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A Poetic Revolution:

Ericka Huggins, Narrative Resistance, and Erotic Power

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
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in African American Studies

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Master of Arts in African American Studies

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Professor Scot Brown, Chair

“A Poetic Revolution: Ericka Huggins, Narrative Resistance, and Erotic Power” is a historical and cultural study that broadens our understanding of the Black freedom movement by examining the conspiracy case and prison writing of former Black Panther Ericka Huggins. Using an archival research approach, I examine primary source materials that includes the *State v. Seale and Huggins* transcript, newspaper articles, interviews, autobiographies, organizational documents, and government records in order to conceptualize the ways in which Black women who imagined themselves as revolutionary freedom fighters asserted agency and resisted dominant narratives of race and gender during the Black Power era. Layering in cultural studies theories that look to Black women’s artistic expression as critical sites of resistance and freedom dreaming, I approach Huggins’ witness testimony and poetry from prison through the lens of Audre Lorde’s articulation of the erotic as a divinely feminine power source and space through which we might envision a more pleasurable future for Black people across the diaspora.

The thesis of Dominique Ashley Rucker is approved.

Sarah Haley

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2020

*for all the women and femmes who have mothered me
who taught me how to walk, to run, to fly, free*

*and especially
for my mother
Michelle*

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Creative Response

on reclamation
for Theresa Rucker

in the year of our Lorde 2020,

on this the day we designate for the celebration of our Mothers

be they those that birthed us or those that learned us, grew us, toughed us

sometimes both and sometimes neither

so on this day,

my Grandmother, she said,

“Don’t take my words from me.”

words spoken with depth and resonance, quick and firm,

words spoken with that “don’t try me” attitude that Black Mamas from the South carry in their

bellies as protection of all that

life

for these words rose out of my Grandmother’s throat from

a generation’s generation of pain and of pleasure

they rose out of her throat from the trauma and the joy of being

Black and being

Woman and being

always at all times

both

for these words rose out of my Grandmother’s throat after that robbery of flesh

a generation’s generational pain

come again and again and again

“Don’t take my words from me.”

for these words rose out of her throat after the attempted robbery of our voices

come again and again and again and again

they rose out of a refusal that came hard, swift, steady, unwavering

again and again and again and again and

again

as many times and by whatever means she deems

necessary

to be

heard (*period*)

so when my Grandmother, she said,

“Don’t take my words from me,”

she meant that shit

from the fleshy unheard core of her being and

her Mother’s being and her Mother’s Mother’s being and

see my Grandmother, she said,

Don’t take

my words

from me.

they might be all I have

to set me *free*

Introduction

“It is our dreams that point the way to freedom.”
-Audre Lorde

In the mid-1960s, the crackle and pop of buildings ablaze mingled with the cries and chants of the Black¹ community in the Watts section of Los Angeles, California, a community that was sick and tired of being sick and tired.² Despite decades of civil rights activism and the passage of federal regulation barring racial segregation and racial discrimination, Black people still lived in segregated and under-resourced towns, neighborhoods, cities, and ghettos across the United States. Black people still felt a visceral relegation to second class citizenship that stroked a quiet rage into violent action. For many who lived through it, the mid-1960s ached with all the growing pains of a teenage country in identity crisis. From a cauldron of that rage, of ever-elusive freedom dreams³, frustration, and dashed hopes, The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense⁴ emerged in Oakland, California in 1966.

There is a long history of violence and brutality in the United States that began with the theft of land and labor from Native and Black communities. Violence was used to subjugate and control Black bodies for the economic and political development of those 13 colonies that became the United States of America. The introduction of Black people to the North American continent through the Middle Passage was a violent enterprise that was followed by 200 years of brutal bondage in the United States. Following a brief relief during Reconstruction, decades of

¹ I will capitalize the B in Black throughout this work in reference to members of the Black diaspora.

² “I am sick of tired of being sick and tired!” spoken by Fannie Lou Hamer at the 1964 Democratic National Convention.

³ Here I borrow “freedom dreams” from Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

⁴ I will hereafter refer to The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense as “the Party,” Panthers, “the organization,” or BPP.

Lynch Law and Jim Crow continued in the form of physical and institutional violence in order to uphold the “proper” social order.⁵ Yet as much as Black people’s experience in the United States is one of oppression, it is also a story of extraordinary resistance, resilience, and world-building. As each new form of subjugation took hold in the United States, generations of Black folks engaged in struggle and resistance to their varied and multiple forms of slavery, segregation, and exploitation. Black people found the means for “every day” resistance that can be found in every moment of joy, song, dance, and bond that Black people created despite the system and practices meant to tear them apart and rob them of their pleasure. In this centuries-long history of violence and resistance lies the foundation for a relationship rife with tension between Uncle Sam and his Black children.

By the late 1960s, quiet impatience rumbled into calls for more immediate change than the civil rights victories had seemed to produce. Black Power as an ideology had arisen out of the frustrations of a community determined to disrupt the centuries-old pattern of violent, organized white oppression against Black people. For many, the solution seemed to lie in a legal armed self-defense and socialist programs to directly address community need, so when The Black Panther Party rose to national attention in the late 1960s, many were eager to join – including a young woman named Ericka Huggins. The Panthers were nationwide in 1969, and they were engaged in trench war with the United States Federal Investigation Bureau’s (FBI) Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO). State violence can take many forms, but here the

⁵ For the purpose of this thesis, the transformation of Jim Crow into our current system of mass incarceration will not be discussed. However, Huggins’ case and those like it are nonetheless critical historical and political links in a broader understanding of the use of prisons and criminality as tools for social control. For an introduction into mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex, see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), and Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

focus will include physical police brutality and government repression.⁶ Under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover, COINTELPRO turned its attention—and heavy artillery—toward the Panthers, using a range of repressive tactics such as legal harassment, infiltration, and psychological warfare in order “to expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize” the organization.⁷ As a result of FBI disruption, the Panthers became distracted from their original goals of uplifting their communities and instead were forced to shift their energy to fighting “a war.”⁸

1969 was a particularly bloody year for the Panthers, who lost 10 members to State violence. On January 17, 1969, John Huggins, along with Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter, were shot and killed on the campus of the University of California at Los Angeles in a dispute with the US Organization. Six other Panthers were killed by local police that year.⁹ Huggins was survived by his daughter, Mai, and widow, Ericka. Ericka was herself a Panther who had rose among the ranks of the Los Angeles chapter, eventually going on to lead the New Haven chapter.

In May 1969, Alex Rackley was a 19-year-old recruit who joined the organization at the height of COINTELPRO’s successful campaign to neutralize the Panthers.¹⁰ In the face of state repression and ongoing paranoia, the Panthers engaged in “vile mistakes,” including the slaying of young Rackley.¹¹ His death, yet another casualty of the FBI assault on Black dissent, would become the center of a criminal conspiracy trial brought against Ericka Huggins, then leader of

⁶ Kali N. Gross, *Colored Amazons: Crime, Violence, and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880 - 1910*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.

⁷ Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI'S Secret Ways Against the Black Panther Party and The American Indian Movement*, (Cambridge: South End Press, 1988); Memo from FBI Director found in Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *The Cointelpro Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars Against Dissent in the United States* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 92.

⁸ Ericka Huggins and Fiona Thompson, *An Oral History with Ericka Huggins*. (Berkeley: Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, 2010), 59; 61.

⁹ Charles E. Jones, ed., *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998).

¹⁰ Memo from FBI Director regarding “Black Nationalist—Hate Groups,” found in Churchill and Vander Wall, 92.

¹¹ Huggins and Thompson, *An Oral History*, 59-62, 64.

the Panther's chapter in New Haven, Connecticut, and National Chairman Bobby Seale. Huggins would remain incarcerated throughout the duration of the joint trial, using a combination of self-taught meditation and poetry writing to survive her two-year period as a political prisoner. During the trial, Huggins elected to take the witness stand in her own defense and effectively used her own words – both verbal and written – to challenge the narratives placed upon her as a Panther and a Black woman. In reclaiming her story and asserting her agency and authority in its retelling, Huggins found a visibility and clarity that offered a great source of strength. By examining Huggin's verbal and written record through this lens, I elect to recover potential visions for joyful liberation.

A Historiography: Black Power Studies, Gender, and Ericka Huggins

Black Studies as an academic discipline arose out of the frustrations of a generation tired of having their experiences and histories distorted, dismissed, or demonized. Out of the rumbles of Black Power, students on college campuses across the nation rose up and demanded rigorous academic attention be paid to Black history. My work honors those activists who made it possible for me to make the history and intellectual production of Black women the site of my scholarly endeavor.¹²

This thesis joins an increasingly popular genre of historical study that Peniel E. Joseph calls “Black Power Studies.”¹³ Though initial scholarship of the Black Power era was folded into

¹² For an introduction and case studies on Black student activism during the Black Power era, see: Fabio Rojas, *From Black Power to Black Studies: How A Radical Social Movement Became An Academic Discipline*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); Martha Bodi, *The Revolution on Campus*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Joy Ann Williamson, *Black Power on Campus: The University of Illinois 1965-75*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

¹³ Peniel E. Joseph, “The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field,” *Journal of American History* 96, no. 3, (December 200): 751–776, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/96.3.751>.

the first wave of the Civil Rights historiography, in recent decades a second wave of scholarship has expanded study on an era often associated with negative imagery and few real “victories.” In addition to some shared historical stages and actors with the civils rights activism, Black Power has proven to be a critical site of exploration of resistance to organized white oppression and institutional violence. Further, scholars are turning to Black Power more broadly in order to deepen an understanding of how Black folks conceptualized their current oppressions and (re)imagined new modes of liberation. This growing body of scholarship has begun to tease out the complexities of post-World War II Black history and is concerned with expanding a historical analysis of the Black experience in the United States. My scholarship joins those that find the Black Power movement to be rich with lessons on Black political consciousness, resistance strategies, and the emancipatory power of the radical Black imagination.

