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Framing the Panther

Assata Shakur and Black Female Agency

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How we imagine a revolutionary is shaped by our ideas concerning gender, sex, and race, not just ideology.¹ How we imagine transformative black political leadership is very much influenced by how we think of gender and agency. The absence or presence of maleness shapes common perceptions of women revolutionaries. The same is not true for femaleness in perceptions of male revolutionaries.

One can easily imagine antiracist revolutionary struggle against the state without (black) women clearly in the picture, but to imagine revolution against state violence in the absence of (black) men often draws a blank. Men appear independent of women in revolutionary struggles; women generally appear as revolutionaries only in association with men, often as “helpmates.” As a category, the female revolutionary remains somewhat of an afterthought, an aberration; hence she is an abstraction—vague and not clearly in the picture.

In this regard, former Black Panther Party (BPP) and Black Liberation Army (BLA) member Assata Shakur is extraordinary, as we shall see later. Assata Shakur is unique not only because she has survived in exile as a political figure despite the U.S. government’s bounty —“dead or alive”—on her head but also because she may prove to be “beyond commoditization” in a time in which political leadership seems to be bought and sold in the marketplace of political trade, compromise, and corruption. Above all, Shakur is singular because she is a recognizable female revolutionary, one not bound to a male persona.



Assata Shakur booking photo.

Gender Politics and “Panther Women”

Influential male narratives have helped to masculinize the political rebel in popular culture and memory. Nationally and internationally, the most prominently known black political prisoners and prison intellectuals are male. The brief incarceration of Martin Luther King, Jr., in Alabama, produced the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963), which popularized civil disobedience against repressive laws. The imprisonment as a petty criminal of Malcolm X in the 1950s engendered the political man and somewhat fictionalized *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965; published posthumously and creatively embellished and edited by Alex Haley, who had worked for the Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], which sought to discredit Malcolm X). The 1971 killing by prison guards of George Jackson, author of *Soledad Brothers: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* and the posthumously published *Blood in My Eye*, helped to incite the Attica prison uprising in New York.² The violent and deadly repression by the National Guard deployed by New York governor Nelson Rockefeller created more male martyrs and more closely linked incarceration, repression, and rebellion to the male figure. Current organizing for a new trial for former Black Panther Mumia Abu-Jamal is galvanized by his incisive commentaries and critiques in *Live from Death Row*.³ Conventional political thought and memory associate few women with revolutionary literature or with armed resistance, political incarceration, or martyrdom stemming from struggles against enslavement or racist oppression.

Along with Harriet Tubman, Shakur would become one of the few black female figures in the United States recognized as a leader in an organization that publicly advocated armed self-defense against racist violence. From its emergence in 1966, originally named the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, given police brutality and police killings of African Americans and cofounded by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, the Black

Panther Party captured the national imagination and inspired its paranoia.⁴ The Black Panther Party remains the organizational icon (with Malcolm X the individual icon) for black militant resistance to racial domination and terror.

The average American political spectator was and is more captivated or repelled by the Black Panthers' stance on armed self-defense and their battles with local and federal police—and resulting martyrs—than with the BPP social service programs largely organized and run by women. Hundreds of women, including Shakur before she was forced underground, served in the Black Panther Party's rank and file, implementing the medical, housing, clothing, free breakfast, and education programs. Female Panthers displayed an agency that (re)shaped American politics, although their stories recede in popular culture before the narratives of elites or icons.

Violence, race, and sex mark the symbolism surrounding BPP icons. African American male revolutionaries are not perceived as having been politicized through their romantic or personal relationships with female counterparts; rather, their speeches and deeds mark them for public recognition. Each male in the Panther pantheon can stand individually yet still “possess” a female counterpart: George Jackson was linked to Angela Davis, Elaine Brown to Huey P. Newton, Kathleen Cleaver to Eldridge. Only Assata Shakur stands alone as an iconic figure, embodying masculine and feminine aspects. Her hybridity is a confluence of masculine and feminine (stereotypical) characteristics. Without a towering male persona, Shakur—unlike the “conventional” black female revolutionary—has no shadow of a legendary fighter and revolutionary to shade her from full scrutiny: the speculative or admiring gaze, the curious gawk, the hostile stare.

Black female icons were recognized as the lovers or partners of black male revolutionaries or prison intellectuals (Newton, Cleaver, and Jackson all wrote from prison). Kathleen Cleaver's tumultuous marriage to Eldridge Cleaver; Elaine Brown's devotion to her disintegrating, drug-addicted former lover, Huey Newton, who installed her as Black Panther Party chair (from 1974 to 1977); and Angela Davis's relationship with prison theorist George Jackson, which began while she was organizing to free the incarcerated Soledad Brothers—all serve as markers, promoting the image of black female militants as sexual and political associates, as beautiful consorts rather than political comrades. The American public as spectator would recognize in these personal if not political

lives familiar heterosexual dramas of desire, betrayal, abandonment, and battery.

Assata Shakur least fits this scenario, although her memoir speaks volumes about gender politics in the BPP. Shakur was already an incarcerated revolutionary when she conceived and gave birth to her codefendant's daughter (who graduated from Spelman College and whose father's name is eclipsed by the name of her mother). Equally, the names of her BLA comrades linked to her capture at the turnpike police shooting are largely unknown. In the 1973 confrontation with New Jersey state troopers, Shakur was seriously wounded; Zayd Shakur was killed (along with Trooper Werner Foerster, who may have died in police cross fire); and Sundiata Acoli (Clark Squire) escaped to be later apprehended and sentenced to prison.

Assata Shakur's leadership persona keeps considerable distance from problematic relationships to men. Interestingly, there are no men in the East Coast Panthers whose stature equals hers (although some, such as Dhoruba bin Wahad, who was incarcerated for nearly two decades, were political prisoners). Although West Coast Panther leaders Huey P. Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, Geronimo Pratt, and George Jackson and the Chicago leader Fred Hampton are more prominent, they wear the shroud of “martyrs”—the psychological or physical casualties of a liberation war.⁵

In some ways the men's status as icons does not compare favorably with Shakur's, for she has longevity as a living political figure, one not marred by personal “pathology” or voluntary exile from a U.S. black mass. Shakur's narrative marks her flight as a revolutionary act in itself. She escaped from prison as “quietly” as she lived and struggled (she writes in the memoir that she planned the escape); she was not released by the courts as were Malcolm, Newton, Cleaver, Pratt, Hampton, and Davis. *Assata: An Autobiography* makes her continuously (re)appear to progressives, while the police manhunt that commands her reappearance into prison keeps her visible in the conservative or mainstream public mind (to the degree that it is attentive).

