

## WOMEN, POWER, AND REVOLUTION

Kathleen Neal Cleaver

When Black Classic Press director Paul Coates invited me to speak at the Howard University symposium featuring the book he'd published, The Black Panther Party Reconsidered, he asked me to be on the panel discussing the party's legacy. I dislike the term "legacy," to me it signifies what has been left after death. Since I am not dead, and a lot of other former Panthers aren't dead, I told him I'd rather speak on a different panel. The afternoon panel, he said, would focus on gender. I suggested that it be called "Women, Power and Revolution," because I think what we have to say about gender transcends the experience of being involved with the Black Panther Party. The organizers, however, followed the conventional thinking, and entitled my panel "Gender Dynamics within the Black Panther Party."

Regardless of what name was chosen, I think the relevant question to discuss is this: "How could a young black woman raised during the 1950s find someplace to take collective action against the repressive social conditions she faced, and bring about revolutionary change?" While I was growing up, I saw black women who inspired me to ask that question, and showed me where I could find that place. I saw Gloria Richardson standing face to face with National Guard soldiers, bayonets sticking from the guns they pointed at the demonstrators she led in Cambridge, Maryland. I saw Diane Nash speaking at Fisk University, leading black and white Freedom Riders onto Greyhound buses that got set on fire when they reached Alabama. I saw Ruby Doris Robinson holding a walkie-talkie, dispatching the fleet of a cars that transported civil

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Dear Professor [Name]:

I am writing to you regarding the [Topic] that we discussed during our meeting on [Date].

The [Topic] is a very important one, and I am glad to hear that you are interested in it.

I have been thinking about it a great deal, and I believe that we can make some progress on it.

I would like to discuss this further with you, and I am sure that we can reach a consensus.

I am looking forward to hearing from you soon, and I am sure that we can reach a consensus.

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rights workers across the state of Mississippi during the 1964 Freedom Summer. These women were unfurling a social revolution in the deep South. Gloria Richardson, Diane Nash, and Ruby Doris Robinson all worked with the Student NonViolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). That's where I was determined to go.

About two weeks before I joined SNCC, Black Power replaced Freedom Now as the battle cry. We young women and young men who flocked to the front lines of the war against segregation, we were contesting the remaining legacy of racial slavery. What we sought to eliminate was the legal, social, psychological, economic, and political limitations still being imposed on our human rights, and our rights as citizens. That was the context in which we fought to remove limitations imposed by gender, clearly aware that it could not be fought as a stand alone issue.

During that era, we hadn't developed much language to talk about the elimination of gender discrimination. Racism and poverty, imposed by bloody terrorists backed by state power, seemed so overwhelming then, and the ghastly backdrop of the war in Vietnam kept us alert as to what was at stake. It was not that gender discrimination wasn't apparent. It was evident in the most intimate matters--separate bathrooms marked 'colored women' or 'white ladies'; it was obvious in the fact that so many schools did not allow women to attend; and that so many jobs were not available if you were a woman. But from the early to mid-1960s, the first order of business was not how to advance our cause as women, but how to empower the community of which we were a part, and how to protect our lives in the process.

Being in the Movement gave me and everyone who joined it a tremendous education. That experience taught us how to understand the world around us, how to think through the

issues of what we could do on our own to advance our people's cause, how to organize our own people to change the world around us, and how to stand up to terrorism. Everything I learned at SNCC I took with me into the fledgling Black Panther Party. I started working there in November 1967, three or four weeks after Huey Newton was jailed on charges of killing an Oakland policeman in a predawn shoot-out. I organized demonstrations. I wrote leaflets. I held press conferences. I went to court. I designed posters. I appeared on television programs, I spoke at rallies. I even ran for political office in order to organize the community around the program of the Black Panther Party and mobilize support to free Huey Newton.