The historical scope and definition of “Black power” has been contested and expanded by decades of study. In 1967, activist Stokely Carmichael and political scientist Charles Hamilton helped define (without unifying, notes historian Rhonda Y. Williams) Black Power as a movement that was at its core a radical declaration of self-love and self-determination for Black people in the United States.¹⁴ This core had seemingly been lost as Black Power was demonized, dismissed, or forgotten as the violent nationalist “evil twin” of the “peaceful” Civil Rights movement.¹⁵ Yet over the years, scholars have produced nuanced, well-researched narratives that document not only Black power’s profound implications on the political landscape of post-World War II America, but also uncover the beauty and love in the movement.

¹⁴ Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage Edition, 1992); Rhonda Y. Williams, “Black Women and Black Power,” *OAH Magazine of History* 22, no. 3, (July 2008): 22–26, <https://doi.org/10.1093/maghis/22.3.22>.

¹⁵ Joseph, “The Black Power Movement,” 752.

General study of this period in Black history is somewhat expansive as scholars have compiled detailed accounts of the era broadly. William L. Van Deburg's *New Day In Babylon* broke historical ground as the first full-length study of the Black Power movement. In order to complicate monolith interpretations of the movement as negative and violent, Van Deburg frames the movement as primarily cultural rather than political and stresses its importance in helping reshape Black identity through the Black arts, activism on college campuses, and powerful slogans. Still, *New Day in Babylon* also reinforced a narrow and masculine interpretation of the era.

Peniel E. Joseph's work has done much to expand the scope of historical re-telling of the era and challenge linear notions of Black Power. *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* is a comprehensive overview of the era's defining moments, organizations, and people. Historian Manning Marable's equally crucial series of historical studies on the black radical tradition sheds substantive light on the movement's political, social, and cultural implications at the local, national, and international level.¹⁶

As the lexicon on Black Power expanded, so too did an interest in the gender dynamics of a movement so positioned as hypermasculine. Focusing on Black women in Black Power—where they are both visible and absent—can provide rich analytical starting points for framing our historical understanding of era as well as for exposing the diverse contours of political participation of a critical phase in the domestic and international struggle for black liberation.

¹⁶ For further historical overview of the Black Power Era, see Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Peniel E. Joseph, ed., *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights—Black Power Era*, (New York: Routledge, 2006); Cedric Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America 1954-2006*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007); Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America*, (New York: Owl Books, 2011).

Black women of the era utilized the militancy of the moment and its urgent rhetoric to articulate a bold feminist vision that itself was critical of Black Power's inherent misogyny. In two essays in *The Black Power Movement*, historians Kimberly Springer and Stephen Ward illuminate the varied routes Black women took to fight multiple oppressions. Springer argues that independent organizations such as the Third World Women's Alliance (TWW) and the literary art of Black feminists such as Toni Cade (Bombara), Ntozake Shange, and Michele Wallace provided critical "example[s] of defining, if controversial, moments in coming to a public discussion of gender discrimination within Black communities." In doing so, Springer concluded that: "Despite limited organizational contact, black feminists added ideals of gender equality and antisexism to the social activist milieu of the Black Power era."¹⁷ Ward extends this finding in his work tracing the intellectual and activist roots of the New York-based TWWA. Ward notes that "black feminists were not simply challenging expressions of male chauvinism, but were also advancing arguments for deeper revolutionary purpose, theory, and commitment" and "in effect, applying and extending Black Power thought."¹⁸ Black women in Black Power were concerned with imaginative world-building at the local, national, and international level. They were as deeply committed to the struggle as their male-counterparts, and their multilayered analysis added

¹⁷ Kimberly Springer, "Black Feminists Respond to Black Power Masculinism," in *The Black Power Movement*, 108, 118.

¹⁸ Stephen Ward, "The Third World Women's Alliance: Black Feminist Radicalism and Black Power Politics," in *The Black Power Movement*, 119-144. For an introductory history of Black women in Black Power and Black feminist introduction, see also: Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1984); Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed. *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, (New York: The New Press, 1995). Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1984-1994*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999); Joy James, *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin, eds., *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights—Black Power Movement*, (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations 1968-1980*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Ula Y. Taylor, *The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, ed., *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017).

creative expansions to political and social thought of the period. This project contributes to that Black feminist tradition by highlighting the “intellectual activism” of Ericka Huggins and situating her written and vocal resistance as necessary to both her race and gender.¹⁹

Of the organizations that arose out of the Black Power movement, the Black Panther Party has received the most sustained scholarly attention through the decades. Not only were the Panthers one of the more visible organizations of the time in news and media, the Panthers themselves documented their experiences in the Black Panther Intercommunal News Service and in autobiographical writings. Edited by Philip S. Foner, *The Black Panthers Speak* is a collection of writings and speeches by the Panthers that foregrounds the urgency of the historical moment and the drive of the young men and women who joined the organization. Several Panther women such as Assata Shakur, Angela Davis, Safiya Bukhari, Afeni Shakur, and Elaine Brown published personal narratives of their lives as Black girls growing up in the United States, their political awakening, and their direct confrontations with the violence of the State.²⁰ The Panthers as a whole have been prolific in detailing their experiences in the community and with the US government’s repressive tactics.

¹⁹ This work is undoubtedly influenced by Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*, (New York: Routledge Press, 2009). Collins describes a “dialectic of oppression and activism” as a central tension in Black feminist thought; this project aims to further the “intellectual activism described by Collins as a study that takes the intellectual production of Black women in Black Power as necessary sites of academic study.

²⁰ For further readings of Panther experiences in their own words, see: *Black Panther Speaks*; Bobby Seale, *A Lonely Rage: The Autobiography of Bobby Seale*, (New York: Times Books, 1978); *This Side of Glory: The Autobiography of David Hilliard and the Story of the Black Panther Party*, (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 2001); Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2009); Mumbia Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom: A Life in The Black Panther Party*, (New York: Common Notions, 2016); Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (United Kingdom: Zed Books Ltd., 1987); Angela Y. Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: International Publishers, 1988); Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman’s Story*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1992); Safiya Bukhari and Laura Whitehorn, *The War Before: Becoming a Black Panther, Keeping the Faith in Prison, & Fighting for Those Left Behind*, (New York: Feminist Press, 2010); see Afeni Shakur’s autobiographical piece in Kuwasi Balagoon, *Look For Me In the Whirlwind: The Collective Autobiography of the New York 21*, (New York: Random House, 1971).

In 1998, political scientist Charles E. Jones' edited collection, *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* broke new ground as an anthology that sought to place the Panthers in a larger historical context. *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* constituted a turning point in Panther scholarship by offering a critical, sympathetic portrait of the organization. Tracye Matthews and Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest contribute seminal essays to the volume that shift Black women's experiences to the center and highlight internal conflict within the Panthers in order to disrupt monolith narratives of life in the Party. Matthews and LeBlanc-Ernest argue that Black women's sophisticated understanding of the relationship between race, class, and gender influenced the political ideologies of the BPP and contributed to a broadening of the Party's conception of revolution. Their scholarship is foundational to an ongoing dialogue about Black women in Black Power.²¹

Black Panther scholars have since provided a comprehensive narrative that complicates linear and monolithic understandings of the Panthers as individual and collective historical actors. *Framing the Black Panthers* by Janes Rhodes provides a compelling study of the shaping of Panther iconography. Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr.'s *Black Against Empire*, meanwhile, further deepened historical analysis with a detailed history of The Black Panther Party. Bloom and Martin give the Panthers a balanced analysis, producing a narrative that simultaneously dispels images of the Panthers as merely armed thugs and avoids the over-corrective pull of romanticizing them. Bloom and Martin's analysis also offers an attention to the

²¹ Jones, *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*; Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest, "The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job': Black Panther Party Women, 1966-1982," in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*; Tracye Matthews, "No One Ever Asks, What A Man's Role in the Revolution Is': Gender and the Politics of the Black Panther Party, 1966-1971," in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*.

Party's shifting gender dynamics contributed to the widening conversation on women in the Panthers.²²

Despite the breath of research on Black Power and the Black Panthers that has emerged over the years, there are still many facets of this history that remain un-or under-excavated, most notably as it pertains to the women. Former SNCC member and Black Panther Kathleen Cleaver maintains that , “The visual record always documents the presence of women, but in the printed texts of academic accounts women’s participation tends to fade.”²³ Increasingly, there has been a growing academic interest in the study of Black women who engaged in Black Power politics, organizations, and actions. Historians Robyn C. Spencer and Mary Phillips have contributed to a growing dialogue on the experiences, contributions, and implications of Panther women. Their collaborative essays with LeBlanc-Ernest and Matthews have opened a discussion of the nuanced experiences of live inside a revolutionary organization. Spencer’s *The Revolution Has Come* not only provides a detailed history of the Black Panther Party’s Oakland chapter, but by highlighting some of the Party’s less famous female members, Spencer renders visible those rank-and-file women who defended and preserved the organization through turmoil and targeted repression. ²⁴ In “Ode to our Feminist Foremothers,” Phillips, Spencer, LeBlanc-Ernest, and Matthews discuss the many silences and omission still present in current Black Power/Panther

²² Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2013). For further Panther analysis, see also: Jama Lazerow and Yorhuru Williams, eds., *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Yohuru Williams, *Black Politics/White Power: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Black Panthers in New Haven*, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008); Yohuru Williams and Jama Lazerow, *Liberated Territory: Untold Local Perspectives on the Black Panther Party*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Donna Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

²³ Kathleen Cleaver, “Racism, Civil Rights, and Feminism,” in Adriene Katherine Wing, ed., *Critical Race Feminism: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 36.

²⁴ Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

scholarship and present a collaborative effort rooted in Black feminist praxis that centers oral history and incorporates Panther women into the historiography.²⁵ This work aims to honor these goals by shifting focus to the oral testimony and written work of Ericka Huggins and rendering visible new conceptions of Panther experiences.