Assata Shakur became a fugitive in the only communist country in the hemisphere. Cuba thus shares an “outlaw” status with the black female fugitive it harbors. (Cuba continues to shelter U.S. political dissidents.) The 1959 Cuban Revolution's ability to expel U.S. crime syndicates and corporations from the island was the ultimate act of enduring revolution within America's “sphere of influence.” Likewise, Shakur is the only prominent Panther able to “successfully” escape from prison. Her “legend” is

augmented through exile and her political sensibilities and literary ability. (That she was trained by the Cubans and received a postgraduate degree at the University of Havana suggests a set of skills that surpass those of her revolutionary colleagues who died or imploded while young.) Unlike the men, there is little notoriety of a personal life lived in excess and criminality. Rather, there is a dignified restraint that must seem confusing when juxtaposed with her advocacy of liberation "by any means necessary."

Shakur is not more reticent than her male compatriots mentioned here; she is more mature—perhaps in part because she lived long enough to see middle age (but so did Newton and Cleaver), perhaps because her political style was less personality driven. It is difficult to compare Shakur's political legacy with those Panther- and BLA-imprisoned intellectuals disciplined by decades of incarceration who have not been in the public spotlight.

Unlike her female elite comrades, Shakur never had to explain (or forget) a controversial male partner or have his silent presence trail her throughout her political and private life. Women more famous than she—Kathleen Cleaver, Angela Davis, Elaine Brown—do not possess her iconic stature as a revolutionary either. In "Black Revolutionary Icons and NeoSlave Narratives," I compare in greater detail Black Panther leaders and associates Elaine Brown, Kathleen Cleaver, Angela Davis and Assata Shakur;⁶ here, I only note that she differs from both male and female elite leadership connected to armed resistance.

Shakur's background is remarkable for its unremarkable nature. Among the women, Brown grew up in Philadelphia slums, became a Playboy Bunny, and moved in circles that included Frank Sinatra. Cleaver was the daughter of a diplomat and went to elite schools before embracing SNCC and then the *Soul on Ice* author and convicted rapist Eldridge Cleaver. Davis was mentored by the communist leaders the Apthekers in New York City and grew into an international figure in the Communist Party. Shakur came from neither poverty nor wealth or privilege. She was as ordinary a young woman, with the exception of truancy as a teenage runaway, as the working or (lower) middle-class black society would issue. For some, how frightening must be the prospect that *any* ordinary colored girl, within the appropriate context, could grow up to become a revolutionary.

Born in a New York City hospital in 1947, Joanne Chesimard would later reject her birth name as a "slave name" to become "Assata Shakur." In the mid-1960s, according to her memoir, she enrolled at Manhattan Community College to acquire secretarial skills in order to advance in the labor market. Instead, she became a political activist and began working in the

Black liberation struggle, the student rights movement, and the movement against the Vietnam War. Upon graduating from college, Shakur joined the Black Panther Party. Although she was active in the social service aspects of the New York BPP, its breakfast program, sickle-cell testing, and health services, she was forced out of this work and into the underground due to violent police repression against black radicals associated with the Party. Assata describes how she sought out the Black Liberation Army, an underground, military wing of largely East Coast Panthers, for self-protection. The BPP had become a primary target of one of the FBI's violent counterintelligence programs (COINTELPRO) and its most murderous intentions. While underground, Shakur became accused of numerous crimes, charges that were eventually dismissed or of which she was exonerated.

However, in March 1977, following a 1973 change of venue and a 1974 mistrial, Assata Shakur was convicted as an accomplice to the murder of New Jersey state trooper Werner Foerster and of atrocious assault on trooper James Harper with intent to kill. Despite the testimony of expert witnesses, who argued that medical evidence showed that Shakur, who herself had been shot by police while sitting in a car, could not have shot either trooper, an all-white jury, with five members with personal ties to state troopers, convicted her. The judge did not allow any evidence of COINTELPRO repression to be entered into the case and refused to investigate a break-in at the office of her defense counsel. Two years after her conviction, Shakur escaped from New Jersey's Clinton Correctional Facility. In 1984, she received political asylum in Cuba, where she remains today, meeting with foreign delegations and working—with a million-dollar bounty on her head.

Waging a People's War: Violence and Trauma in the Absence of "Victory"

Historically within the United States, black resistance to domination has been pacifist, militarist, or a creative combination of the two. Most of the violence in resistance movements has been from the state. The story of COINTELPRO as a form of state violence is like a Brothers Grimm tale: it is meant to chill and chasten most who hear it. Unlike in the Grimm's fairy tales, however, the victors in American stories of political struggle for a greater democracy are not usually the victims-in-resistance. Deployed since the 1920s in some fashion against communists, workers, artists, women, civil rights and human rights activists, and antiwar organizations,

the FBI counterintelligence program destabilized progressive political movements by targeting, intimidating, and killing activists. The program remains in effect today, with the continuing harassment and incarceration of its targets.⁷ In 1968, when FBI director J. Edgar Hoover designated the Black Panther Party as the “greatest threat to the internal security” of the United States, imprisonment as well as assassinations of key Panther leaders followed. However, no concerted national outrage emerged in response to the state’s violent repression of black insurgency. The lack of concern seemed tied partly to ignorance and partly to the consequence of negative media depictions of black revolutionaries. According to the U.S. Senate’s 1976 Church Commission report on domestic intelligence operations: “The FBI has attempted covertly to influence the public’s perception of persons and organizations by disseminating derogatory information to the press, either anonymously or through ‘friendly news contacts.’”⁸

