women in positions of power, but also their first-time taking orders from a woman who was not a relative."[9] Yet, it was not just male Panther members that chimed in on her appointment.

The FBI, who had been keeping a close watch on the Panthers noted that "Elaine Brown, BPP Minister of Information, currently appears to be in charge of the BPP in Newton's absence. However, Brown does not appear to attract support or adhesiveness of members as Newton did in the past."[10] As Newton was one of the founders of the BPP and so often found himself in the newspaper headlines, it was not a surprise that many outside the Party saw him as the lynchpin of the BPP and believed that without him, it could not continue. Once again, the FBI noted that "Newton's disappearance has somewhat tainted any possible legitimate posture the BPP may have attained in the past with its community programs."[11] Not only was the FBI underestimating Brown and the women of the Party, but it also seems that they forget that for five years Brown was an active participant within these programs. Her first-hand knowledge and participation alone should have been enough to lend legitimacy to these programs because she knew just how hard members had to work in order to operate these programs. While it was no surprise that people were attempting to discredit the Party under its first female chairperson, it was *how* Brown and the rest of the Party responded during this time that would set the Panthers apart from the years when the Party was under the supervision of Newton. The Party certainly advocated for the return of Newton, in its newspapers and even in letters from Brown to Newton. However,

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[9] Alameen-Shavers, "The Woman Question," 48.

[10] "FBI File: Elaine Brown Leadership," 1974, Series 4: Freedom of Information Act File, Folder 5, "FBI Files - 1972 - 1974," Box 8, HPN Papers.

[11] Ibid.

the Party did not remain stagnant, it continued forward with the goals that Newton had once

aspired to achieve and even added some new goals to the mission of the Party.

Due to the lack of enthusiasm from male members, the women of the Party especially

those in Oakland, were forced to adjust how they approached positions of power, and this

included Elaine Brown. Many of the men did not take kindly to taking orders from a woman but

they had a job to do, and the cooperation of men was needed if they were to achieve anything.

Therefore, the women began adopting a "macho or masculine posture in an effort to deal with

male chauvinism."[12] Thus a double-edged sword continued to cut deep into the psyche of black

women, as they were made to feel shame and were not treated with respect if they embraced their

femininity within the Party. But when women attempted to put forth a more masculine

demeanor, they "were haunted by the myths of domineering, emasculating females" described in

the Moynihan report.[13] This shift in some women's personalities not only discomforted men but

"also challenged the idea that only black men should lead and 'protect' black women."[14] These

stereotypes had been present within the Party from the beginning and allowed the men to

suppress the majority of the women within the Party. While some women, four to be exact, had

made it to the Central Committee already, many of the rank-and-file women were not having a

similar experience.

Though most black men within the Party were not prepared for this change, Brown did

not let these rumblings stop her from moving forward as leader. During her time as chairperson

"Brown appointed Phyllis Jackson as the Chief Executive Officer of the Educational Opportunity

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[12] Alameen-Shavers, "The Woman Question," 48.

[13] Taylor, "The Historical Evolution," 241.

[14] Matthews, "No One Ever Asks" , 244.

Corporation, Joan Kelley as the Chief Executive Officer of the EOC Service Corporation, Norma

Armour (now Mtumbe) as Minister of Finance to the Central Committee, and Ericka Huggins as

a standing member."[15] Brown maintained that these women were elevated to these positions

based on merit and the promotions nothing to do with gender. Still, for other women, these

moves were seen as attempting to balance the gender lines within the Party. For Ericka Huggins,

a long-standing member, this decision, and Brown's leadership were a necessary change:

> The reason why women were placed on the Central Committee of the Black
> Panther Party is to give it greater balance. . . it had this warrior like flavor which
> is fine. But women think twice about war, why because we are thinking about the
> babies . . . We're thinking how is war going to solve this problem? Well men
> don't think like that a lot. So to have the balance of the men and women in the
> same committee we could haggle with that stuff. Why don't we try this as
> opposed to that? Why not this and that? Before there were women on the Central
> Committee of the Black Panther Party, it was all like "let's just do it like this"
> (imitating male voice) and it wasn't always the best.[16]

Huggins is alluding to the fact that with more women being a part of the Central Committee,

there was more of an acceptance to discussing ideas. Under the male leaders, it was essentially

their way, there was never room to openly exchange ideas. When women became more secure in

their roles within the Party and had their ideas legitimized by the Central Committee, there was

more of an openness amongst members.

Women of the Panthers were not strangers to responsibility. In fact, throughout the early

years of the organization, when the male Panther members were being arrested or killed, it was

women who kept the Party afloat. Brown's move to promote more women to high-ranking

positions was not about offering women responsibility, as they had already had it. Rather, it was

about offering acknowledgement and respect to the women who had been running the Party for

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[15] Alameen-Shavers, "The Woman Question," 45.

[16] Huggins personal communication qtd in Alameen-Shavers, "The Woman Question," 46.

years behind the scenes. These appointments and Brown's leadership showed the men and those outside the organization that the women were already present, and they could do just as good of a job as their male counterparts.