In addition to small attention given to the Free Bobby and Ericka rallies in anthologies such as *Black Against Empire*, two books have been written about the New Haven joint trial specifically. *Agony in New Haven* is a close reading of the *State v. Seale Huggins* trial alone, whereas Bass & Rae recount Rackley's death and the role of government infiltration in the affair and ensuing trial. Both works offer detailed overviews of the impact of the New Haven trial as well as a sympathetic look at the Panthers.²⁶

The literature on Ericka Huggins is itself a growing body of work, expanded in large part by Phillips. In "The Power of the First Person Narrative," Phillips highlights Huggins' use of her own experiences as a means of reframing historical memory and "challeng[ing] hegemonic practices of power and knowledge." It is through this lens that I approach this project; this scholarship further renders visible Huggins' narrative resistance. Phillips also contends that, "The silence that black women revolutionaries so often encounter became part of Huggins' experiences at the trial."²⁷ In this study, special attention is paid to the instances where Huggins pushed the boundaries of this silencing and responded to this invisibility in the face of official

²⁵ Mary Phillips et al., "Ode to Our Feminist Foremothers: The Intersectional Black Panther Party History Project on Collaborative Praxis and Fifty Years of Panther History," *Souls* 19, no. 3 (Spring 2017): 241-260, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2017.1390378>.

²⁶ Donald Freed, *Agony in New Haven: The Trial of Bobby Seale, Ericka Huggins, and the Black Panther Party*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973); Paul Bass and Douglas W. Rae, *Murder in the Model City: The Black Panthers, Yale, and the Redemption of a Killer* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

²⁷ Mary Phillips, "The Power of the First Person Narrative: Ericka Huggins and the Black Panther Party," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 3&4 (Fall/Winter 2015): 34, 33, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43958548>. For further reading, see also: Mary Phillips, "The Feminist Leadership of Ericka Huggins in the Black Panther Party," *Black Diaspora Review* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 187-221, <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/bdr/article/view/4241/3849>.

record keeping. I argue that by narrating her experiences as part of her witness testimony, Huggins broadened the meaning of freedom and resistance for Black revolutionary women.

Further scholarship on Huggins is mainly concerned with her significant contributions to education and the Oakland community school, as well as her poetry and personal narratives. For instance, in “The Pen of the Panther,” Amy Washburn positions Huggins political and cultural production as an important medium to “dissemble the personal/political dichotomy” and emphasize expression, “even without mainstream representation.”²⁸ This work furthers the objective put forth by Washburn by decentering masculinist notions of the Black Power movement and placing aesthetics and politics in conversation with one another.

Sources and Methodology: Conceptualizing the Erotic and Huggins’ Narrative Resistance

Primary sources for this study include newspaper articles, oral court testimony, interviews, autobiographies, and written work produced by Ericka Huggins. Huggins has participated in extensive interviews about her life and experiences with the Panthers and as a political prisoner, and she published some of her work alongside Huey Newton in .²⁹ Her poetry has been reprinted by Angela Y. Davis, Judith A. Sheffler, and David Hillard in attempts to showcase it, though they do not include analysis of the work.³⁰ Huggins’ lawyer, Catherine

²⁸ Amy Washburn, “The Pen of the Panther: Barriers and Freedom in the Prison Poetry of Ericka Huggins.” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 8, no. 2 (2014): 51-78. doi:10.14321/jstudradi.8.2.0051.

²⁹ Fiona Thompson, *Ericka Huggins: Oral History with Ericka Huggins*, (Berkeley: University of California Bancroft Library, 2007) https://338bcc8efe2e-44ed-8a5f07a5b83316c8.filesusr.com/ugd/1610f9_4cd0b1586c274467b7a9f80036921a4f.pdf; Rofel, Lisa, and Jeremy Tai, “A Conversation with Ericka Huggins,” *Feminist Studies* 42, no. 1 (2016): 238. doi:10.15767/feministstudies.42.1.236; Tony Platt and Celia O’Leary, “Two Interviews with Ericka Huggins,” *Social Justice* 40, no. ½, (2014); Ericka Huggins and HueyP.Newton, *Insights and Poems*, (San Francisco: City Lights Press, 1975).

³⁰ Angela Y. Davis, ed., *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance* (New York: Third Press, 1971); Judith A. Scheffler, ed., *Wall Tappings: An International Anthology of Women’s Prison Writing, 200 AD to the Present* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2002); and David Hilliard, ed., *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008).

Roraback, made Huggins' collection of papers available, which includes her prison writings, legal files, and other documentation of her trial and imprisonment.³¹ In addition, New Haven journalist Paul Bass obtained a copy of the full trial transcript from a court reporter and donated the file to the Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library.³²

By placing these primary sources in conversation with Audre Lorde's conceptions on poetry, silence, and the erotic, I offer an analysis that is grounded in Black Power and Black feminist thought overlaid with contemporary queer cultural theories on pleasure and art in order to expand the historical understanding of an era. Further, this work positions the historical cultural and political contributions of Black women as central sites to imagine and build new modes of freedom. Framed under a pleasure politics that places feeling as its own critical site of resistance for Black women, this work seeks to complicate an understanding of revolutionary praxis and shift radical politics toward one centered on the moments of joy and feeling that can be found in the struggle. This scholarship joins those that seek to locate the erotic as a reclamation project for Black women that can connect our bodies to sites of pleasure.³³

I found the roots of this project in a triad of seminal Audre Lorde texts on silence, poetry, and the erotic power of feeling. The erotic, in particular, has been a contested site of theory in queer and feminist studies for decades. Though Lorde asserts that the erotic must be disentangled from the pornographic, there is a tension around that separation for many scholars. Important for this work is Lorde's positioning of the erotic as a "resource within each of us that lies in a deeply

³¹ Catherine Roraback, *Catherine Roraback Collection of Ericka Huggins Papers*, (New Haven: Yale University Beinecke Library, 2013).

³² Paul Bass, *New Haven Black Panther Trial Transcripts*, (New Haven: Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library, 2015).

³³ Loron Melinda Benton, "Interior Spaces, Spiritual Traces: Theorizing the Erotic in the Cultural Works and Creative Lives of Black Women Writers and Artists, 1930-1970," (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2020), 13. For further analysis of Black women's art as feminism connected to feeling, see also: Bettina Antoinette Judd, "Feelin Feminism: Black Women's Art As Feminist Thought," (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2014).

female and spiritual plane,” one that I argue appears in Huggins’ poetry and oral testimony.³⁴ Here I am more concerned with the sensual and spiritual connection of the erotic. Lorde notes that there is a false dichotomy of the spiritual and political; that in fact, they are connected by a bridge that is “formed by the erotic—the sensual—those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings.”³⁵ In Huggins’ poetry is a deep love for Black people, the sharing of which sustained her throughout her incarceration and trial. Further, though Huggins’ spiritual practice is only briefly highlighted in this study, it is nevertheless a critical connection in her erotic resistance. As Huggins meditated and wrote to the people she loved, she became more in touch with the erotic and “less willing to accept powerlessness.”³⁶

Lorde opens “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” by stating, “I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.”³⁷ In taking the witness stand and giving her testimony, Huggins risked further bruising and misunderstanding of her experiences and role in Rackley’s death. Yet, she believed that preserving her voice on the official record was worth that risk. By transforming a moment of potential silencing into a site of resistance, Huggins asserted agency and uncovered a critical site of narrative resistance. If our silence will not protect us, perhaps speaking the truth, again and again, will.³⁸

Simultaneously, I view Huggins’ poetry as a critical site for her reclamation of self and resistance to the dehumanizing environment of the prison. Poetry offered a vital space for

³⁴ Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” in *Sister Outsider*, (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 53.

³⁵ Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic*, 56.

³⁶ Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic*, 58.

³⁷ Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” in *Sister Outsider*, 40.

³⁸ Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence,” 41.

Huggins to process her emotions both pleasurable and painful, allowing them to “become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas.”³⁹ Further, Lorde reminds us that our feelings were not meant to survive the structures that define the good by profit rather than human need, yet through her poetry Huggins managed to foster an intentional attention to feeling.⁴⁰ Lorde further notes in “Uses of the Erotic” that “giving in to the fear of feeling and working to capacity is a luxury only the unintentional can afford, and the unintentional are those who do not wish to guide their own destinies.”⁴¹ I posit that Huggins was very much an intentional guide of her own destiny, exercising an erotic resistance in her attention to feeling and the sharing of such in her oral testimony and written work.

Finally, this work is also greatly influenced by cultural theorists Joshua Chambers-Letson, Amber Jamilla Musser, and historian Robin D.G. Kelley. From Chambers-Letson and Musser, I borrow their conceptions of a communism of incommensurability and brown jouissance to find new meaning and definitions of freedom in the poetry of Ericka Huggins. Chambers-Letson describes a “communism of incommensurability” as “a sphere of social relation structured less by the social fictions of possession, equality, and exchange, than by collective entangled, and historically informed practices of sharing out, just redistribution, sustainability, and being together in difference.”⁴² The term, therefore, can be understood to mean a connecting force that privileges shared histories of other-ing and centers a collective redistribution of resources similar to the coalition building of activists in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Further, Musser briefly describes brown jouissance as “a reveling fleshiness, its sensuous

³⁹ Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” in *Sister Outsider*, 37.

⁴⁰ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 55.

⁴¹ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 54.

⁴² Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 9.

materiality that brings together pleasure and pain.”⁴³ In Huggins’ poetry, which highlight the dual trauma and “little flecks of joy”⁴⁴ she experienced in prison, I locate moments of brown jouissance and erotic power.

Though I came to Robin Kelley’s *Freedom Dreams* late in the writing of this thesis, I nevertheless found that it resonated deeply with the meaning of this project as an exploration of the radical Black imagination. Kelley opens with his mother’s “tendency to dream out loud,” detailing how her imaginative world-building influenced his own political exploration.⁴⁵ Liberation, itself an incredibly creative world-building act, can therefore find its home in the imagination. And as Lorde connects the poet with the Black mother who “whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free,” Kelley too brings his mother’s imagination and capacity to envision a world beyond the limitations of the present to the center as itself a radical act.⁴⁶ Both Kelley and Lorde show that Black mothers are radically imaginative, and I contend that it is their “dreams that point the way to freedom.”⁴⁷ Though my work does not deal full in theorizing the Black mother, she is nevertheless a palpable presence in this work. Ericka Huggins’ story cannot be disentangled from her motherhood, and thus it appears in glimpses throughout my analysis.