While Angela Davis’s 1972 acquittal proves to some liberals that the “system” works (and, conversely, for some conservatives, that it is dangerously flawed), Assata Shakur’s escape from prison in 1979 invalidates that conviction. Shakur’s political life reworks the neoslave narrative to invert its deradicalizing tendencies with the testimony of an unreconstructed insurrectionist. She is disturbing because she was never exonerated, because her 1979 prison escape rejects “the system,” because she bears witness as an unrepentant insurrectionist and “slave” fugitive. Shakur represents the unembraceable, against whom (and those who offer her refuge) the state exercises severe sanctions. Nevertheless, her case has received support from ideologically disparate African Americans, ranging from incarcerated revolutionaries and prison intellectuals to neoliberal black studies professors. Her narrative, which is more that of the revolutionary slave than the slave fugitive, seems to construct Cuba, not the United States, as the potential site for (black) freedom.⁹

Assata Shakur’s political contributions to black liberation are enmeshed in high controversy and life-and-death crises. Scholar Manning Marable writes in his essay “Black Political Prisoners: The Case of Assata Shakur” (1998):

If Assata Shakur is involuntarily returned to the US . . . she will be imprisoned for life, and very possibly murdered by state authorities. The only other Black Panther who survived the 1973 shoot-out, Sundiata Acoli, is 61 years old and remains in prison to this day. No new trial could possibly be fair, since part of the trial transcripts have [*sic*] been lost and crucial evidence has “disappeared.”

Assata Shakur is less marketable in mainstream culture given that her life and writings present a narrative similar to that of Mumia Abu-Jamal. As the unrepentant rebel, she calls herself “slave,” rejects her “slave name,” and denounces the white-dominated corporate society and state as “slave-masters.” Aspects of her narrative (found in the memoir, interviews, documentaries, and media reports) link her more to the underground Black Liberation Army than to the Black Panther Party, which has become on some levels a cultural commodity. Hence she is not only a rebel but also a militarist.

Shakur thus functions as political embarrassment and irritation for the police and conservative politicians, and conversely as political inspiration, or at least quiet satisfaction, for some of their most ardent critics. Those who worked above ground with the courts saw and see in Angela Davis’s release and exoneration a vindication of their political agency. Likewise, those who did advocacy work or worked underground, or who understood that circumstances and police malfeasance required extralegal maneuvers, see in Shakur’s self-liberation an affirmation of their political efficacy or the practicalities of resistance. That her escape entailed neither casualties nor hostages obviously helps pacifists to support her strategies.

Assata: An Autobiography depicts a public persona hardly compatible with commoditization by those who romanticize political or revolutionary violence. Rejecting the image of violent black revolutionaries, her account offers a complex portrait of a woman so committed to black freedom that she refused to reject armed struggle as a strategy to obtain it. Even during violent upheavals, community remains central for Shakur. Refusing to make revolutionary war synonymous with violence, she writes of a “people’s war” that precludes elite vanguards. *Assata* describes the limitations of black revolutionaries:

Some of the groups thought they could just pick up arms and struggle and that, somehow, people would see what they were doing and begin to struggle themselves. They wanted to engage in a do-or-die battle with the power structure in America, even though they were weak and ill prepared for such a fight. But the most important factor is that armed struggle, by itself, can never bring about a revolution. Revolutionary war is a people’s war.¹⁰

The “people’s war,” however, retained a military dimension for Shakur. Her memoir cites the importance of organizing an underground, the serious

consideration of “armed acts of resistance” in scenarios that expand black people’s support for resistance.¹¹

In news interviews and documentaries, narratives have emerged to portray the black revolutionary as a political icon and the lone active survivor of a tumultuous era.¹² Shakur’s image in Lee Lew-Lee’s documentary *All Power to the People! The Black Panther Party and Beyond* appears with archival footage in an exposé on the murderous aspects of COINTEL-PRO. What Lew-Lee labeled “death squads” and I term “state violence” operated against both the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the documentary, former New York Panther Safiya Bukhari is one of the few black women—women are not prominently featured in *All Power to the People!*—who discusses the emergence of the BLA as an underground offshoot of the Panthers. According to Bukhari, New York Panthers, accused of breaking with the West Coast leadership, were caught between “a rock and a hard place.” Huey P. Newton had allegedly put out a death warrant on them, condemning them as traitors and “government agents”; the New York Police Department (NYPD), assisted by the FBI, had done likewise, marking them as traitors and “terrorists.”

The BLA formed against the frightening background memories of Malcolm X’s 1965 assassination and healthy paranoia inspired by the unclear roles played by the Nation of Islam, Louis Farrakhan, and NYPD undercover agent who had infiltrated Malcolm’s organization to serve as his “bodyguard.” Likewise, the 1969 executions of Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in a predawn raid by the Chicago police coordinated by the FBI (survivors would later collect a large settlement from the government, which admits no wrongdoing) framed the choices of black radicals as life-and-death options.

In *Still Black, Still Strong: Survivors of the War against Black Revolutionaries*, former Panther Dhoruba Bin Wahad offers insights into the underground organization and reveals the complex gender and race dynamics surrounding Shakur. Assata Shakur’s revolutionary icon exists *sans* celebrity posing or adulation for past dramatic and traumatic clashes with the state. Her solitude—in prison, as a fugitive, as a revolutionary woman not tied to a dependent relationship with a man—epitomizes the aloneness, if not loneliness, of the unrepentant revolutionary.

Physical violence and battlefield knowledge and fatigue foster a unique black female political being. Her encounters with police both in the street and in “safe havens” such as hospitals are revealing. Shakur was shot while

unarmed, with her hands raised, then taken to the hospital, where she was brutally beaten. The memoir describes her being shackled to a hospital bed with bullet wounds, while New Jersey state troopers tortured and threatened to kill her. *Assata* recounts how medical staff and poetry kept her alive despite police assaults:

They gave me the poetry of our people, the tradition of our women, the relationship of human beings to nature and the search of human beings for freedom, for justice, for a world that isn’t a brutal world. And those books—even through that experience—kind of just chilled me out, let me be in touch with my tradition, the beauty of my people, even though we’ve had to suffer such vicious oppression. . . .it makes you think that no matter how brutal the police, the courts are, the people fight to keep their humanity.¹³

Revolutionary Fugitive and Slave Rebel

At first confined in a men’s prison, under twenty-four-hour surveillance, without adequate intellectual, physical, or medical resources during the trial, Shakur was later relocated to a women’s correctional facility in Clinton, New Jersey. Sentenced to life plus thirty-three years, after being convicted of killing Werner Foerster by an all-white jury in 1977,¹⁴ she was initially housed in facilities alongside women of the Aryan Nation sisterhood, the Manson family, and Squeaky Fromme, who had attempted to assassinate former president Gerald Ford. Shakur maintains that her escape was motivated by a fear of being murdered in prison. In her memoir she also writes that she ultimately decided to “leave” after dreaming of her grandmother instructing her to do so, and realizing that she would not be able to see her young daughter while incarcerated.