Women Panthers were clearly equipped with the tools to lead the Party in the absence of men, and they also proved that were able to take the Panthers into the political world in a way that had yet to be seen. Importantly, the organization of the Party's community survival programs had long been done by its female members. Former Panthers, "recall that women were responsible in terms of both leadership and personnel for key Party programs, such as the free breakfast programs, liberation schools, and medical clinics."[17] Yet, this type of organization or responsibility is regularly looked over by historians, who often "categorize it as 'support work' or 'community service' as opposed to 'real' political activism."[18] However, Brown was able to tap into their knowledge and skill set in order to help campaign and win elections in Oakland and potentially on a national level. Brown had the opportunity to set herself apart from previous leaders of the Panthers and make her own legacy as chairperson. She sought to do that through political and social change.

Learning the Game of Politics

Despite the defeat of Brown and Bobby Seale in the 1973 election for City Councilwoman and Mayor of Oakland respectively, Brown felt that it was necessary to keep the Black Panther Party involved in the city's political world. It was not easy to convince the black community that voting and participating in the government would be beneficial, because "despite vigorous voting campaigns, blacks still believed that the act of voting in America was futile. The

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[17] Matthews, "No One Ever Asks," 245.

[18] Matthews, "No One Ever Asks," 246.

voting record of Oakland blacks reflected this belief, even the registration percentage was still very low."[19] Therefore, to help the black community become more involved in the process, Brown and the Panthers began backing more candidates within California's Democratic Party. Two years after running for City Council Brown ran again in 1975, and "though her bid was unsuccessful, she garnered over 40 percent of the vote."[20] The continuous running of Panther members and other black community members was motivating to others in the community. It became clear that if there was going to be any sort of change the Panthers had to work to get more black people into California's offices.

The year of 1976 was one of the first indications that the Party was starting to understand how to play the game of politics. There were five key elections that the Panthers were showing support for and proved to be altering for the Panthers. John George, who was not a member of the Black Panther Party, became the first African American elected to the Alameda County Board of Supervisors in District 5.[21] The Panthers backed George's run for County Supervisor in the *Black Panther* newspaper. An article published on December 28, 1975, dedicates an entire two pages to his candidacy and platform which included excerpts from the press conference at which George announced his intention to run. George stated that "'the major challenges to county government for the next 10 years will be the delivery of services to their citizens at reasonable costs without increasing taxes ... Persistent efforts responsive to the needs of the people on the issues is the key to effective solutions of county problems.'"[22] George and the

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[19] Brown, *A Taste Of Power*, 417.

[20] Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 174.

[21] "Alameda County Board of Supervisors 1885-Present," 2003, https://www.acgov.org/ac150/board1885.htm.

[22] "John George Announces Candidacy For Alameda County Supervisor, 5th District," *The Black Panther*, December 20, 1975, Vol. 14, No. 14 edition.

Panthers had similar goals for the black community of Oakland, as the Panthers had spent the past few years attempting to raise the consciousness levels of the community members through their community survival programs. George was victorious in this election, he "swamped BART's top cop William Rumford, 52,419 to 31,945."[23]

Other elections the Panthers were backing in 1976 included Ron Dellums and Valerie Raymond. Dellums, a black Oakland native and more seasoned politician, won his re-election bid for the House of Representatives. Dellums defeated "his Republican opponent in the 8th Congressional District 97,711 to 39, 917."[24] Valerie Raymond campaigned alongside George for the Alameda County Board of Supervisors, and she won "by a narrow decision, becoming the first woman in that post."[25] The Panthers were campaigning for these candidates, including hosting an event were the Panthers and George passed out 1,000 bags of free groceries to the residents of West Oakland. In return for their support, George announced that "he has 'always been an enthusiastic, 100 per cent supporter of Elaine Brown and the Black Panther Party.'"[26] These types of endorsements were crucial to the continued success of the Panthers in the world of politics. This string of elections proved that times were changings for the Party in the electoral sphere.

After that the pieces began to fall into place. Brown continued her work with the Democratic Party, including aiding Governor Jerry Brown's campaign for President in 1976. Jerry Brown had "won Panther support 'because we thought he was representative enough of a

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[23] "Ron Dellums: 'WAKE UP BLACK AMERICA, 1976,'" *The Black Panther*, November 6, 1976, Vol. 15 No. 30 edition.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

liberal kind of philosophy that at least the world would remain intact for the next four years.'"[27]

Due to the fact that the Panthers and Elaine Brown had established a strong base through years of

community organization, it was clear that the Panthers were going to be a strong force within the

electoral circuit.

Brown's next challenge turned her from politics into the urban renewal territory. In

December 1976 Brown was appointed [by Lionel Wilson] to the Oakland Council for Economic

Development (OCED)."[28] While the appointment of Brown to the OCED, a committee dedicated

to "implementing programs associated with the Office of Economic Opportunity and the 'War on

Poverty' in Oakland," was certainly a victory for the Panthers, she seemed to have a contentious

and fragile relationship with the OCED and the Democratic Party as a whole.[29]

Urban Renewal

After accepting her appointment to the OCED, Brown came down hard on the committee,

calling it "an 'elite club' which represents 'right-of-center political interests.'"[30] Brown decided

to take her appointment as an opportunity to be transparent with the black community. In an

interview with the *Oakland Tribune,* Brown explained that "'As a member of this council, I

guarantee to the people of Oakland regular reporting on its activities; that the mouthed

commitment of the business community for jobs, thousands of permanent jobs for Oaklanders,

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[27] "Ron Dellums."