In keeping with the interdisciplinary traditions of Black Studies, this project utilizes mixed methods and pulls theory from history, gender studies, sociology, and cultural studies. Using an archival research approach, I examine primary source materials that includes the *State v. Seale and Huggins* transcript, newspaper articles, interviews, autobiographies, organizational

⁴³ Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance*, (New York: New York University, 2018), 3.

⁴⁴ Huggins and Thompson, “An Oral History,” 64.

⁴⁵ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 1.

⁴⁶ Lorde, “Poetry Is Not A Luxury,” 38.

⁴⁷ Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” 39.

documents, and government records, in order to broaden an understanding of the ways in which Black women who imagined themselves as revolutionary freedom fighters asserted agency and resisted dominant narratives of race and gender during the Black Power era. Layering in cultural studies theories that look to Black women's artistic expression as critical sites of resistance and freedom dreaming, I approach Huggins' witness testimony and poetry from prison through the lens of Audre Lorde's articulation of the erotic as a divinely feminine power source and space through which we might envision a more pleasurable future for Black people across the diaspora. My analysis is grounded in a Black Feminist philosophy that acknowledges and honors the intellectual production of Black women.⁴⁸ As Audre Lorde notes, "where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives." I approach this project with the intention of seeking those words out to read, share, and examine as necessary for the long struggle toward Black liberation.⁴⁹

Thus, my scholarship comes out of this convergence of interest in Black women, Black Power, and the uniquely feminine beauty and pleasure that can and must coexist in revolutionary struggle. This study joins those that seek to disrupt previous notions of Black Power as wholly negative, violent, and masculine. This thesis is unique in its dual examination of Huggins' oral witness testimony and her written poetry from prison through an analysis rooted in Lordean erotic theory. I advance the conversation for an exploration of Black women of the Black Panthers as "poetic revolutionaries" in order to uncover moments of pleasure politics and a

⁴⁸ Cite Black Women, a collective project created by Black Feminist Anthropologist Christen A. Smith, challenges everyone, but especially academics, to "critically reflect on their everyday practices of citation and start to consciously question how they can incorporate black women into the CORE of their work." This praxis is a driving force of this thesis project. <https://www.citeblackwomencollective.org/>.

⁴⁹ Lorde, "Transformation of Silence," 43.

reimagining of the meaning of freedom. Finally, this study places the intellectual and creative production of Black women in Black Power as central to a deeper understanding of a critical point in American history and as a space from which contemporary activists can draw new lessons, tactics, and tools for survival pending revolution.⁵⁰

The first chapter will introduce the historical origins of the Black Power Movement, the Black Panther Party, and COINTELPRO in two parts. While the first section focuses on these origin stories that are important for a contextual understanding of the period, the second section of chapter one chronicles the rise of The Black Panther Party until 1969, including a brief analysis of gender dynamics within the Party. This section also briefly examines Panther image-making in the media, introduces Ericka Huggins, and closes with a few specific examples of COINTELPRO's violent engagements with the Panthers in the year 1969. The violent repression of the Panthers at the hands of the United States government is critical for a full understanding of the horrific events in New Haven, Connecticut in May 1969 and the ensuing political trial. Chapter one lays that foundation.

Chapter two deals specifically with the *State v. Seale and Huggins* murder conspiracy trial. It opens with a recounting of Alex Rackley's last few days and then moves to a discussion of Ericka Huggins' witness testimony during the trial. In her decision to testify on her own behalf, Huggins submitted her lived experiences with the Panthers as counter to the public and government narrative. In line with Black oral historical tradition as well as the resistance of Black women in America, I argue that by submitting her personal experiences with the brutality

⁵⁰ "Our slogan became revolution and survival, pending transformation of survival; survival pending revolution," David Hilliard, former Chief of Staff of the BPP, as quoted in DeNeen L. Brown, "I have all the guns and money': When a woman led the Black Panther Party," *The Washington Post*, Jan. 10 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/01/09/i-have-all-the-guns-and-money-when-a-woman-led-the-black-panther-party/>.

of the state as evidence in her criminal case, Huggins was reclaiming agency and centering the Black experience for the official court record, its own archive of sorts. Given that Black voices are often silenced or erased from the archive, Huggins' choice to testify in the way that she did was a radical reordering of public knowledge and a critical moment of resistance in the overall struggle toward freedom. Huggins refused to be silenced and thus actively resisted the dominant narrative placed upon her and upon the Panthers.⁵¹

The unorganized and abstract methods of resistance make up the backbone of Black political struggle, and in particular the often unarticulated survival work of Black women and Black mothers has sustained that struggle in immeasurable ways. The survival methods constructed and employed by American Black women are in fact the prerequisites for higher forms of resistance—for without survival, there would be no more overt forms of struggle. At the heart of this study is a curiosity not only about the hidden stories and resistance strategies of radical Black women in male-dominated spaces, but a desire to center emotion, sensuality, and joy as tools of survival for activists as well. How did poetic and revolutionary women of the Black Power era not only survive, but manage to find pleasure and joy even in the face of deep injustice, conspiracy, and murder? How is it that Black women continue to hope and dream for a freedom that has yet to be realized as anything but a vision for an alternative mode of life?⁵²

The final chapter examines two poems written by Ericka Huggins during her two year incarceration throughout the trial as a vehicle for answering these questions through a Black Feminist lens. When it is viewed as a whole, Huggins story is rich with survival methods that transform pain and isolation into beautiful art. I position her poetry from prison as a revelatory

⁵¹ For further reading on silence in the archives, see: Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

⁵² Chambers-Letson, *After the Party*, 7.

survival method that allowed her to create a vision for new modes of freedom and More Life via an emancipation of the senses.⁵³ Huggins' fleshy hunger⁵⁴ to realize freedom not just for herself, but for her people as well, bleeds so deeply into her writings from inside. It was through these momentary but nonetheless exhilarating engagements with freedom—her writing—that Ericka Huggins found brown jouissance.⁵⁵

At its core, Black Power was a radical declaration of self-love. If Ture and Hamilton envisioned “a Black community with the resources, will, and imagination to define the past, present, and future on its own terms,” Huggins' revolutionary storytelling and radical commitment to the movement contributed richly to that end.⁵⁶ By centering and uplifting her emotional responses to her world, Huggins opened space for new modes of resistance. Within a movement portrayed as violently masculine, Huggins insisted on an incorporation of the divinely feminine through a deeply felt love and connection for the Black Diaspora. Her work with the Panthers always originated from this place of love, and even in the face of incredible violence and trauma, Huggins' commitment to feeling never wavered.

⁵³ Chambers-Letson, *After the Party*, 4-5.

⁵⁴ Musser, *Sensual Excess*, 3-7.

⁵⁵ Musser briefly describes brown jouissance as “a reveling fleshiness, its sensuous materiality that brings together pleasure and pain,” *Sensual Excess*, 3.

⁵⁶ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til*, 172.

Chapter One: Origin Stories

*“To be a Negro in this country and and to be relatively conscious
is the be in a rage almost all of the time.”*

-James Baldwin

Part I

Black Power: The Humble Beginnings

The year 1963 brought with it a one-hundredth birthday celebration for the Emancipation Proclamation, a document which promised a freedom it could not deliver in real time. In the span of one-hundred years, it had become clear to Black Americans that, though physically free from the horrors of slavery, they were still under legal bondage. Founding documents that should have guaranteed its hopes and dreams to all American citizens had instead given its collective Black community what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. referred to as “a bad check, a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds’.”⁵⁷ Yet the “bank of justice” cannot be bankrupt, and on the eve of such a centennial milestone, Black Americans were entitled to cash their proverbial checks.⁵⁸ Freedom rang hollow one hundred years after Emancipation, and freedom would ring hollow again and again as Black folks remain unfree. So while the nation planned to celebrate its redemption 1963, Black folks, bitterly reminded of the Proclamation’s hollow freedom, turned up the heat on their dissent.

The activism of the 1950s and early 1960s had yielded important victories, but on the ground change remained slow. One glaring example: just a few days after the passage of the Voting Rights Act in August of 1965, the Watts section of Los Angeles, California exploded in

⁵⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream” (speech, Washington, DC, August 28, 1963), Archives.gov. <https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>.

⁵⁸ King, “I Have a Dream.”

unrest.⁵⁹ Sparked by a routine traffic stop and decades of quiet rage, the City of Angels burned for six days. Despite the grand political victories at the national level, every day Black folks still felt the nation's silent disdain—and they had had enough. The origins of what would come to be known as Black Power reach back for decades, but a sense of urgency had been growing, particularly within what Peniel E. Joseph refers to as “the space between new rights and unclaimed freedoms,” and by the mid 1960s it had begun to boil over.⁶⁰ Dr. King had given similar sentiments in 1963, and by 1966 folks were beginning to get restless with impatience. As noted by Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, “Black people in America have no time to play nice, polite parlor games—especially when the lives of *their* children are at stake.”⁶¹ Polite asks and nonviolent action had been helpful in chipping away at the very real chains of bondage, but Black Americans could not afford to even consider waiting another hundred years for justice. If appealing to the moral sense of the oppressor would never truly grant the freedoms Black folks deserved, then perhaps it would take—with all the weight the word should carry—a revolution, one akin to those in Cuba and South Africa. Thus, with a quiet rumble that grew into a mighty roar, “Black Power!” was ushered into American history.

Joseph traces the roots of Black Power to the 1930s in New York City's then all-Black neighborhood of Harlem.⁶² While the neighborhood's “New Negro” leading Black literary figures were creating American classics, Pan Africanist Marcus Garvey and the United Negro Improvement Association were teaching a brand of Black male nationalism that would directly

⁵⁹ Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom*, 41-42; Joseph, *Waiting 'Til*, 121; Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can't Wait*. (UK: Penguin Books, 2018), 13.