In a 1978 petition concerning political prisoners, political persecution, and torture in the United States, the National Conference of Black Lawyers, the National Alliance against Racist and Political Repression, and the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice brought Shakur’s case before the United Nations. The petition stated that Assata Shakur became a hunted fugitive after and due to: the FBI and NYPD charging her with being a leader of the Black Liberation Army, which the agencies characterized as an “organization engaged in the shooting of police officers”; the appearance of public posters that depicted her as a dangerous criminal involved in fabricated terrorist conspiracies against civilians; and

her appearance on the FBI's "Most Wanted List" which rendered her "a 'shoot-to-kill' target."

In 1998, black activist-intellectuals S. E. Anderson, Soffiyah Jill Elijah, Esq., Joan P. Gibbs, Esq., Rosemari Mealy, and Karen D. Taylor circulated, via e-mail, "An Open Letter to New Jersey Governor Whitman." This letter to Christine Todd Whitman (who would later head the Environmental Protection Agency in the first administration of George W. Bush) protested the \$50,000 bounty the governor had placed on political exile and fugitive Shakur. (In 2006, Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez, who would later resign from the Bush administration due to abuse of his office, raised the bounty to \$1 million.) The letter castigated the Republican governor: "[In] seeking her apprehension by . . . 'kidnapping,' you have engaged in the kind of debased moralism that the former slave masters in this country resorted to when seeking the return of runaway Africans to slavery." For the letter's authors, Assata Shakur "followed in the footsteps of Harriet Tubman, who instructed: there was one of two things I had a right to, liberty, or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other; for no man should take me alive; I should fight for my liberty as long as my strength lasted."¹⁵

In early 1998, concurrently with the circulation of "An Open Letter to New Jersey Governor Whitman," an "Open Letter from Assata Shakur" circulated online. Shakur's letter begins: "My name is Assata Shakur, and I am a 20th century escaped slave." Of herself and her codefendant, Sundiata Acoli, she writes that they were both convicted in pretrial news media, and that the media were not allowed to interview them although the New Jersey police and FBI gave daily interviews and stories to the press.¹⁶ Shakur's conflictual relationship with mainstream media would be rekindled a decade later. On December 24, 1997, a press conference was held to announce that New Jersey State Police had written a letter (which was never publicly released) to Pope John Paul II asking him to intervene on their behalf and to aid in having Shakur extradited to the United States. In response, Shakur wrote to the pope, explaining her story. Then in January 1998, during the pope's visit to Cuba, Shakur granted an interview with NBC journalist Ralph Penza. For this three-part "exclusive interview series," NBC advertised on black radio stations and placed notices in local newspapers. The series erased or distorted much of the information Shakur and other progressives had presented concerning her case.

However, most striking here is the bizarre polarization of female identities with images so antipodean that the only comparable extremes in

American cultural iconography are the neoslave narratives, those of the white plantation mistress and the black field slave. In a media interview, Governor Whitman expressed outrage at Shakur's happiness about being a grandmother, and her haven or home in Cuba. Shakur's rejoinder notes that she has never seen her grandchild. She argues that if Whitman considers that "50 years of dealing with racism, poverty, persecution, brutality, prison, underground, exile and blatant lies has been so nice, then I'd be more than happy to let her walk in my shoes."

During the NBC special, one interviewee suggested that the New Jersey police would do everything to extradite Shakur from Cuba, including "kidnapping" her and using bounty hunters. Shakur responds in her "Open Letter":

I guess the theory is that if they could kidnap millions of Africans from Africa 400 years ago, they should be able to kidnap one African woman today. It is nothing but an attempt to bring about the re-incarnation of the Fugitive Slave Act. All I represent is just another slave that they want to bring back to the plantation. Well, I might be a slave, but I will go to my grave a rebellious slave. I am and I feel like a maroon woman. I will never voluntarily accept the condition of slavery.¹⁷

Leadership without a Vanguard?

What could have protected Shakur and other militant black leaders in liberation organizations from the counterrevolutionary war and murder waged by a democratic state? In theory, the answer to that question is: a politicized mass base that demanded and enforced their human and civil rights, one that could negotiate the end to police surveillance and brutality that sought to undermine legal and productive organizing in black communities ignored by the welfare state. These communities desperately needed what the BPP provided without fostering dependency upon an aloof and depoliticizing bureaucracy: breakfast and educational programs, literacy and newspaper publishing, drug counseling and health care. Yet the problem in leadership would emerge for this black revolutionary woman, and all revolutionaries, if the mass lacked not only the will but also the desire to constitute itself as leaders, as a political vanguard.

During her time in prison, Shakur became familiar with the mass base, or its most depressed sectors, in ways that her organizing outside of prison, providing social services largely denied to blacks at that time by the state,

never permitted. While incarcerated, she was housed with the sector of the population most in need of transformative politics or revolutionary struggle. But this sector proved ambivalent toward organized political struggle. In that space, prison, she and the other incarcerated women functioned less as members of a vanguard and more like social workers. Her writings on her time in captivity are quite revealing about the disparities within black female agency. Throughout her time and trials of being hunted and prosecuted, Assata Shakur would write and publish mostly essays. *Assata* both reveals her skills as a poet and reveals in many ways the triumphal black woman despite institutional trauma.¹⁸ But that memoir was written and published in Cuba, several years after her self-emancipation from prison. The writing during incarceration is filtered with despair for vanguard formations among severely oppressed black women in repressive sites.