[28] Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 175. The Oakland Council for Economic Development (OCED) is referred to in a number of different ways, including The Oakland Economic Development Council (OEDC) and The Oakland Economic Development Council, Incorporated (OEDCI). This thesis will use the description that Elaine Brown uses in primary source documents. Therefore, it will be referred to as either the Oakland Council for Economic Development or the OCED unless directly quoted by another source.

[29] "Oakland Economic Development Council Newsletter Collection," Oakland Public Library, n.d.

[30] "Elaine Brown on OCED," *Oakland Tribune*, December 6, 1976, Series 8: Newspaper Clippings, Folder 27, "[Newspaper Clippings] [1 of 2] 1976 - 1978," Box 4, HPN Papers.

be fulfilled; that decent replacement housing be built for those displaced by the Grove-Shafter and City Center Project.'"[31] The Grover-Shafter project was a freeway built during the 1960s and 1970s, however, the construction of the freeway was dependent upon destroying the homes of black and poor peoples. The City Center project was presented to the people of Oakland as a revitalization of Oakland and promised that Oakland "would [be able] to compete successfully with both San Francisco and the burgeoning suburbs."[32] Brown was a strong advocate for adequate replacement housing for Oakland citizens and a supporter of "Legal Aid Society of Alameda County and the West Oakland Planning Committee [who] filed a lawsuit, [forcing the city] to agree to build low-cost housing to replace housing demolished during freeway construction."[33] Brown was attempting a balancing act while on the Council and despite her attempt to please all sides of the argument, she faced criticism for her role within the OCED, not only from the media but from other politicians.

The Oakland Tribune published an editorial on December 10th, 1976, titled "OCED – An Elite Club?," which discussed how Brown's comment may have been justified, stating that "there has been a tendency in this city to do things 'for the good of the people' without getting much input from the people concerned.'"[34] However, the author goes on to say that "it is also time for Ms. Brown to get off her Black Panther Party kick. In fact, when Ms. Brown calls OCED an 'elite club' which represents 'right-of-center politics,' she opens herself to criticism from those who may consider the Black Panther Party an 'elite club' with left of center

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[31] "Elaine Brown on OCED."

[32] Mitchell Schwarzer, "Oakland City Center: The Plan to Reposition Downtown within the Bay Region," *Journal of Planning History* 14, no. 2 (2015): 88.

[33] Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*, 175.

[34] Tribune Editorial, "OCED - An Elite Club?" *Oakland Tribune*, December 10, 1976.

politics."[35] Representing what many considered to be a dangerous militant organization proved to be a difficult identity for Brown to shed, even as she tried to help fellow Oakland citizens.

There is irony in the fact that the *Tribune* labeled the Black Panther Party an 'elite club,' when for years prior to this and at the current moment, the FBI and the Oakland police were adamantly attempting to destroy it, especially because of its community survival programs. One would assume that there isn't a need to destroy programs that are benefitting the community; one would assume that these programs would be elevated due to the work that they are contributing to the community. It is also possible that this was meant to be a dig at the Panthers, by calling them an 'elite club' it is almost combining them in the same category as the Panther's oppressors. It may read to others that the Panthers are seemingly not that different from other politicians, because they are participating in the same 'elite' behavior. This comment also can hold the meaning of ignorance on the part of the journalist. It proves that the white community truly did not understand the mission of the Panthers or the work that they are doing for the rest of the community.

A year after Brown's appointment to the OCED, former Oakland Mayor John Reading accused Governor Jerry Brown of "an 'out-and-out blackmail' attempt" in his appointment of Elaine Brown.[36] Reading stated that "if Ms. Brown was not named to OCED the governor would not approve the freeway extension project."[37] Robert Shetterly, who was the chairman of the OCED, stated in an interview that "Ms. Brown's OCED appointment, was made in the belief that she 'could undoubtedly be helpful to us in persuading the governor to put some heat' on

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[35] "OCED - An Elite Club".

[36] "Reading Accuses Brown," *Oakland Tribune*, n.d., Series 8: Newspaper Clippings, Folder 11, "General Write-ups on Oakland [Sept. 1973 - 1974], Box 4, HPN Papers.

[37] Ibid.

speeding up completion of the Grove-Shafter ... [because] Elaine Brown was quite influential

with the Jerry Brown administration."[38] Indeed, Elaine Brown and the BPP had worked to help

register and mobilize not only Oakland but other sections of California in Jerry Brown's

campaign against Republican nominee, Houston Flournoy. While Reading, Shetterly, and

Governor Brown were attempting to use Brown for their political gain, they did not realize that

Brown herself was also using the Grove-Shafter and City Center Project to help the poor

population in Oakland. Brown was initially supportive of Governor Brown's decision to

withhold the funds for the Grove-Shafter and City Project due to the destruction that it would

cause for the black population in Oakland. However, she had a change of heart on this matter,

which coincided with the mayoral campaign of Lionel Wilson.