⁶⁰ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til*, 5-6.

⁶¹ Ture and Hamilton, *Black Power*, xvii.

⁶² Joseph, *Waiting 'Til*, 3-6

inspire the work of Malcolm X, whose father and mother were both involved in the movement.⁶³ By the early 1960s, X and the Nation of Islam—itsself a historic presence in Harlem⁶⁴—introduced the neighborhood to a new brand of religious militancy. Amidst disillusionment with integration’s success, the separatism preached by Malcolm X and the Nation throughout the storied streets of Harlem was a natural replacement for calls of Black assimilation.

Communist Party and COINTELPRO

As the fervor of the New Negroes and Garveyites slipped into the Great Depression, class struggles were quickly brought into sharp focus. As class distinctions blurred in Harlem, Communism emerged as a viable anti-racist ideology that understood and integrated the critical connection between capitalism and racism.⁶⁵ The Communist Party built a positive reputation on race matters during this era, particularly with its ardent attacks on segregation, that would inspire Black radicals for decades. Harlem’s leading Black voices such as Richard Wright and Langston Hughes often rubbed shoulders with Communist Party members and sometimes fostered intimate relationships with the CP and its members.⁶⁶

These early established associations would in the future become critical connections for Black activists and government officials alike. In 1956, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, led by J. Edgar Hoover, launched its first official Counterintelligence Program (or COINTELPRO as it would come to be known during this particular period.), though ghosts of similar programs

⁶³ Alex Haley and Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 1964), 1.

⁶⁴ Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til*, 16.

⁶⁵ Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til*, 3; for an introduction on the connection between capitalism and slavery, see Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1944) and Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983).

⁶⁶ Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til*, 4.

past suggest that Hoover had had eyes on the Communist Party, USA, as early as 1918.⁶⁷ Yet under Hoover's directive in 1956, COINTELPRO was officially created in response to a growing interest in Communism and the CP that took hold in America following the Great Depression.⁶⁸ As membership rapidly increased, so too did Hoover's paranoia and determination to eradicate "radicalism" on American soil. In a secret memo from Alan Belmont, head of the FBI's Internal Security Section, to L. V. Boardman of the Counterintelligence Division, confirmed collaboration of the two units to "foster factionalism" within the CP as well as to discredit the Party in public opinion. Belmont stated that the Bureau could at the time initiate a counterintelligence program against the CP that would be "on a broader scale than heretofore attempted."⁶⁹ The FBI's efforts proved successful as the CP crumbled under factional infighting—a tactic that would be launched, largely to similar success, against the Black Panther Party a mere 10 years after COINTELPRO's first official deployment.⁷⁰

Throughout the course of its documented existence as COINTELPRO, "virtually all who fight for peace and social justice in the United States" were likely to find themselves as its next target, including the Puerto Rican Independence movement, the American Indian Movement, and the Black Liberation Movement. Communists/Anti-Capitalists such as Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and the Black Panther Party were targeted largely under the guise of criminal proceedings. Though the official record launches the COINTELPRO campaign against Black nationalists as August 25, 1967, there are examples of repressive engagement far earlier.⁷¹ As early as 1918, Hoover was utilizing Bureau resources in attempts to destroy black nationalist

⁶⁷ Churchill and Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression*, 91.

⁶⁸ Churchill and Vander Wall argue that COINTELPRO as a practice reached back to 1919 in *The Cointelpro Papers*, 34-36.

⁶⁹ Memo in Churchill and Vander Wall, *The Cointelpro Papers*, 40; 91-164.

⁷⁰ Churchill and Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression*, 37-53.

⁷¹ Churchill and Vander Wall, *The Cointelpro Papers*, 91.

leader Marcus Garvey.⁷² Further, in order to circumvent the rise of a “black messiah”⁷³ during the early 1960s, such activists as Dr. King and Malcolm X were subjected to FBI interference and covert disruption, including attempts to provoke Dr. King’s suicide via doctored blackmail.⁷⁴

By August 1967, the threat of Black nationalist violence was so severe for Hoover that he officially declared a new counterintelligence endeavor aimed “to expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize” Black nationalist organizations and their leaders.⁷⁵

The endeavor’s express purpose would be to “prevent the coalition of militant black nationalist groups,” and, more specifically, to “prevent the rise of a leader who might unify and electrify these violent-prone elements.”⁷⁶ Hoover and the Bureau grew increasingly anxious about this simmering Black rage as Black communities were spontaneously rebelling in cities all over the nation. Disorganized and unprompted, these rebellions posed no major national threat to status quo, but their potential under a leader who might unify and direct that rage was too high to risk.⁷⁷

When it came to Black radicals in the Post-Depression era, Ward and Churchill note that “the intelligence services tended to view the newly awakened black militancy through the tinted prism of the Red Scare,” a phenomenon dubbed as the “Black Scare.”⁷⁸ If Communists and Black activists were heavy threats separately, the combination brought a new level of government repression. For instance, as The Black Panther Party—those militant Black men carrying guns and passing out Mao’s Little Red Book in Berkeley, California—gained national

⁷² Churchill and Vander Wall, *The Cointelpro Papers*, 91.

⁷³ Memo from J. Edgar Hoover from March 4, 1968 found in Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 202.

⁷⁴ FBI agents got so desperate to neutralize King by 1964 that they forged incriminating tapes to leak and threatened to discredit him in the media in an unsuccessful attempt to initiate his suicide, as detailed in Churchill and Vander Wall, *The Cointelpro Papers*, 95-105; redacted letter from FBI to King, Churchill and Vander Wall, *The Cointelpro Papers*, 99.

⁷⁵ Memo from FBI Director found in Churchill and Vander Wall, *The Cointelpro Papers*, 92.

⁷⁶ Memo from G. C. Moore detailing the expansion of COINTELPRO – Black Liberation Movement, Churchill and Vander Wall, *The Cointelpro Papers*, 107.

⁷⁷ Joesph, *Waiting ‘Til*, 122; Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 28-30.

⁷⁸ Churchill and Vander Wall, *The Cointelpro Papers*, 9.

attention, they quickly became enemy #1 for Hoover and COINTELPRO.⁷⁹ The specifics of the violent and extralegal actions taken by COINTELPRO against the Panthers will be detailed explicitly at the close of this chapter, but note that these tactics included harassment, surveillance, psychological warfare and extralegal force.

Black radicals throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s were subjected to some of COINTELPRO's most vicious—and successful—attacks. Many did not survive the “war,” and those that did were put through extensive trauma via highly publicized trials, incarceration, media distortion, and assassination of prominent Black leaders. Yet of course some of COINTELPRO's most heinous operations were never committed to writing, and even those records that are available have been altered or redacted. These records do not reveal the full historical account, but rather only one part of a narrative whole. The full history and extent of counterintelligence programs will likely never be known, but the implications from what we do know and can view are monumental, particularly for current Black radical activism. These implications as seen through just one “battle” in the war between progressive dissent and government repression are at the heart of this study.

What We Gotta Start Saying Now is, “Black Power”!

These words rang out to a receptive crowd in the evening hours of June 1966, a mere season before the founding of the Black Panther Party. Freshly released after spending several hours in jail over an arbitrary arrest—his 27th arrest to that date—an agitated Stokely

⁷⁹ Bobby Seale, *Seize The Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton*, (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1991), 79-81.

Carmichael⁸⁰ spoke to a crowd who shared his frustrations.⁸¹ A year later, Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton published *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* to articulate in almost real time the core values and purpose of Black Power and, ultimately, to make clear the “why, where, and in what manner black people in America must get themselves together.”⁸² Nonviolence, it seemed, would never have the level of strength that was now necessary for the reordering of society Black folks sought. They were no longer asking—they were demanding what should have been rightfully theirs as guaranteed by the founding notions of liberty, freedom, and justice for all.

What emerged for Black folks in the space between these idealized freedoms and structural realities was a frustration that, perhaps, could not be tamed. Many Black Americans, particularly those college-educated freedom fighters like Carmichael, felt that nonviolence was no longer an approach Black people could afford nor was it a “luxury” white people deserved.⁸³ This is not to say that Black Power advocated violence for the sake of retaliation or revenge, but rather an articulation of the violence of a colonized people. Black intellectual Frantz Fanon, in analyzing the colonial project he witnessed in Algeria in the 1950s, theorized that decolonization, or any change in a social order, would necessarily always be a project of violence.⁸⁴ As a historical process that began with the violence of an oppressor, Fanon theorized,

⁸⁰ Following a move to Conakry, Guinea in 1969, Stokely Carmichael changed his name to Kwame Ture to honor both the president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, and the president of Guinea, Sékou Touré and dedicate his life to Pan-African unity, found in “Stokely Carmichael,” Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Stokely-Carmichael>.

⁸¹ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til*, 142.

⁸² Ture and Hamilton, *Black Power*, xv.

⁸³ Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom*, 1.

⁸⁴ Ture and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 5-6; Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 1-2.

decolonization has “an agenda of total disorder” that carries with it the urgency of the exploited.⁸⁵

Black Power advocates and intellectuals such as Carmichael, Malcolm X, and Huey Newton saw America’s Black cities and communities as akin to internal colonies. The institutional racism of the United States had left Black Americans with a relationship to their own country that mirrored the exploitation, particularly of land and labor, of colonialism in the Third World.⁸⁶ When Ture and Hamilton articulated that Black Power meant that Black people see themselves through new and different terms, they were explicit in that this should include an alignment with Third World liberation struggles around the world such those happening in Cuba, Algeria.⁸⁷ This identification with international freedom movements can be heard in the speeches and writings of those of Black Power’s earliest thinkers and influencers. If Black America was itself the product of an American colonial project, then the dismantling of this “illegitimate system” of power would require a transformation of the existing structures that work to uphold it.⁸⁸

Black Power’s primary concern was a redefinition of Blackness and a reclamation of not only Black history, but American history as a whole.⁸⁹ To combat this erasure, this “cultural terrorism,” Black Power meant that Black people should define their own positive image as a step toward a new and more unified community consciousness.⁹⁰ This new consciousness would come with a rejection of assimilation into middle class American society, a society whose values

⁸⁵ Fanon, *Wretched*, 2.