At times, during the question and answer session following a speech I'd given, someone would ask, "What is the woman's role in the Black Panther Party?" I never liked that question. I'd give a short answer: "It's the same as men." We are revolutionaries, I'd explain. Back then, I didn't understand why they wanted to think of what men were doing and what women were doing as separate. It's taken me years, literally about 25 years, to understand that what I really didn't like was the underlying assumption motivating the question. The assumption held that being part of a revolutionary movement was in conflict with what the questioner had been socialized to believe was appropriate conduct for a woman. That convoluted concept never entered my head, although I am certain it was far more widely accepted than I ever realized.

Nowadays, the questions are more sophisticated. "What were the gender issues in the Black Panther Party?" "Wasn't the Black Panther Party a bastion of sexism? Etc. etc. etc. But nobody seems to pose the question that I had, "Where can I go to get involved in the revolutionary struggle?" It seems to me that the part of the genesis of the gender question, and this is only an opinion, lies in the way it deflects attention from confronting the revolutionary

critique our organization made against the larger society, and turns it inward to look at what type of dynamics and social conflicts characterized the organization. To me, this discussion holds far less appeal than that which engages the means we devised to struggle against the oppressive dynamics and social conflicts the larger society imposed on us. Not many answers to the "gender questions" take into consideration what I've experienced. What I've read or heard as answers generally seem to respond to a particular model of academic inquiry that leaves out what I believe is central: how do you empower an oppressed and impoverished people who are struggling against racism, militarism, terrorism and sexism too? I mean, how do you do that? That's the real question.

My generation became conscious during a period of profound world turmoil, when the Vietnam War and countless insurgencies in Africa, in Asia, in Latin America challenged the control of the resources of the world by the capitalist powers. They were facing a major assault. Those of us who were drawn to the early Black Panther Party were just one more insurgent band of young men and women who refused to tolerate the systematic violence and abuse being meted out to poor blacks, to middle class blacks, and any old ordinary blacks. When we looked at our situation, when we saw violence, bad housing, unemployment, rotten education, unfair treatment in the courts, as well as the direct attacks from the police, our response was to defend ourselves. We became part of that assault against the capitalist powers.

In a world of racist polarization, we sought solidarity. We called for Black power for Black people, Red power for Red people, Brown power for Brown people, Yellow power for Yellow people, and, as Eldridge Cleaver used to say, White power for White people, because



all they'd known was "Pig power." We organized the Rainbow Coalition, pulled together our allies including not only the Puerto Rican Young Lords, the youth gang called the Black P Stone Rangers, the Chicano Brown Berets, the Asian I Wor Keun (Red Guards) but also the predominantly white Peace and Freedom party, and the Appalachian Young Patriots Party. We posed not only a theoretical but a practical challenge to the way our world was organized. And we were men and women working together.

The women who filled the ranks of our organization did not have specifically designated sex roles. Some women worked with the newspaper, like Shelley Bursey, who became a grand jury resistor when she was jailed because she refused to respond to one of the investigations into the Black Panther Party newspaper. Some of us, like Erika Huggins, saw their husbands murdered, then were arrested themselves. In Erika's case, she was jailed along with Bobby Seale and most of the New Haven chapter on charges of conspiracy to commit murder. She was later acquitted, but imagine what happens to an organization when 14 people at once get arrested on capital charges? That doesn't leave much time to organize, or to have a family life. Maybe that was the kind of pressure that they hoped would force us to give up.

I created the position of Communications Secretary, based on what I had seen Julian Bond do in SNCC. I sent out press releases, I got photographers and journalists to publish stories about us, I wrote articles for our newspaper. I ran for political office on the Peace and Freedom Party ticket, against the incumbent Democratic state representative who, by the way, was Willie Brown. We ran a campaign poster in the Black Panther newspaper, which was a drawing of Willie Brown with his mouth sewed up, his body tied up in rope. The caption read: Willie Brown's position on the Vietnam War, political prisoners, and racism, you get the idea.

The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that proper record-keeping is essential for the smooth operation of any business and for the protection of its interests. The text also mentions the need for regular audits and the importance of having a clear system of internal controls.