The biggest challenge for the Black Panther Party in the political world came with the

1977 mayoral race in Oakland. This election had more pressure than a lot of the other elections

the Panthers and Brown had helped organize because this was a chance to have the first black

mayor of Oakland elected, Lionel Wilson, who was currently a democratic State Superior Court

Judge. Wilson ran against Dave Tucker, a Republican and school board president. The Grove-

Shafter and City Center project took center stage in Wilson's campaign when Brown "received a

call from Michael Berman ... [who] urged [her] to use [her] influence to solicit the governor to

fund the controversial Grove-Shafter Freeway extension."[39] Brown was at first skeptical

claiming that the benefits of the City Center project would not reach the black population. But

Berman reminded Brown that the construction of the Freeway was a dependency for companies

such as the Hyatt Cooperation, Wells Fargo Bank, and the Bullocks and Sears department stores

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[38] "Reading Accuses Brown."

[39] Brown, *A Taste Of Power*, 418.

who had made commitments to develop in Oakland. Berman reaffirmed that with these stores

and "their millions of investment dollars [they] would build the City Center and also trigger the

revitalization of Oakland's economy. Without the freeway, there was nothing."[40]

Recognizing the importance of the revamped economy, Brown decided that "if Lionel

could be associated with bringing ten thousand new jobs into Oakland, blacks would run to the

polls to vote for him."[41] While there was more logistics to be decided upon, it can be inferred

based on analysis of the manner in which Elaine Brown conducted herself in her political work

during this time, for instance accepting the OCED post, that she knew that influence over

Governor Jerry Brown could help secure Lionel Wilson the Mayorship. In a way Brown almost

let it appear to the media and the public that Governor Brown was the one orchestrating things in

Oakland, when in fact Brown held all the cards. Due to the increasing respectability and

popularity of the Panthers the held some influence over the voting in Oakland, therefore Brown

recognized that by accepting the OCED post may not have been her priority by doing so she

ensured the support of Governor Brown for the election of Lionel Wilson. The efforts of the

Panthers proved to be successful and "by a narrow margin of 5,715 voters elected the first black

mayor and ended years of City Hall dominance by moderate white Republicans and their

supporters in the business community."[42]

Urban renewal was not unique to Oakland. Across the country, different city

governments were pushing this idea of a more modern urban life, which involved the

redevelopment of poorer areas. Due to policies such as redlining and an influx of immigrants

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[40] Brown, *A Taste Of Power,* 419.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Les Ledbetter, "Oakland Elects First Black Mayor," *New York Times*, May 19, 1977, 43,580 editions, 28.

after World War II, the poorer areas were often the home of minorities and the working class.

The backdrop for urban renewal was President Lyndon B. Johnson declaring a war on poverty in

1964, and "ironically, although urban renewal was presented as a pillar of the war on poverty for

African Americans, it caused their homelessness."[43] In places such as Boston, urban renewal had

a big impact on life for the black community especially in the 1960s. Boston's South End, which

was "one of the country's largest and most diverse communities," was one of the first places to

get hit with an urban renewal project.[44] The project demolished "a 24 acre, 12-city block area in

the northeast corner of the South End. By 1957, 321 buildings had been demolished and over

1,000 working-class residents displaced from their homes."[45] While the government was

spending all this money to clear the poorer areas and construct new freeways, such as the Grove-

Shafter Freeway in Oakland, they were not providing more options for the members of the

communities they were destroying. According to a study done about the year 1967, when urban

renewal was in its prime, it "had destroyed 404,000 housing units, most of which had been

occupied by poor families, whereas only 41,580 housing units were built as replacements."[46]

Another issue facing urban renewal was that it appeared to some residents that they were

being skipped over in favor of refurbishing more well-off areas. In Roxbury, a black

neighborhood in Boston, "activists and community members began to raise concerns about

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[43] Roberta Ann Johnson, "African Americans and Homelessness: Moving Through History," *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 4 (March 2010), 595.

[44] Thomas O'Connor, "Progress and Populism," in *Building a New Boston* (Northeastern University Press, 1993). See also, Mary Triece, *Urban Renewal and Resistance: Race, Space, and the City in the Late Twentieth to the Early Twenty-First Century* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2016); Hanes Walton Jr., ed., *Black Politics and Black Political Behavior: A Linkage Analysis* (West Port, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1994).

[45] "Racial Segregation in Greater Boston," Harvard Chan-NIEHS Center for Environmental Health, July 18, 2022.

[46] Friedland, in Squires, 100, qtd Johnson, "African Americans and Homelessness: Moving Through History": 595.

inequitable distribution of urban renewal funds and efforts. In a telegram in 1960, Black organizers of Roxbury's Freedom House Civic Center Association expressed outrage to Boston Mayor John Collins about racial discrimination in urban renewal site selection."[47] In other cities such as Chicago and New York, the urban renewal projects faced just as much push back and complications as it did in Boston. In fact, there had "been great controversy as to how much public housing would be provided. In both instances the amount had been limited so that low-income families will be a definite minority of those areas ... There is no question that both the New York and the Chicago neighborhoods will be predominantly middle class."[48] These policies were disproportionately impacting low-income residents, which in places such as Oakland, were going to be predominately African American.