⁸⁶ Ture and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 5-6.

⁸⁷ Ture and Hamilton, *Black Power*, xix.

⁸⁸ Lorde notes that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” as she urges Black folks to find the tools for their liberation in themselves rather than their oppressor in her essay “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” in *Sister Outsider*, 123; for distinction between the system and specific structures, see Ture and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 41-42.

⁸⁹ Ture and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 34-35.

⁹⁰ Ture and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 39.

“are in themselves anti-humanist” and which support a racist system.⁹¹ Armed with this new consciousness and spurred by centuries of the broken and unfilled promises of a nation, Black Power demanded that Black Americans “ask the hard questions” and challenge the United States’ societal values and institutions.⁹² Many of America’s youth took up the call, including two students at Merritt College in Oakland, California who in the fall of 1966 would create an organization aimed toward revolution and survival known as The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.⁹³

Part II

The Black Panther Party: Oakland 1966

Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, then both students at Merritt College in Oakland, California, often found themselves in political discussions on campus as they moved through various Black student organizations all searching for, in the words of Mumia Abu-Jamal, “that which Black Americans had searched for centuries—for freedom.”⁹⁴ None of these organizations seemed, to Newton at least, to be able to effectively consider class in their recruitment and engagement—an oversight all the worse with an understanding of the critical links between capitalism and racism both globally and specific to the United States.

As Newton and Seale searched for an organization that would meet the needs they saw in their community, they spent hours in Seale’s living room engrossed in casual conversation that grew more concrete over time. The rebellion in Watts had brought up familiar feelings of

⁹¹ Ture and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 40-41.

⁹² Ture and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 34.

⁹³ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 115-119; Bobby Seale, *A Lonely Rage: The Autobiography of Bobby Seale*, (New York: Times Books, 1978), 144-151.

⁹⁴ Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom*, 3.

frustration and anger for both Newton and Seale, who had both borne witness to the brutality of Oakland PD. Newton was an avid student of the writings and speeches of Malcolm X, and he moved through the work of Robert F. Williams, Franz Fanon, Mao Tse-Tung, and Che Guevara. As Newton and Seale discussed politics, agreeing and disagreeing, the influence of Fanon and X would rise above the rest.⁹⁵

Though often billed as a Marxist-Leninist organization at its height, Abu-Jamal says it is more “Malcolmist,” particularly in the decision to take up arms.⁹⁶ Malcolm’s philosophy of self-defense was a natural complement to Fanon’s theorizing about the colonial context in Algeria. To Black Americans like Newton and Seale, *Wretched of the Earth* put their own experience into empathetic context. Newton and Seale, like many of those who would join Panther ranks in the years that followed, saw themselves in the village resistance and their neighborhoods, “the American ghetto,” as akin to internal colonies discussed in Fanon’s analysis.⁹⁷ To understand settler colonialism in the international context was also, then, to understand the plight of Black people in America. Further, Fanon’s assertion that the oppressed are always on the defensive while the oppressor is always aggressive and “always surprised when the people turn back on him the force he has used against them” would remain a heavy influence in early Panther ideology.⁹⁸ It was the “Year of the Boomerang,” and it was time for Black Americans to take up their legal right for armed self-defense.⁹⁹

In 1966 in the state of California, it was perfectly legal for men and women—Black or otherwise—to openly carry a weapon. Further inspired by Robert F. Williams’s *Negros with*

⁹⁵ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 115-116.

⁹⁶ Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom*, 66.

⁹⁷ Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom*, 4.

⁹⁸ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 117.

⁹⁹ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 117.

Guns, Newton and Seale's budding organization would elect to arm themselves and patrol the neighborhood to protect their communities from the harassment and brutality of Oakland's police force. On May 2, 1967, armed Panthers "invaded" the California State assembly in response to the death of Denzil Dowell to protest the Mulford Bill, a bill that was a direct legislative attempt to change California gun laws in response to the BPP's armed patrols. Though the bill would ultimately be successful in changing the law, the demonstration would also prove successful in catapulting the Black Panther Party to national attention, resulting in a surge of membership.¹⁰⁰

As the Black Panther Party began to solidify, Newton and Seale outlined a "10 Point Program" that spoke to the issues the Party sought to address and would be the BPP's main governing document. Written on October 15, 1966, The Party's ten points demanded for Black freedom and self-determination and against "robbery by the capitalists."¹⁰¹ The Program called specifically for fair housing, education, and employment for Black Americans, as well as "an immediate end to police brutality and the murder of Black people," and its final point succinctly reiterated the demands for "land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace."¹⁰² The Party would address these issues through the establishment of community programs that would be maintained by the organization in the Oakland community.

The Party's most lasting and impactful legacy would be these community programs, established initially because, like the neighborhood patrols, Newton and Seale saw needs in their community that weren't being met. Initially referred to as "survival programs," the BPP started making free breakfasts for children and hosting clothing and food drives. As the BPP expanded, so too did these programs, so that by 1969 local chapters across the country were cooking

¹⁰⁰ Seale, *Seize the Time*, 134-149; Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 145-152; 153-159.

¹⁰¹ Black Panther Party Platform and Program found in Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 122.

¹⁰² Black Panther Party Platform and Program found in Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 122-125.

breakfasts and bussing community members to jails and prisons to visit family who otherwise might never see their incarcerated brothers and sisters. These programs included everything from free food, clothing, and shoes, to Panther-run and volunteer-operated health clinics, including a program run by ex-drug addicts who worked with the Party that was specifically focused on treatment and rehabilitation. This program also directly sought to call attention to the largely disproportionate number of incarcerated black folks, and specifically Panthers being held as political prisoners. One Party chapter in North Carolina even operated its own ambulance. Party members went through training to become emergency medical technicians (EMTs) so that they could operate the ambulance. This was in response to an incident where a boy had been shot and the county EMTs claimed they could not move the body, so he was left to bleed in the street.¹⁰³

The Party also established several “liberation schools” across the nation designed to teach young black Americans about their history in a way that would not be taught in the white-centered curriculum. “The Panthers’ liberation schools extended this tradition by insisting on a Black Power revolution: the inclusion of black perspectives, experiences, and knowledge in the formal and informal school curricula.”¹⁰⁴ The schools served as a way for the Panthers to again step in where they felt that mainstream society had failed the black community. Though often viewed as anti-white propaganda by outsiders, the schools were important to the Panthers as another way to foster Black Nationalism and an understanding of black culture. Ericka Huggins would be a pivotal organizer for the schools, acting as Director of the Oakland Community School that came out of the BPP from 1973-1981.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 188-190. If this death sounds familiar it is because 18-year-old Michael Brown, Jr. was shot and left to die in a similar way in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014.

¹⁰⁴ Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 192.

¹⁰⁵ Ericka Huggins. “Biography.” Ericka Huggins: The Official Website. 30 April 2018.

<https://www.erickahuggins.com/bio>; The Oakland Community School remains one of the most lasting legacies of the Black Panther Party.

By 1969, the Black Panther Party was well established, with chapters popping up all across the country—and the government had begun to take notice. Throughout the majority of the Party’s existence as a political organization, J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI’s Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) continued its historical tradition of repressive tactics and used any means necessary attempt to dismantle the Black Panther Party. In order to achieve this goal, the State used a variety of both subtle and blatant tactics, mostly of a legal nature, including “mandating arrests and detention, deployment of informants and agent provocateurs, the use of disinformation, electronic surveillance, and assassinations.”¹⁰⁶ In the immediacy of the events, these State efforts were successful in distracting the Party with revolving arrests, detainments, bail fees, and the highly politicized trials¹⁰⁷ of some of the Party’s most central leaders, including Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, and Ericka Huggins.

Gender Dynamics in the Party

Despite the thoroughly Black male nationalist roots of both Black Power as a whole and the Black Panther Party specifically, Black women across the United States also felt compelled to follow the call of revolution. Young women joined the Black Panther Party because themselves as “vanguards” ... and were actively in search of an organization that would challenge gender stereotypes in larger society, organizations that were “committed to eradicating racist as well as sexist attitudes.”¹⁰⁸ Many found that within the Panthers Such revolutionary women as Elaine Brown, Kathleen Cleaver, Angela Davis, Afeni Shakur, and Assata Shakur

¹⁰⁶ Grady-Willis, “The Black Panther Party: State Repression and Political Prisoners,” in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Maryland: Black Classic Press, 1998), Kindle location 6275.

¹⁰⁷ Grady-Willis, “The Black Panther Party: State Repression and Political Prisoners,” Kindle location 6280.

¹⁰⁸ Salamishah Tillet, “The Panthers’ Revolutionary Feminism,” *New York Times*, 2 Oct. 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/movies/the-panthers-revolutionary-feminism.html>.

would join Ericka Huggins as former or lifelong Panther Women whose commitment to the people and to the revolution rivaled that of their male counterparts, and often to similar consequences, as Huggins' direct experiences with COINTELPRO show.¹⁰⁹ Panther women were “powerful revolutionaries who fought with and for their brothers like lionesses” – and they were some of the Party's “very best.”¹¹⁰

Making up over 50% of Panther membership,¹¹¹ Black women were critical to the survival of The Black Panther Party as a community and political organization.¹¹² As the Party expanded its community programs and government interference intensified, Panther women stepped easily into leadership roles, as much out of desire as necessity. Over the course of its active existence, women in the Panther Party held a variety of leadership roles both nationally and in local branches.¹¹³ The community programs—and the BPP as an organization, whose field offices resembled a business office staffed with intellectually and radically gifted young women—were maintained primarily by Panther women, especially in the organization's later years.¹¹⁴ This community work, that of feeding children and taking care of the sick, were “looked on as being women things,” which is part of why the women took them over.¹¹⁵ It was also a means of the Party's survival that as more and more Panther brothers were killed or jailed, it left women such as Huggins and Brown to fill vacancies and keep the spirit of the Party alive.¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁹ Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom*, 179.