A year before Shakur's escape, the *Black Scholar* published her April 1978 essay "Women in Prison: How We Are."¹⁹ Here, Shakur describes New York Riker's Island Correctional Institution for Women, arguing that at the prison "there are no criminals . . . only victims." The environment is uncomfortable and the food inhospitable. The name of the space they occupy, with a heating system whose thermostat cannot be adjusted for more warmth, is the "bull pen." The women held in the pen are "all black" and "all restless" and freezing, according to Shakur. But the physical discomfort is less disturbing than the frightening and embarrassing emotional and psychological decay of the black women caged in the pen. Shakur observes the state of her fellow inmates:

All of us, with the exception of a woman, tall and gaunt, who looks naked and ravished, have refused the bologna sandwiches. The rest of us sit drinking bitter, syrupy tea. The tall, forty-ish woman, with sloping shoulders, moves her head back and forth to the beat of a private tune while she takes small, tentative bites out a bologna sandwich. Someone asks her what she's in for. Matter-of-factly, she says, "They say I killed some nigga. But how could I have when I'm buried down in South Carolina?" Everybody's face gets busy exchanging looks. A short, stout young woman wearing men's pants and men's shoes says, "Buried in South Carolina?" "Yeah," says the tall woman. "South Carolina, that's where I'm buried. You don't know that? You don't know shit, do you? This ain't me. This ain't me." She kept repeating, "This ain't me" until she had eaten all the bologna sandwiches. Then she brushed off the crumbs and withdrew, head moving again, back into that world where only she could hear her private tune.²⁰

The nameless woman, in comparison to whom all the other incarcerated women can feel superior, appears in the first of several short vignettes. The essay provides a framework for seeing a number of representational black women. There is the mother of teenage children, Lucille, who defends herself from her violent domestic partner. He had mutilated her arm and partially severed her ear the night she finally killed him. But a jury seeing no vulnerability, and hence no need for self-defense, in a black woman with a drinking addiction gives her a felony "C" conviction. Working as "jailhouse legal counsel" on the women's behalf, Assata, rather than the salaried court attorney or judge, informs her that the sentence can carry up to fifteen years. There is "Spikey," a drug addict scheduled for release; her appearance is so altered by her addictions, and her violations and abusiveness have so damaged her relations with her mother and her children, that she prefers to spend the Christmas holidays institutionalized rather than with her family and experience the shame that would follow.

The majority of the women inside are black and Puerto Rican survivors of childhood abuse, abuse by men, and abuse by the "system."²¹ Shakur's memoir chronicles suffering from political violence rather than social or personal violence (the most traumatic recorded memory is her escape from a "train," or gang rape, by teenage boys). Yet she expresses empathy with the seemingly apolitical women: "There are no big time gangsters here, no premeditated mass murderers, no godmothers. There are no big time dope dealers, no kidnappers, no Watergate women. There are virtually no women here charged with white collar crimes like embezzling or fraud."²²

The dependency of the women's criminality strikes her: their dependency on drug addiction, on male "masterminds" for whom they work as runners, mules, prostitutes, and thieves. Shakur radiates a sympathy or perhaps empathy for what she views as impoverished rather than criminal people: "The women see stealing or hustling as necessary for the survival of themselves or their children because jobs are scarce and welfare is impossible to live on. . . . amerikan capitalism is in no way threatened by the women in prison on Riker's Island."²³

American capitalism and racially driven incarceration coexist with patriarchy and the mystique of "home." And the women are not fans of white supremacy, or even the nation-state, but are loyalists toward consumer-driven capitalism and the fetish of "home." Shakur writes that the "domesticity" of the women's prison, its brightly colored walls, television, plants, rooms with electronic doors (rather than bars), and laundry facilities,

produces in the incarcerated a sense of well-being among emotionally and materially deprived women: "Many women are convinced that they are, somehow, 'getting over.' Some go so far as to reason that because they are not doing hard time, they are not really in prison."²⁴ Yet the women's relationships, not their attachments to material resources, comfort, and structured predictability, unavailable in their lives outside of prison, reveal their convictions to be false. This false consciousness is dispelled by the relations that women have among themselves as prisoners and with their jailers. The women who police the lives of the incarcerated are also black. Their particular type of black female agency in service to and on the payroll of the state works against the agency of both black radical women prisoners such as Shakur and destabilized black women prisoners such as Spikey. This presents a range of contradictions for progressive politics and absolute Manichean divides. Assata Shakur writes disparagingly of the bonds of "affection" exhibited between black female jailers and their black wards:

Beneath the motherly veneer, the reality of guard life is [ever] present. Most of the guards are black, usually from working class, upward bound, civil service oriented backgrounds. They identify with the middle class, have middle class values and are extremely materialistic. They are not the most intelligent women in the world. . . . Most are aware that there is no justice in the amerikan judicial system and that blacks and Puerto Ricans are discriminated against in every facet of amerikan life. But, at the same time, they are convinced that the system is somehow "lenient." To them, the women in prison are "losers" who don't have enough sense to stay out of jail. Most believe in the boot strap theory—anybody can "make it" if they try hard enough.²⁵

American exceptionalism filters down to the lowest reaches of the social strata (which does not mean that black women can be generalized). Shakur's problematic black women manage Frantz Fanon's "wretched of the earth" by ensuring the smooth operation of systems that cage them. As guards, their dispensing of affection for the caged (presumably based on some shared condition or affinity) pacifies the wretched. American exceptionalism worn by the black woman (guard) becomes a form of self-validation and social superiority.

Shakur grimly (or sadly?) notes: "They congratulate themselves on their great accomplishments. In contrast to themselves they see the inmate as

ignorant, uncultured, self-destructive, weak-minded and stupid." She next proceeds to identify the source of black achievement for these women (and, by extension, an extensive segment of the black working and middle class): "They ignore the fact that their dubious accomplishments are not based on superior intelligence or effort, but only on chance and a civil service list. . . . no matter how much they hate the military structure, the infighting, the ugliness of their tasks, they are very aware . . . [that if] they were not working as guards most would be underpaid or unemployed." The absence of their employment in the prison industries would mean existential and material losses: "Many would miss the feeling of superiority and power as much as they would miss the money, especially the cruel, sadistic ones."