Throughout history and in modern society urban renewal programs have a pattern of not giving back to the communities that they are aiming to redevelop. When a black community was displaced, there may have been promises of new and better housing. However, while black people were made homeless, "the public sector was heavily subsidizing downtown commercial development, homeownership, and freeway construction programs."[49] Private companies jumped at the opportunity to make a profit meaning that the low-income residents would not be able to afford the new housing. The history of urban renewal across the country shows mostly negative side effects, yet Brown was an advocate for it. The promise of new jobs that the City Center would provide for the residents seemed too great to resist. Indeed, "then-Governor Jerry Brown ordered that the completion of the Grove-Shafter be a high priority on the condition that 50% of

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[47] "Racial Segregation in Greater Boston."

[48] Robert Weaver, "Class, Race, and Urban Renewal," *Land Economics* 36, no. 3 (August 1960): 245.

[49] "I-980," Connect Oakland, 2014, http://www.connectoakland.org/history/i-980/.

the construction employment and 30% of long-term City Center employment be reserved for minorities."[50] While it is somewhat unclear whether or not this exact percentage was realized in Oakland, Brown was certainly confident in it enough to promote urban renewal and the construction of the freeway. Yet, this is not to indicate that there were not negative impacts of its construction:

> [The Grove-Shafter Freeway] formed the last section of a loop of freeways that completely ensnared West Oakland with freeways. A significant portion of the challenges faced by West Oakland in the past three decades can be attributed to the disconnection of the neighborhood from the rest of Oakland and from the deliberate municipal neglect that such separation enabled. These freeways, like many throughout the country were not constructed to serve the communities they displaced, but to create easy automobile access for suburban communities to reach the central business districts of both Oakland and San Francisco. It is particularly tragic that, to echo a protest slogan at the time, new "white freeways" were still allowed to run through 'black bedrooms' two decades after the revolt against urban highways began.[51]

Therefore, while Brown was clearly attempting to do good by the Oakland community and its residents with her promotion of urban renewal, the effects were isolating. The cycle of urban renewal is one of destruction, displacement, promises, redevelopment, and betrayal.

In the moment, though, the Panthers more than hit their stride as they were contributing to society in a way that was seen before, but not necessarily on this scale. Brown had developed the social programs of the Party, successfully campaigned on behalf of Democrats, and garnered the respect of most Panther members. However, throughout the three years Brown was chairperson the question on everyone's mind inside the Party was: when would Huey Newton return to the Panthers and what would that mean for the Party?

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[50] "I – 980".

[51] Ibid.

Newton Returns

Brown and the Panthers were preparing for Newton's return from day they found out he had fled to Cuba. In February 1976, Brown told Newton in a letter that "as we have said, the time has been difficult since your absence, and we sorely need your active leadership. We had hoped conditions would be better here now for your return."[52] Brown was a loyal member of the Panther Party. Her support to Huey Newton while in exile showed a sense of strength to the other Party members. If she were to not support him in every way possible, especially considering there was a strong possibility he would be returning soon, members might have turned on Brown. Keeping a united front even in a time of crisis demonstrated to other members of the Party that Brown was chairperson in somewhat of a temporary capacity and that the man every person dedicated their life to when joining the Party was not being forgotten. For all of Newton's struggles shortly before leaving for Cuba, he was a man who demanded authority, had created a dedicated group of followers, and was drawing national attention to the struggles facing the Black community around the world. At the end of her letter, Brown stated "Comrade Huey, needless to say, every member of our Party and thousands of people across this country love and miss you. We are working feverishly every day to forward our struggle and to secure the right conditions for your return as soon as possible."[53]

Yet, in the year after that letter, Brown had succeeded in the role as chairperson and the "BPP had regrouped and regained public respectability and the confidence of its small but dedicated membership. At this pivotal moment Huey Newton returned from exile."[54] The

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[52] Elaine Brown, "To Huey Newton from Elaine Brown," February 1976, Series 2: Black Panther Party Records, Subseries 7: Individuals, Folder 4, "Elaine Brown - Correspondence 1975 - 1977," Box 41, HPN Papers, 1.

[53] Brown, "To Huey Newton from Elaine Brown," 2.

[54] Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 176.

possibility had finally become a reality and despite Brown's public and private support of Newton's return, his arrival shook the Party and all that had been achieved in those three years.

On July 3rd, 1977, Huey Newton returned home to California to crowd of nearly 1,500 people including members of the Black Panther Party. Newton, charismatic as ever, turned towards the crowd at the airport and proclaimed "'I am not guilty of anything,' just before he surrendered to the Oakland authorities to face charges of assault and murder."[55] Despite all that Brown had done for the Party, including the successes of the Panther School, the community survival programs, and the political victories, many outside the Party believed that Newton would be reinstated as chairperson.