¹¹⁰ Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom*, 185; 184.

¹¹¹ Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom*, xxv; LeBlanc-Ernest, ““The Most Qualified Person,” in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, 305-336;

¹¹² Matthews, ““No One Ever Asks,” in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, 267-304.

¹¹³ Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom*, 165.

¹¹⁴ Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom*, 168; 186.

¹¹⁵ Brooklyn Panther member Frankye Malika Adams as quoted in *We Want Freedom*, 168; it is also interesting to note the almost unnoticed internalized misogyny of Adam's statement and the way women fall into a social order even as they are actively rebelling against said social order.

¹¹⁶ Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom*, 165.

Yet as they were still operating within the confines of a colonized American society, the young Panther men and women alike often perpetuated sexist behaviors themselves. Abu-Jamal asks, “As a prominent feature of the dominant social order, how could it not exist in social, political formation that was drawn from that order?”¹¹⁷ In other words, it is inevitable that any organization, even those geared toward social justice, would still perpetuate the issues of the dominant society. For the Black Panther Party and its internal issues around gender, that was certainly the case. For example, in “Why I Joined the Party: An Africana Womanist Reflection,” Regina Jennings recounts her own experiences with the sexist leadership; Assata Shakur shares similar reflections in her autobiography, as does Elaine Brown in hers.¹¹⁸ Further, Tracey Matthews asserts in “No One Ever Asks, What A Man’s Place in the Revolution Is,” that issues of gender and sexuality within the Black Panther Party should be seen as an “ongoing, nonlinear process” that was affected by both internal and external factors.¹¹⁹ Particularly as we continue to put historical distance between the present and the late 1960s, it is critical to consider the historical context when analyzing and contextualizing the Black Panther Party.

It would be a disservice to present the issue of gender within the Black Panther Party as anything but the complexities of intellectual and radical-minded young men and women in an era demanding new structures and definitions. In many regards, the Panthers were progressive when it came to not only welcoming women who sought to join the movement (many of whom, like Ericka Huggins, held various leadership positions throughout their service to the Party), but also in the self-awareness of internal sexism within the Party itself. The Party often attempted to address its gender issues head on in perhaps an unexpected manner; it was, after all, a

¹¹⁷ Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom*, 169.

¹¹⁸ Brown, *A Taste of Power*; Jennings, “No One Ever Asks,” in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*; Shakur, *Assata*.

¹¹⁹ Matthews, “No One Ever Asks,” Kindle location 4565.

“movement under siege” that was simultaneously transforming itself and an notions of gender. As many Panthers, both men and women, have noted, that “a revolutionary had no gender.”¹²⁰

Panthers in Media

As the Panthers grew in size and fame, they also found themselves having to constantly combat “wrong understandings” of the Party itself, as well as misconceptions of the revolutionary people who ran it.¹²¹ The prevailing memory of the Black Panther Party places the Panthers at the intersection of reviled and celebrated, though scholars, filmmakers, and ex-Panthers (and those situated within and between such identities) have provided well-researched accounts that aim to provide more nuanced understandings of the Panthers and their image.

Yet in the late 1960s and early 1970s, representations of the BPP in the media had been puzzled together from a mix of both internal and external propaganda. As the Panthers rose to fame, they became what Jane Rhodes refers to as a “public commodity,” and as such the Panther image could be “bought, sold and manipulated” to the American public. Of course, race—specifically, Blackness—played a critical role in the framing of the Panthers and folded into the commodified image of Blackness embodied within the organization.¹²² Blackness itself is fluid, often meaning different things depending on context of time and place, and Stuart Hall argues that the media are one place where ideas of race “are articulated, worked on, transformed and elaborated” within these complexities.¹²³ It isn’t, Hall elaborates, that there is a “unifiedly conspiratorial media” and a “unified racist ‘ruling class,’ but rather than that these things operate

¹²⁰ Jennings, “On the Question of Sexism Within the Black Panther Party,” quoted in Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom*, 177; 165.

¹²¹ Rofel and Tai, “A Conversation with Ericka Huggins,” 238.

¹²² Stuart Hall, “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media,” in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Text Reader*, ed. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995), 20.

¹²³ Hall, “Whites of their Eyes, 18.

within an ambivalence and primitivism of the images of Blackness that are produced through the media. Threats of a “recurrence of savagery” and “untutored sexuality” are lurking beneath the surface that race back to the roots of the making and unmaking of American racial politics.¹²⁴

COINTELPRO, with the help of the most local and national media, was certainly successful in providing a counternarrative and discrediting the Black Panther Party, as well as any others who the agency perceived to be threats to national security. In a 2015 interview, Huggins asserted that the legacy of COINTELPRO was “to demean and discredit everything that happened when it was happening.”¹²⁵ By the latter half of the 1960s, the Panthers had lost several leaders to assassination or incarceration. While the early and later years of the Party’s existence would be dedicated to an original purpose, survival programs for the community, the middle years had Panther energy focused solely on the survival of members such as Ericka and Bobby. “Here we were, these people who intended to do all these beautiful community survival programs,” Huggins noted in a 2007 interview, “but instead what we were doing was fighting court cases and trying to protect ourselves from FBI surveillance.”¹²⁶ The FBI’s tactics worked to both fracture the Party internally simultaneous to intense external pressure on the members themselves, and this often resulted in the very violence the FBI accused the Party of initiating, as in the cases of the deaths of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in Chicago, the shootout in Los Angeles, California at 41st and Central, and the murder of Alex Rackley in New Haven.

Indeed, the extent to which State agencies distracted Party members with infiltration resulted in the increased paranoia that garnered the circumstances of Alex Rackley’s murder. Huggins described the time period as akin to “living in a war” or on the battlefield as she stressed

¹²⁴ Hall, “Whites of Their Eyes,” 22.

¹²⁵ Rofel and Tai, “A Conversation,” 239.

¹²⁶ Huggins and Thompson, “An Oral History,” 59.

the trauma and paranoia of the time.¹²⁷ This trauma and paranoia, Huggins continued, meant that the Panthers “allowed for things that went on in that house that any sane person, especially me, would not go along with.”¹²⁸ In this articulation, Huggins spoke from her unique perspective as a survivor of the psychological warfare brought about by COINTELPRO; her experiences with the agency in connection with the trauma of losing her husband and comrades to this perceived threat put Huggins’ in a particular emotional and mental state. Rackley’s tragic death did not occur in a vacuum, and through her testimony on the witness stand and her poetry and writings from prison, Huggins demanded visibility and contextualization of the time and space in which it occurred.

Ericka Huggins: “What do you mean, a poetic revolutionary?”¹²⁹

Born into a middle class family in Washington D.C. in 1948, Ericka Huggins (nee Jenkins) has been described as having a “fierce resolve sometimes masked by a flowery exterior,”¹³⁰ a dichotomous description that would resurface some years later. At the age of 15, alone and defying her parents orders, Ericka attended the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where she heard Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech and committed herself to “serving people for the rest of [her] life.”¹³¹ After high school, Huggins attended the historically black Cheyney State College in Pennsylvania; by 1966, she’d transferred to Lincoln University, another historically black university in Pennsylvania.¹³² There she met future husband John Huggins, and by 1967 they’d both decided to leave the university

¹²⁷ Huggins and Thompson, “An Oral History,” 61.

¹²⁸ Huggins and Thompson, “An Oral History,” 61.

¹²⁹ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 56.

¹³⁰ Bass and Rae, *Murder in the Model City*, 82.

¹³¹ Bass and Rae, *Murder in the Model City*, 82; Ericka Huggins, “Biography.”

¹³² Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 139-140; Bass and Rae, *Murder in the Model City*, 82.

behind to chase revolution all the way to Los Angeles, California, where they joined the Black Panther Party and rose up the ranks.¹³³

A turning point came for Huggins on April 12, 1968 when she and John attended the funeral of Lil' Bobby Hutton in Oakland. Hutton, unarmed, had been shot by Oakland police officers during a shootout with several other Panthers, including Eldridge Cleaver.¹³⁴ For Ericka, it had been one thing to read about and know about the history of violence against Black people in America from a scholarly perspective; it was entirely another to have, in Huggins' own words, "direct confrontation with the brutality, the cruelty, and the doggishness of the police."¹³⁵ She vowed then and there not only to commit herself to serving her people, but specifically to "the life of the revolution and to the Black Panther Party."¹³⁶ That commitment never faltered.

For Huggins herself, 1969 seemed to mirror the grief and violence seen across the country. It opened with the death of her friend and her husband and it closed with the death of another comrade; and in the middle, Ericka would be undergoing her own political trial and incarceration. On January 17 of that year, just three weeks after Ericka gave birth to their daughter, Mai, her husband John was shot and killed, along with fellow Panther Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter. In what has been labeled a government conspiracy and assassination, John and Bunchy were shot in Campbell Hall at UCLA by members of the US Organization as a result of a disagreement within UCLA's Black Student Union regarding leadership of UCLA's newly forming High Potential Program and Black Studies program.¹³⁷ Though the incident itself was likely a "spontaneous shootout," the FBI had heard about certainly had some level of knowledge

¹³³ Huggins and Thompson, "An Oral History," 21-22.

¹³⁴ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 126; Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 118-119.

¹³⁵ Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 139.

¹³⁶ Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 139.

¹³⁷ Huggins and Thompson, "An Oral History," 45-48; Scot Brown, *Fighting for Us: Maulana Karenga, The US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism*, (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 96-97.

of the ensuing murder and decided not to further intervene.¹³⁸ Regardless of the FBI's actual involvement in orchestrating the shooting, most disturbing about the State's behavior was, as Brown notes, "the FBI's apparently gleeful enthusiasm and coldly deliberate inaction with respect to a prospective murder conspiracy."¹³⁹ In this war against dissent, Black casualties were viewed as victories.