The second part of the document deals with the financial aspects of the business. It covers topics such as budgeting, forecasting, and the management of cash flow. The author stresses the importance of having a realistic budget and of monitoring the business's performance against it. It also discusses the need for adequate financing and the importance of maintaining a good credit record.

The third part of the document focuses on the human resources of the business. It discusses the importance of having a well-trained and motivated staff. The text covers topics such as recruitment, selection, training, and the development of a positive work environment. It also mentions the need for clear communication and the importance of having a system of performance appraisal.

The fourth part of the document deals with the legal and regulatory aspects of the business. It discusses the importance of understanding the laws and regulations that apply to the business. The text covers topics such as contracts, taxes, and the protection of intellectual property. It also mentions the need for legal advice and the importance of having a clear system of compliance.

The fifth and final part of the document discusses the overall strategy of the business. It covers topics such as market research, competitive analysis, and the development of a clear business plan. The author stresses the importance of having a long-term vision and of being able to adapt to changing market conditions. It also mentions the need for regular communication with stakeholders and the importance of having a strong corporate culture.



We were imaginative in our approach to political organizing. Matilaba, one of the earliest members of the Black Panther Party, published drawings in the newspaper along with Emory Douglas. Connie Matthews, a young Jamaican who was working for the United Nations in Copenhagen met Bobby Seale when he came over there on a tour, joined the Black Panther Party, and became our International Coordinator. Assata Shakur, who joined the New York chapter of the Black Panther Party, later became convicted of murdering a state trooper after a shoot-out on the New Jersey Turnpike, in which she was wounded, and another Panther, Zayd Shakur, was killed. Fearing that she would be killed, she escaped from prison, lived underground for a while, and eventually received asylum in Cuba.

In fact, according to a survey Bobby Seale did in 1969, two thirds of the members of the Black Panther Party were women. I am sure you are wondering, why isn't this the picture that you have of the Black Panther Party ? Well, ask yourself where did the image of the Black Panther that you have in your head come from? Did you read those articles planted by the FBI in the newspaper? Did you listen to the newscasters who announced what they decided was significant, usually, how many Panthers got arrested or killed? How many photographs of women Panthers have you seen? Think about this: how many newspaper photographers were women? How many newspaper editors were women? How many newscasters were women? How many television producers were women? How many magazine, book, newspaper publishers? Who was making the decisions about what information gets circulated, when that decision gets made, who do you think they decide to present? Is it possible, and this is just a question, is it possible that the reality of what was actually going on day to day in the Black Panther Party was far less newsworthy and provided no justification for the campaign of

destruction that the intelligence agencies and the police were waging against us? Could it be that the images and stories of the Black Panthers that you've seen and heard was geared to something other than conveying what was actually going on?

What I think is distinctive about gender relations within the Black Panther Party is not how those gender relations duplicated what was going on in the world around us. In fact, that world was extremely misogynous and authoritarian. That's part of what inspired us to fight against it. When women suffered hostility, abuse, neglect and assault -- this was not something arising from the policies or structure of the Black Panther Party, something absent from the world, that's what *is* going on in the world. The difference that being in the Black Panther made was that it put a woman in a position when such treatment occurred to contest it. I'll always remember a particular mini-trial that took place at one of our meetings. A member of the Party was accused of raping a young sister, who was visiting from the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party, and he got voted out of the Party on the spot. Right there in the meeting. In 1970 the Black Panther Party took a formal position on the liberation of women. Did the United States Congress make any statement on the liberation of women? Did the Congress enable the Equal Rights Amendment to become part of the Constitution? Did the Oakland police issue a position against gender discrimination? It is this context that gender relations--a term which we didn't have back then--in the Black Panther Party should be examined.