Despite the continued successes of the Panthers under Brown, the also media did not question that Newton would return to his position as chairperson. *The New York Times* wrote "Mr. Newton is expected to assume the leadership of the Black Panthers upon his return here, although he will be occupied with seeking bail and preparing a defense."[56] Newton, on the other hand, was adamant that things would not change. He even went as far as to tell Brown "'I didn't come back to replace you. We'll run this thing as partners.' He had no desire to disturb the organization that was now unrecognizable to him."[57] The Party was functioning in a way that Newton had not established, discipline was not done with violence but rather productive and stern discussions, women were in key roles of the Central Committee, and attention was being paid to other avenues such as politics. Brown fully believed him and, Newton was on trial for the next few months, keeping him occupied. Yet that trust eroded very quickly:

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[55] Les Ledbetter, "1,500 Welcome Huey Newton Before He Is Arrested," *New York Times*, July 4, 1977, 43,626 editions, 4.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Brown, *A Taste Of Power*, 437.

> Soon after Newton's return, allegations by some members that the party had become 'weak', and 'female' began to surface. Newton moved quickly to reassert his leadership, installing macho security squads, establishing circles of brotherhood, and challenging sources of influence. [Ericka] Huggins remembered, 'There was a decline because he came back in I feel, and was envious of the work that Elaine had done. So he started changing things back to a kinda point that was easier for him to handle.[58]

Newton had betrayed Brown and she realized that he was just biding his time until he could reinstate himself as chairperson. In just four months, Newton returned to the States and pushed his way back to the top of the Panthers, which would ultimately play a hand in Brown's resignation.

Elaine Brown Resigns as Chairperson

On November 16th, 1977, Elaine Brown announced her resignation as Chairperson of the Black Panther Party. In a memorandum to the Party, Brown began by saying "it is my fervent hope that no one will be shocked or disturbed by this action, as it is my personal decision to do so, one which does not reflect my overwhelming love for Huey P. Newton ... In fact, this decision was made with Huey's understanding."[59] This decision was one that was weeks in the making, especially after the incident with Regina Davis. Davis was a member of the Panthers who dedicated her time to the Oakland Community School, which acted not only as a school but also a form of childcare for many Panther members. Around September or October 1977, Newton ordered the beating of Regina Davis because she reprimanded a Black male panther member after she "told a Brother to do an assigned task at the school, and he had refused."[60]

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[58] Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 180.

[59] Elaine Brown, "Statement of Elaine Brown Re: The Black Panther Party," November 16, 1977, Series 2: Black Panther Party Records, Subseries 7: Individuals, Folder 5, "Elaine Brown Resigns from the B.P.P. 1977," Box 41, HPN Papers.

[60] Brown, *A Taste Of Power*, 444.

When Brown confronted him, he responded as "not that of [her] lover or leader. It was a bland acknowledgment that he had indeed given his authorization for Regina's discipline."[61] Under Brown's leadership, the Party had moved away from the brutal physical discipline that was seen throughout 1973 and no one was beaten as discipline. Brown and the other women of the Party knew the reasoning behind this beating. It was not due to discipline needing to be enforced; it was because Davis, a woman, had given orders to a man. With the Panthers back under partial leadership of Newton, "the beating of Regina would be taken as a clear signal that the words 'Panther' and 'comrade' had taken on gender connotations, denoting an inferiority in the female half [of the Party]."[62] This incident was one of the biggest that had taken place since Newton had returned to the Panthers, and since he had told Brown he wished to operate the Party as a partnership. It is unclear whether or not others had been disciplined before Davis, but based on previous evidence, the rapid decline of Newton in 1973 and how quickly he lashed out at Davis, it can be assumed that Newton had most likely beaten other members prior to Davis. Questions on gender had long animated discussions within the Party, with leaders such as Huey Newton and Bobby Seale holding firm in their statement that roles within the Party were "appointed to ranked positions based on ability not gender."[63] Yet, the actions of Newton and other male members made it clear that women were still inferior to the male members.

Despite all that occurred in Brown's last few months of her leadership, she did not want to expose what happened to the other Party members. In her letter to the Party, Brown cites "unhappiness in personal matters, incapacitating my ability to function ... My mental and

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[61] Brown, *A Taste Of Power,* 444.

[62] Brown, *A Taste Of Power*, 445.

[63] Alameen-Shavers, "The Woman Question," 45.

physical strength, after 10 years, were waning, in fact nearly collapsing."[64] A fear of Brown's and many other Panther members was that speaking out about what actually occurred within the Party, whether it be while in the Party or after leaving, would cause it to be weaponized against the Party, especially in the media. The country, FBI, and media were already doing a thorough job of painting the Panthers to be a militant and anti-white group. Suppose that members of the Party came out with stories about things such as harsh physical discipline and male chauvinism, the media and country would have a field day with that information and use it to confirm the worst ideas that people had about the Party. Brown urged the Party to accept her resignation, knowing that "many will argue what this really means. They will speculate. [But] it means only what I have said."[65] Her resignation letter was most likely circulated around the Party since it was addressed to The Black Panther Party. However, this was not the only resignation letter that she wrote. Brown wrote a much shorter and more precise letter directly to Huey Newton (fig. 5).

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[64] Brown, "Statement of Elaine Brown Re: The Black Panther Party."