Among the incarcerated, drug use and abuse provide the topics for most conversations. Hence, Shakur argues: "In prison, as on the streets, an escapist culture prevails." She estimates that half of the prison population is prescribed and required to take a psychotropic drug (what contemporary incarcerated women have referred to as "chemical handcuffs").²⁶ Other forms of addiction, socially acceptable ones, manifest in television, prison love/sexual relations, and games of distraction. Few women engage in academic, political, or legal studies, and even fewer in radical politics such as feminism, antiracism, or gay liberation politics. Their dependency on institutionalized life moves beyond the borders of physical need expressed in shelter, health care, food, and safety from violent males.

Assata Shakur observes gender disparities as marking the existence and expression of political agency of black incarcerated people: "A striking difference between women and men prisoners at Riker's Island is the absence of revolutionary rhetoric among the women. We have no study groups. We have no revolutionary literature floating around. There are no groups of militants attempting to 'get their heads together.' The women at Riker's seem vaguely aware of what a revolution is, but generally regard it as an impossible dream."²⁷ Revolution, of course, requires risk, sacrifice, discipline, and work. Ironically, the women seek the "American dream" and find that more attainable than the dream of revolution for a society free of capitalism, institutional racism, and (hetero)sexism.

Noting that some women find prison "a place to rest and recuperate," Shakur sees that the trials of captivity in some ways reflect the outside: "The cells are not much different from the tenements, the shooting galleries and the welfare hotels they live in on the street. . . . Riker's Island is just another institution. In childhood school was their prison, or youth

houses or reform schools or children shelters or foster homes or mental hospitals or drug programs and they see all institutions as indifferent to their needs, yet necessary to their survival." Here, there are rings of captivity to be explored, theorized, and resisted. The striking problem, though, is whether or not the women have the agency and energy to undertake such a task. In her inability to assert that they do in this essay, Shakur functions as witness and advocate.²⁸

In the final section of the essay, titled "What of Our Past? What of Our History? What of Our Future?," Shakur notes that trauma and grief are not new to black/red women: "I can imagine the pain and the strength of my great great grandmothers who were slaves and my great great grandmothers who were Cherokee Indians trapped on reservations." She then references the pain of contemporary women in liberation movement(s), those supposedly so unlike the "apolitical" women in Riker's Island who are functioning at low levels of consciousness with no level of active resistance. For Shakur, movement women mirrored the dysfunctional attitudes and behaviors of incarcerated or mass women:

I think about my sisters in the movement. I remember the days when, draped in African garb, we rejected our foremothers and ourselves as castrators. We did penance for robbing the brother of his manhood, as if we were the oppressor. I remember the days of the Panther party when we were "moderately liberated." When we were allowed to wear pants and expected to pick up the gun. The days when we gave doe-eyed looks to our leaders. The days when we worked like dogs and struggled desperately for the respect which they struggled desperately not to give us. I remember the black history classes that did [not] mention women and the posters of our "leaders" where women were conspicuously absent. We visited our sisters who bore the complete responsibility of the children while the Brotha was doing his thing. Or had moved on to bigger and better things. . . . And we had no desire to sit in some consciousness raising group with white women and bare our souls.²⁹

According to Shakur, the specificity of oppression that black women, including the most "liberated" who manifested as "revolutionary," faced in the frame of a Black Panther is strikingly unique. The essay focuses on women in prison, but the forms of containment and abandonment that black women face radiate beyond the prison walls. Shakur maintains that women's liberation is predicated on a liberated country and culture, and

that capitalism forecloses that possibility. Her final injunction in the 1978 essay, one of the last pieces written for publication while she was incarcerated, was that black women must form a movement: "Under the guidance of Harriet Tubman and Fannie Lou Hamer and all of our foremothers, let us rebuild a sense of community. Let us rebuild the culture of giving and carry on the tradition of fierce determination to move on closer to freedom."³⁰ But what that "freedom" is, beyond what it is not—that is, capitalist, racist, sexist/misogynist, homophobic—cannot be specified in her essay.

Conclusion: Honoring the Panther Woman

Assata Shakur's power as a narrator of black struggles and freedom movements would become eclipsed itself as she evolved, along with the BPP, into an icon. The reified thing, the icon, replaces the dynamic human being who changes her mind, her practices, her desires as a living entity. As a living entity she grows. A fixed site of notoriety, in which the stories that could be told about freedom struggles increasingly become eclipsed by caricatures of the antisocial black militant, is a conceptual and political grave.

In her "Open Letter," Shakur evokes one of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s sermons from 1968 that alludes to his imminent assassination. King states that he does "not mind" dying because he has been to the "mountain top." Shakur reflects:

Everybody has to die sometime, and all I want is to go with dignity. I am more concerned about the growing poverty, the growing despair that is rife in America . . . our younger generations, who represent our future . . . about the rise of the prison-industrial complex that is turning our people into slaves again . . . about the repression, the police brutality, violence, the rising wave of racism that makes up the political landscape of the US today. Our young people deserve a future, and I consider it the mandate of my ancestors to be part of the struggle to ensure that they have one.³¹

Arguing for young people's right to "live free from political repression," Shakur—with "a special, urgent appeal" for struggles for the life of Mumia Abu-Jamal, the only political prisoner on death row—urges the readers of her letter to work to free all political prisoners and abolish the death penalty.³²

Assata Shakur's story depends in part upon the frame that establishes the borders or boundaries for its telling. There is the antiracist feminist,

the prison intellectual, the party member, the underground revolutionary, the lone iconic militant. There is fierce resistance and profound grief. Shakur's somber, measured response to losses provides a word ritual for the dying and dead—whether those entombed in Riker's Island twenty years ago or a recently fallen comrade.