I think it is important to place the women who fought oppression as Black Panthers within the longer tradition of freedom fighters like Sojourner Truth, like Harriet Tubman, like Ida Wells Barnett, who took on an entirely oppressive world and insisted that their race, their gender, and their humanity be respected all at the same time. Not singled out, each one separate,

but all at the same time. You cannot segregate out one aspect of our reality and expect to get a clear picture of what this struggle is about. In some cases, those who raise issues about gender are responding to what they think is the one-sided portrayal of the Black Panther Party as some all male macho revolutionary group. But look at where the picture is coming from before concluding that the appropriate response is to investigate gender dynamics within the Black Panther Party. I am not criticizing the project, but I am criticizing the angle.

The way Black women have sustained our community is phenomenal. Historically, we did not live within the isolation of a patriarchal world, we were thrust into that brutal equality slavery imposed. Our foremother knew we would have to face the world on our own, and tried to prepare us for that. What I think needs to be examined and explained more fully are the powerful contributions women have made to our resistance against slavery, to our resistance against segregation, to our resistance against racism. Placing the participation of women in the Black Panther Party within that context illuminates a long tradition of fighting women. But that tends not to be what scholars asking these gender questions seem to have in mind.

To conclude, I refer to W.E.B. Du Bois, who pointed out that until emancipation, blacks faced two alternatives. We could either revolt and resist, or assimilate and submit. Emancipation provided a third alternative which Du Bois called "separate development." It could be seen as the ground of nationalism, or some might prefer to call it pan-Africanism. What I think is unique about the Black Panther Party is that as an organization, it combined all these possibilities in one. It provided the chance to revolt, to assimilate, and to have separate development at different aspects and at different times. I think that needs to be understood. I think the Black Panther Party's leadership structure, organizational structure, and military

structure all need to be better understood. I think the way the organization furthered the main currents of African American resistance from slavery to the present need to be better understood, and that is the context within which gender dynamics should be placed.

Look at the demands raised by the Colored Peoples' Conventions at the end of the Civil War, they asked for the right to education, the right to be treated in law the same as white people, for equal treatment under the law. When you look at the Appeal to Human Rights issued by the student movement in Atlanta when they launched the campaign of sit-ins, what did they demand? Jobs, housing, education, and an end to police brutality. When you look at the Charter of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, the African liberation movement that we called the Mau-Mau, what did they ask for? They wanted self government. They wanted to get rid of foreigners. They wanted an end to the trial of criminal and murder cases by the Europeans. Things like that. All these demands were similar to what we asked for in the Black Panther Party Ten Point platform and program. We insisted on power to determine our destiny, full employment, decent education, and an end to police brutality. These have been our peoples' demands for over a century. The Black Panther Party continued to fight for what our people demanded in those Colored Peoples' Conventions, in those civil rights protests, and in those African liberation struggles, and this is what the black women who joined the organization were fighting to bring about.

I am part of a group of women, former Black Panthers, who have been meeting for the past few years. We hold retreats to come together and discuss what has happened to us, to restore our health, and to recover from the injuries and traumatic experiences that we endured. A few days ago, I was at the Newark airport to catch a 5:00 A.M. flight to Atlanta, on my way

to one of these retreats, and I ran into the actor Danny Glover, who was also taking that 5:00 A.M. flight to Atlanta, where he was going to visit his family.

We talked, and of course, I asked him about his work in the film "Beloved," and told him that I was going to a Black Panther Womens' Retreat. Danny Glover lived down the street from me in San Francisco. He told me, "I came to San Francisco in 1967 to go to San Francisco State." I said, "I came to San Francisco in 1967, but I went to Eldridge Cleaver's apartment." We all lived on Oak Street, only a few houses apart. He was involved with the BSU (Black Student Union). Many students who belonged to the BSU were active in the Black Panther Party, our organizations were very close. In fact, one of the demands made when the students at San Francisco State initiated their strike concerned George Murray, a professor who was fired and was then on the Central Committee of the Black Panther Party. So I told him about our Black Panther womens' retreat.

He was sitting beside me at the gate. He tilted his head back, and looked up as if he were remembering something that happened a long time ago. Then he said, "Oh, those women....Those women in the Black Panther Party, you all held it together. The men -- there was a lot of chaos going on. Things were wild. But it was the women who held it all together."