[65] Ibid.

Figure 5. A copy of Elaine Brown's personal resignation letter to Huey Newton. Undated. Located in Series 2: Black Panther Party Records, Subseries 7: Individuals, Folder 5, "Elaine Brown Resigns from the B.P.P. 1977," Box 41, HPN Papers.

While this note is on the shorter side, there is one important point revealed in this letter. Brown wrote, "it seemed too much of a man's world for me."[66] Brown had given ten years of her life to the Party, and she achieved many successes for the members of the Party and the rest of the Black community. The male chauvinism experienced by the women of the Party was a daily struggle and there was a constant fear of retaliation from the male members. It was even more difficult for Brown as she rose through the ranks very quickly. Brown faced criticism from inside and outside the Party, yet she continued in her role as long as she could. Both letters show how Brown understood she could not continue in the role as chairperson if Newton was back on the scene and her cautious language demonstrated her fear that "history might come to define the Party for its worst, not it's best – John and Bunchy and Fred and George and so many others, our food and other programs that provided a concrete means for our people to survive."[67]

With a young daughter in tow, Brown boarded a plane leaving behind the Party she loved and began the next phase of her life. In the wake of Brown's absence, the Party was desperate for stability, but it became quickly apparent that Newton was not going to be a force of calm. Rather, "his actions undermined the legitimacy and vitality of the survival programs ... [and] the growing collision between Newton's decline and the Party's ability to carry out its mission foreshadowed the demise of the Black Panther Party."[68] Times were changing for the Black Panther Party; they were no longer able to rely on the steadfast work of Brown and for many the change was too much. Supporters of the Panthers were worried about the direction Newton took the Party in after Brown's resignation, including Jay Friedman, who was a dedicated supporter.

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[66] Brown, "To Huey Newton from Elaine Brown," Undated.
[67] Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 447.

[68] Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 179.

Friedman wrote a letter to the Panthers just one month after Brown's official resignation became public:

> I have decided to terminate my monthly contributions to the Black Panther Party. One of the major reasons is the recent resignation from the Party of co-chairperson Elaine Brown, and what appears to be the 'cult of personality' of Huey Newton. Unless the Party can broaden its roots in the community, unless it can retain the support of its own membership without cults and purges, etc., it cannot hope to achieve its goals.[69]

Friedman's letter conveyed a feeling that was shared by many, and Newton's ability maintain control over his organization became weaker every month that Brown was gone, which in turn forced Newton towards more manic and drastic methods of control. Brown's time as chairperson helped show the members and the rest of the world that the Panthers were a legitimate organization capable of shifting the social and political worlds. Brown's resignation indicated that the cracks within the foundation of the Party were too deep for her to smooth out. The next stage for the Panthers exposed the internal struggles and usher in more instability throughout the ranks.

Where do the Panthers and Brown go from here?

For the next five years the Panthers stayed afloat, yet their numbers dwindled with each passing year. There are different debates as to why the Panthers eventually met their demise, some blame COINTELPRO, others credit Newton's paranoia and the Panthers "increased involvement in criminal activities."[70] But it is clear that at the end of 1977, the Panthers took a nosedive and were not going to recover. While the Panthers were struggling to retain members

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[69] Jay Friedman, "Monthly Donations," December 13, 1977, Series 2: Black Panther Party Records, Subseries 7: Individuals, Folder 5, "Elaine Brown Resigns from the B.P.P. 1977," Box 41, HPN Papers.

[70] Johnson III, "Explaining the Demise of The Black Panther Party: The Role of Internal Factors," 408.

and appearing to be making all the wrong decisions, Brown seemingly disassociates herself from the Party entirely.

With her young daughter clutching her hand, Brown ventured away from the Black Panther Party. She described how she felt when she left: "freedom. That was all I could feel in those first seconds away from the Black Panther Party."[71] The chaotic end to Brown's three years as chairperson clearly left her in shock and the pain of it all hit her in a wave of what appears to be relief. While Brown's autobiography does not delve into much beyond her years within the Black Panther Party, it is known that Brown traveled to Paris after her resignation. While there, the Panthers officially collapsed in 1982 with the closing of the Oakland Community School, which Brown had once held very close to her heart. Over the years, Brown's dedication to the Party and overall impact on the organization seemed to dwindle. Brown eventually returned to the United States around 1998 and continues her political activism through grassroots mobilization and fighting for equality for black Americans.

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[71] Brown, *A Taste Of Power*, 449.

Conclusion

For about sixteen years the Black Panther Party operated in Oakland and other major cities across the United States. The Party that society and historians have come to know, the one with men standing poised with guns and dressed in all black, is not truly what the Black Panther Party was. Yet we must wonder why it has come to be all that is known. The Black Panther Party was a black nationalist group that rose to prominence at the end of the non-violent civil rights movement and began as a way to protect black citizens in the community. Huey Newton and Bobby Seale were inspired by various movements from Malcom X, a member of the Nation of Islam, to Socialism to Mao Tse Tung's Communism and Newton borrowed the Black Panther name from the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, a political party formed with the help of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). As the Black Panther Party grew in numbers, so did the microscope that they were being scrutinized under by the FBI, politicians, and the white population. There are many misconceptions surrounding the Black Panther Party and those misconceptions have continued to steer the narrative of the Party in the almost 40 years since its collapse.