Her eulogy for Safiya Bukhari, given in Havana on August 29, 2003, is haunting. Bukhari collapsed hours after she buried her own mother—the grandmother who raised Safiya Bukhari's young daughter the day her own daughter became a BLA fighter and fugitive, going underground only to surface for an eight-year prison term. Bukhari survived the maiming medical practices of prison doctors (although her uterus did not) only to succumb to the "typical" black women diseases of hypertension, diabetes, obesity, and heart failure in 2002. The eulogy could also be read as Assata Shakur's—and that of all revolutionary black women who refused to circumscribe their rebellion, and paid the costs for that decision:

It is with much sadness that i say my last goodbye to Safiya Bukhari. She was my sister, my comrade and my friend. We met nearly thirty-five years ago, when we were both members of the Black Panther Party in Harlem. Even then, i was impressed by her sincerity, her commitment and her burning energy. She was a descendent of slaves and she inherited the legacy of neo-slavery. She believed that struggle was the only way that African people in America could rid ourselves of oppression. As a Black woman struggling in America she experienced the most vicious forms of racism, sexism, cruelty and indifference. As a political activist she was targeted, persecuted, hounded and harassed. Because of her political activities she became a political prisoner and spent many years in prison. But she continued to believe in freedom, and she continued to fight for it. In spite of her personal suffering, in spite of chronic, life-threatening illnesses, she continued to struggle. She gave the best that she had to give to our people. She devoted her life, her love and her best energies to fighting for the liberation of oppressed people. She struggled selflessly, she could be trusted, she was consistent, and she could always be counted to do what needed to be done. She was a soldier, a warrior-woman who did everything she could to free her people and to free political prisoners.³³

For Assata Shakur, the weight of isolation, alienation, and vilification are scars that are borne. Redemption does not occur on this plane or in this life. Betrayal by nonblacks and blacks, by men and women, is part of the

liberation narrative. There will be no gratitude, no appreciation, no recognition equal to the insults and assaults. So, Assata Shakur, in true revolutionary fashion, must conclude her testimonial embracing a community that radiates beyond our immediate boundaries and limitations: "I have faith that the Ancestors will welcome her, cherish her, and treat her with more love and more kindness than she ever received here on this earth."³⁴

NOTES

1. This chapter is based on "Black Revolutionary Icons and 'Neoslave' Narratives," in Joy James, *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000). In that essay, I discuss gendered differences among and between Black Panther leaders and associates.

For additional writings on Assata Shakur and the Black Panther Party, see Jim Fletcher, Tanaquil Jones, and Sylvère Lotringer, eds., *Still Black, Still Strong: Survivors of the U.S. War against Black Revolutionaries* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1993); J. Dao, "Fugitive in Cuba Still Wounds Trenton: Chesimard Unrepentant at Trooper's '73 Killing; Whitman Isirate," *New York Times*, May 1, 1998; Lenox S. Hinds, foreword to Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1987); Charles E. Jones, ed., *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998); H. Kleffner, "The Black Panthers: Interviews with Geronimo ji Jaga Pratt and Mumia Abu-Jamal," *Race and Class* 35, no. 1(1993): 9–26; Manning Marable, "Black Political Prisoners: The Case of Assata Shakur," *Along the Colour Line*, April 22, 1998; Christian Parenti, "Assata Shakur Speaks From Exile: Post-modern Maroon in the Ultimate Palenque," *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, 1469–9982, vol. 10, no. 3 (1998): 419–426; Margo V. Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000); Michael Ratner, "Immoral Bounty for Assata," *CovertAction Quarterly*, no. 65 (Fall 1998), <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/101.html>; Evelyn Williams, *Inadmissible Evidence* (Brooklyn, NY: Lawrence Hill, 1993); Lee Lew-Lee, *All Power to the People! The Black Panther Party and Beyond*.

2. For some of the most incisive literature from the Black Power era, see George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* (New York: Random House, 1972); Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Random House, 1970).

3. Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Live from Death Row* (New York: Harper, 1996). Abu-Jamal was convicted in 1982 of killing a Philadelphia police officer, Daniel Faulkner. Trial perjury by witnesses, police suppression of evidence that would assist the defense, and inconsistencies in ballistics reports have led to international calls for a new trial.

4. Charles E. Jones, ed. *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998); Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams, eds. *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement* (Durham: Duke UP, 2009); Mumia Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom: A Life in the Black Panther Party* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2004); Robyn Ceanne Spencer, "Inside the Panther Revolution: The Black Freedom Movement and the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California," in *Groundwork*, edited by Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard.

5. In *Still Black, Still Strong: Survivors of the War against Black Revolutionaries*, Dhoruba Bin Wahad offers insights into the underground organization and reveals the complex gender and race dynamics surrounding Shakur. Her solitude—in prison, as a fugitive, as a revolutionary woman not tied to a dependent relationship with a man—epitomizes the aloneness, if not loneliness, of the isolated revolutionary. Physical violence, battlefield knowledge, and fatigue

foster a unique black female political being who is susceptible to being either romanticized or demonized.

George Jackson would be killed in prison. Huey P. Newton would be executed in an Oakland drug deal gone awry. Eldridge Cleaver's drug addiction was followed by conversion to evangelical Christianity before his death. Geronimo Pratt, wrongfully incarcerated for twenty-seven years for murder, received a large financial settlement and settled in Africa to found an educational center.

For an analysis of media coverage of George Jackson's death, see Michel Foucault et al., "The Masked Assassination," in *Warfare in the American Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy*, ed. Joy James (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

6. James, *Shadowboxing*. For a discussion of those activists and authors, see Joy James, *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America's Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation and Rebellion* (Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

7. Although publicly condemned, the program allegedly remains in effect today with the continuing harassment of "targets" such as the San Francisco Eight.

8. The 1976 Church Committee Reports on Domestic Surveillance and Other Illegal Activities by U.S. Intelligence Agencies was named after Senator Frank Church (D-Idaho).

9. According to Shakur, she has never been "free"; even in Cuba, protected and valorized as a "black revolutionary," she remains a "slave" because of her status as a black or African woman, a status that she sees as inseparable from the state of subaltern Africans throughout the diaspora.

10. Shakur, *Assata*, 242-243.

11. *Ibid.*, 243.

12. Assata Shakur continues to maintain her innocence in the shooting of Werner Foerster. Her case was reintroduced to mainstream black America in the mid-1980s through a segment on New York-based black journalist Gil Noble's television talk show, *Like It Is*. Noble traveled to Cuba to interview Shakur and with archival footage of the civil rights and black liberation movements set the context for their discussions. Following the two-part segment, a panel that included the Reverend Jesse Jackson was convened to talk about her case. In the 1990s, Shakur appeared in various documentaries, including Cuban filmmaker Gloria Rolando's *Eyes of the Rainbow*, which intersperses images of a serene Shakur with African Orisha, or Yoruba female warrior deities and entities of love and community.