Elaine Brown is a name that is not often associated to the Black Panther Party. However, the Panthers and Newton knew what she did for the Party. As the only female chairperson of the organization, Brown was responsible for helping the Panthers not only achieve respectability within the community and media, but her leadership was crucial in the political and social aspirations of the Black Panther Party. When Brown first joined the organization, she was not completely sold on the Panther rhetoric. She referenced the first time she was called 'sister', which was a common Panther term, and she remembered that "a quiver went through me when

she spoke to me. I did not feel I was her 'sister' by any definition. Yet, as Brown ventured into the Party and became emersed in their mission and programs, she quickly shot to the top.

For Brown, the decision to become a Panther forced her to address her womanhood. She recognized early in her time in the Party that despite preaching gender equality, the gender imbalance was very real as was the chauvinism. Brown did acknowledge the chauvinism, but it was clear through many interviews and her decisions throughout her ten years within the Party that she did not want to focus all her attention on it. In an interview with *Good Times Magazine* in March 1971, Brown was asked "How do you handle the problems that come up in dealing with male supremacy and chauvinism?" After a brief answer describing the violations of Black Panther Party rules, Brown concluded by stating:

> As a woman … or that is, if I begin to think of myself as a woman first, I already have an incorrect and improper attitude toward my work in the party. First of all, I am a member of the Black Panther Party; all the other considerations evolve after that, so as a member of the Black Panther Party I have the same rights as the other members in relation to the rules and organization.[1]

Brown took issue with identifying as a woman within this Party. She saw the struggle that the Panthers were fighting as one that was not gendered and by identifying her own womanhood, she thought that she was more or less taking away from the issue of racism and oppression of black people. Therefore, she confronted chauvinism through her actions, as a rank-and-file member and as leader. In her first five years as a Panther, Brown was able to rise through the ranks of the Party and in doing so she expanded the scope of the Party. From her work on the Black Panther newspaper to her involvement with the community survival programs, she was constantly facing chauvinism and sexism, yet she continued in her mission of fighting the oppressor.

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[1] Phyllis and Steve, Interview with Elaine Brown, Good Times Newspaper, March 5, 1971, Series 8: Newspaper Clippings, Folder 5, "General Write-ups on the Party [2 of 2] 1972 - 1974," Box 4, HPN Papers.

When Brown was promoted to chairperson of the organization, she immediately established a new approach to leadership. Under the male leaders such as Newton and Seale, the organization operated in a manner that did not always fully utilize the skillset of the female members. While women were on the Central Committee under Newton's leadership, they were not being recognized for how much they were contributing, such as their work in the community survival programs. By promoting women to the Central Committee, Brown demonstrated her trust in these women, which was key to the Party's survival.

Elaine Brown's time within the Black Panther Party demonstrated the struggle that Black women were facing at this contentious time in history. The same year that Elaine Brown resigned from the Black Panther Party and fled to Paris, the Combahee River Collective Statement was released. The Combahee River Collective was comprised of black lesbian women, including Demita Frazier, Beverly Smith, and Barbara Smith, who were the primary authors of the Statement. Within their statement, the women, who identified as black feminists, were "committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking."[2] The movement that rose out of the Combahee River Collective Statement was one that considered the truly intersectional identity of black women: the very same identity that Brown and countless Panther women were struggling to understand.

Rather than forcing the issue of sexism or classism to the back in order to make room for the fight against racism, members of the Combahee River Collective recognized that "racism did not allow us, and still does not allow most black women, to look more deeply into our own

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[2] The Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 3/4 (2014): 271.

experiences and define those things that make our lives what they are and our oppression specific to us."[3] These women were taking on the task of raising the consciousness of black women across the country, something that Brown and other Panther women attempted to do in their own way. Yet given Brown's resignation letter, it can be deduced that her efforts fell short. But the Combahee River Collective can be viewed as a sign of change for black women and that the efforts from Brown were not for nothing.

Indeed, Brown's contributions to the Panthers needs to be commemorated within Black Panther Party history. Analyzing the Party through a gender-corrective lens leads to the understanding that the Party would not have survived as long as it did without Brown and other women. Constantly stepping into the men's roles, these women were responsible for day-to-day tasks but also matters that involved the community survival programs, representing the Panthers in the community, and electoral politics.

As the only female chairperson of the Black Panther Party, Brown's continued loyalty and dedication to the Party that had turned its back on her a few times, needs to be commended. In the end, Brown points to the man's world as being her reasoning behind her resignation. Yet, her presence within this male-dominated organization set a path for future black women to insert themselves in places that society might not be ready to see. Brown's time within the Party demonstrated that maintaining a balance between gender was not an easy task. However, Brown used her power wisely, after witnessing her male predecessors wielding a scepter of terror she opted for a new approach. Brown wielded both a scepter of terror and a sword of freedom as chairperson of the Black Panther Party, making her one of the most memorable and influential figures in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.

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[3] The Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," 273.

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