13. Shakur, *Assata*, 206-207.

14. Malfeasance was the norm during her 1973 trial in Middlesex County. It was discontinued because of the blatant racism expressed in the jury room. The court ruled that the entire jury panel had been contaminated by racist comments like, "If she's black, she's guilty." The New Jersey courts then ordered that a jury be selected from Morris County, one of the wealthiest counties in the country, where 97.5 per cent of potential jurors were white. Most in the jury pool believed the defendant guilty based on pretrial publicity. The trial was later moved back to Middlesex County, yet most whites continued to equate 'black militancy' or a 'black revolutionary' with criminality. Shakur's political affiliations as well as her race-ethnicity would mark her as criminally culpable.

15. In closing, the signatories admonish Whitman concerning her civic and political responsibilities:

"The people of New Jersey, particularly people of African descent, other people of colour and the poor, as well as your political aspirations, would be better served by your attention to reducing poverty, unemployment, underemployment, the incidence of AIDS, police brutality and corruption and improving housing, public education and health care." Copy of the letter can be found at www.iacenter.org/cuba/assata.htm.

16. More contemporary media portrayal of victims of the 1973 tragedy that ended in two deaths focused only on whites. Images of Foerster's weeping widow were broadcast (in similar

fashion to 20/20's use of images of Daniel Faulkner's distraught widow in a segment, hosted by Sam Donaldson and run in January 1999, was hostile to calls for a new trial for Mumia Abu-Jamal). No references were made to slain Zayd Shakur, or incarcerated Sundiata Acoli, or their families. Images are, of course, the dominant factor for creating icons, particularly demonized ones. NBC repeatedly aired a photograph of a black woman with a gun implying that it was Shakur although the photograph was taken from a highly publicized case where she was accused of bank robbery but later acquitted (during the trial, several witnesses, including the manager of the bank, testified that the woman in that photograph was not Shakur). Despite NBC's extensive resources for research, it failed to establish the photograph as misidentified; although a subsequent fax and e-mail campaign protested the misinformation, the network continued to broadcast the woman in the photograph as Shakur.

17. Open letter from Assata Shakur. [http://www.handsoffassata.org/content/assata openletter-text.htm](http://www.handsoffassata.org/content/assata%20openletter-text.htm)

18. For a comparative reading of the life of a black female activist among incarcerated black women, see Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: International Publisher, 1989). Note that Shakur had been convicted when she wrote her essay, while Davis was awaiting trial, and later would be released on bail, during the writing of her reflections on black women in captivity. Editors at Random House, a capitalist, and/or International Publishers, a communist, publishing house have both provided opportunities for Davis's publication.

19. Assata Shakur, "Women in Prison: How We Are," *Black Scholar* 9, no. 7 (April 1978). http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/Underground_News/pdf/Best_of_The_Black_Scholar.pdf

20. *Ibid.*

21. As of 2002, the population of New York jails and prisons was 84 percent non-white. (Mother Jones, *Debt to Society* Special Report, available online at <http://www.motherjones.com/prisons/index.html>; statistics gathered from Bureau of Justice Statistics, Criminal Justice Institute, and U.S. Census Bureau.)

For more information about women in prison see Amnesty International, "Not part of my sentence": *Violations of the Human Rights of Women in Custody* (New York: Amnesty International, 1999), available online from <<http://www.amnesty.org>>.

22. Assata Shakur, "Women in Prison: How We Are," *Black Scholar* (April 1978): 9. http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/Underground_News/pdf/Best_of_The_Black_Scholar.pdf

23. *Ibid.*, 10.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, 11

26. For more information on the use of psychotropic drugs in prison, see Kathleen Auerhahn and Elizabeth Dermody Leonard, "Docile Bodies? Chemical Restraints and the Female Inmate," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 90(Winter 2000): 599-634; D. Benson, "Getting High in Jail: Legal vs. Illegal Drugs," *Prison News Service*, no. 52 (September 1995): 5; "Overview of Mental Health Services Provided by State Adult Correctional Facilities: United States, 1988," *Mental Health Statistical Note* 207 (May 1993): 1-13.

27. Assata Shakur, "Women in Prison: How We Are," *Black Scholar* (April 1978): 12.

28. *Ibid.*, 13

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

Between 1850 and 1860, escaped slave Harriet Tubman guided several hundred enslaved people to free territories in the North on the Underground Railroad. During the Civil War, she served as liaison between the army and newly freed African Americans, and following the war she raised money for the education of former slaves and founded a home for the old and poor.

Fannie Lou Hamer was fired from her work as a sharecropper after she attempted to register to vote in 1962 as part of the SNCC voting rights campaign. Jailed and severely beaten in

Mississippi in 1963 for her activism, she gave a rousing speech on behalf of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. For Hamer's speech, see <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/sayitplain/flhamer.html> (accessed February 16, 2009).

31. Open letter from Assata Shakur. http://www.handsoffassata.org/content/assata_openletter-text.htm

32. Ibid.

33. http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/memorials/safiya_bukhari.html

34. Ibid.

7

Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education

The Black Panther Party's Oakland Community School

*Ericka Huggins and
Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest*

Pride in myself as a [young] black man . . . and pride for all African-Americans and the revolution we are making together by helping one another. . . . See, when my mommy and daddy were growing up, black people didn't have no educational system to teach *them* that. . . . The job of a revolutionary is to learn and to teach. I try to do that. I've got a lot more learnin' to do.

Keith Taylor, eleven-year-old OCS student, 1977¹

The Black Panther Party (BPP), a grassroots organization founded in Oakland, California, in 1966, by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, grew from the needs of local African American and poor communities. Throughout its sixteen-year history, the organization addressed and took action against police brutality, hunger, inadequate education, poor health, and unemployment in black and poor communities. Community education, specifically education for young people, was central to its vision. The BPP's original Ten Point Platform and Program emphasized providing an education that, among other things, taught African American and poor people about their true history in the United States (see point 5).² The Oakland Community School became not only a flagship