Immediately following the shoot-out, Ericka Huggins herself was arrested and detained, along with several other LA Panthers, in connection with the murders.¹⁴⁰ In an act of motherly resistance, Huggins, knowing the police would be coming to arrest them and fearing the "storm trooper fashion" in which they often raided Panther pads, rolled her baby under the bed and thought, "If I die, you are going to live."¹⁴¹ In her desperation to preserve the life of her child, Huggins action shows her revolutionary commitment to the protection of her people in spite of her own life. Further, as a young mother who had also just lost her husband and the father of her child, Huggins displayed incredible strength and courage in the face of a violent government, a strength and courage that would carry her through her own trial a year later.

Huggins was released on bail and the charges were dropped the next day, but not before the Los Angeles Police Department had attempted to create an arrest record for Huggins' three-week-old daughter. Trauma compounded more trauma with each "institutional cruelty," which Huggins would later detail on the witness stand as evidence that her previous experiences with State violence were relevant to the historical record.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Brown, *Fighting for Us*, 96; Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 220.

¹³⁹ Brown, *Fighting for Us*, 95.

¹⁴⁰ Huggins and Thompson, "An Oral History," 50-55.

¹⁴¹ Huggins and Thompson, "An Oral History," 50.

¹⁴² Phillips, "The Power," 36, 45; Ericka Huggins testimony, *State v. Seale and Huggins*, 2829-2830; Huggins and Thompson, "An Oral History," 49-53.

Now alone with a newborn, Huggins left Los Angeles and brought her husband's body home to New Haven, Connecticut for burial and to receive support from her in-laws.¹⁴³ After John's funeral in early 1969, Huggins was called to open and act as Deputy Chairwoman of a Party chapter in New Haven.¹⁴⁴ In doing so, Huggins became the first woman to open a chapter and hold the position of Deputy Chairwoman of said chapter.¹⁴⁵

1969: The Year of the Panther

At the close of the decade, the Panthers were still engaged in an all-out war with a repressive US government. One of the most blatant and devastating examples of State repression against the Black Panther Party was the assassination of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark on December 4, 1969. With the help of a detailed floor plan of Hampton's apartment provided by informant William O'Neal, a raiding party of heavily armed SPU officers descended upon Hampton's apartment in the early morning hours of December 4. The officers carried with them not the standard raiding equipment, but heavy artillery: a "Thompson submachine gun, five shotguns, a carbine, nineteen .38 caliber pistols, and one .357 caliber pistol."¹⁴⁶ In less than twenty minutes, the young Chicago leader, Hampton, had been shot twice in the head while he lay asleep in bed, dead at twenty-one and with a son on the way. His body had been dragged onto and carried on top of a bloody door left "to show off their 'kill' to the other raiders as one might show off the carcass of a slain deer."¹⁴⁷ Visiting Panther leader Clark was also slain. The seven other Panthers in the apartment, many of whom had been wounded in the assault, were

¹⁴³ Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 247; Huggins, "Biography."

¹⁴⁴ Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 247; Huggins, "Biography."

¹⁴⁵ LeBlanc-Ernest, "The Most Qualified Person," Kindle location 5341.

¹⁴⁶ Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 238.

¹⁴⁷ Jeffrey Haas, *The Assassination of Fred Hampton: How the FBI and the Chicago Police Murdered a Black Panther*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2010), 90.

summarily arrested on charges of attempted murder, aggravated battery, and unlawful use of weapons. Despite no useful evidence—and in fact, despite all evidence pointing to the contrary—the press was told that Panthers fired first and did not cease fire despite warnings from police, which they said resulted in the shootout.¹⁴⁸

Four days later, on December 8, 1969, police raided three Panther buildings across Los Angeles: the home of Geronimo Pratt, the Toure Community Center, and the chapter headquarters at 41st and Central. At headquarters, it was, in the words of Panther Elaine Brown, a “mini-Vietnam.”¹⁴⁹ Panthers inside resisted, engaging in a shootout with the police which brought with it the debut of the Special Weapons Assault Team (SWAT), and lasted nearly five hours.¹⁵⁰ That Black freedom fighters brought about the implementation of such a special squad of excessive police force is telling of how Black radicals were perceived in 1969. Of important note, at 9:45 A.M., the Panthers inside headquarters sent out one of the two women present; Renee “Peaches” Moore, nineteen, emerged carrying the surrender flag and stating, “We gave up because it’s not the right time. We’ll fight again when the odds are more in our favor.”¹⁵¹

Following these events, community and national protests in support of the Panthers and against the repressive actions of the police surged, particularly as Panthers and Panther supporters grieved the loss of Fred Hampton. According to Elaine Brown, all of West and South Chicago, as well as Panthers in various chapters across the nation, prepared for Hampton’s funeral, with Panthers all over Chicago “organizing to arouse the wrath of the people.”¹⁵² Fred’s death galvanized the already restless and radical Black youth of the time; at the close of 1969, a

¹⁴⁸ Haas, *Assassination*, vii; Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 238-239.

¹⁴⁹ Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 205.

¹⁵⁰ Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 223.

¹⁵¹ Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 223.

¹⁵² Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 205.

year of turmoil for the United States as a whole, it was tragic proof that Black lives do not matter to the State. In cities across the country from Los Angeles to Chicago to New Haven, State repression had achieved the unintended goal of strengthening the Black Panther Party and support for the movement across the nation.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 225; 266.

Chapter Two: “America Is On Trial”

*“I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me
must be spoken, made verbal and shared,
even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.”
-Audre Lorde*

Rest in Power, Alex Rackley

In early 1969, a young new Panther recruit by the name of Alex Rackley, coming from the New York chapter by way of Florida, sought to join the ranks of the newly established New Haven chapter. According to a taped recording, Rackley had been in the Party for less than a year by May of 1969.¹⁵⁴ Though his confession is preserved on tape and his death is now immortalized as part of Panther history, unfortunately, not much is known about Rackley’s life before those three days in May. Even his age at the time of his death was unknown and misreported.¹⁵⁵

By May 20, 1969—just four short month’s since Ericka’s husband’s murder and barely a month into the establishment of the fledgling New Haven Panther chapter—Rackley would be dead and Ericka Huggins’ voice would be captured on a tape recording of the aftermath of Rackley’s interrogation and torture.¹⁵⁶ The FBI had been paying close attention to the New Haven Panthers by then, engaging in some of their best repressive tactics such as tapping Panther phones and infiltrating their ranks with undercover informants. By January 1969, as Huggins was returning to New Haven a widow, the Party had to begun to purge and close its ranks nationally in response to the heavy government infiltration. Known government agents were outed via the

¹⁵⁴ “Alex Rackley ‘Confesses,’” *The New Haven Independent*, filmed May 1969 in New Haven, CT. YouTube video, 4:50-4:52. Posted Feb 2013. <https://youtu.be/UqhRjyqUdPc>.

¹⁵⁵ Bass and Rae, *Murder in the Model City*, 22-23.

¹⁵⁶ Lesley Oelsners, “Witness Puts Seale’s Co-Defendant in Murder Victim’s Room,” *Special to The New York Times*, Mar. 19, 1971, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*; “Seale Jury Hears Tape of Rackley Torture,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Apr 24, 1971, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*.

Black Panther newspaper, where their faces were printed under an “Enemies of the People” headline.¹⁵⁷ Paranoia was understandably rampant—though Huggins’ own dedication and loyalty to the organization was unwavering and went unquestioned.¹⁵⁸

Earlier in the year, George “Crazy George” Sams—himself somewhat of an enigma, as he traveled across the country visiting Panther chapters that were then coincidentally subjected to predawn raids by a combination of federal, state, and city police forces—arrived in New Haven under claims of being sent by national Panther headquarters to “weed out spies.”¹⁵⁹ Sams—himself the actual government agent—charged nineteen-year-old Rackley with being a spy and immediately set up a basement interrogation that would result in Rackley’s coerced confession to being a police informant.¹⁶⁰

Under orders barked by Sams and reiterated for the taped record in Huggins voice was a combination of combative questions, beatings “because he was acting like a coward, acting like a non-Panther,” and the dumping of boiling water over his shoulders that resulted in second degree burns on his back and thighs.¹⁶¹ Rackley was accused of lying about not being able to read, among other things. By the end of it all, it would be decided that Rackley was “a motherfucking phony, that he was lying, and that if he lied to us, he lied to other party members and the people.”¹⁶² By this point in 1969, the Panthers as a whole had suffered such tremendous betrayal and government infiltration that even a whiff of suspicious behavior would be grounds for action

¹⁵⁷ “Enemies of the People,” *The Black Panther: Intercommunal News Service* VI, no. 3, (13 Feb. 1971), http://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC513_scans/BPP_Paper/513.BPP.ICN.V6.N3.Feb.13.1971.pdf.

¹⁵⁸ Bass and Rae, *Murder in the Model City*, 26; 192.

¹⁵⁹ Freed, *Agony in New Haven*, 25; Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 251.

¹⁶⁰ Bass and Rae, *Murder in the Model City*, 30-34; Paul Bass, “Black Panther Torture ‘Trial’ Tape Surfaces,” *New Haven Independent*, (21 Feb. 2013),

https://www.newhavenindependent.org/index.php/archives/entry/rackley_trial_tape_surfaces/.

¹⁶¹ The New Haven Independent, “Rackley Confesses,” 3:35-3:37; Bass and Rae, *Murder in the Model City*, 9; 30-34.

¹⁶² The New Haven Independent, “Rackley Confesses,” 3:00-3:10.

taken against them. In an environment sticky with loss and fear and uncertainty, Rackley's small lies, whether real or perceived or implemented by Sams, were reason enough to question his loyalties.

Three days after the interrogation began, on the night of Tuesday May 20, 1969, George Sams, Warren Kimbro, and Lonnie McLucas loaded Alex Rackley into a green Buick Riviera owned by another police informant named Kyle Moyer. Lonnie drove the Buick down the highway and stopped by off a low bridge off Route 157. Sams, Kimbro, and McLucas walked Rckley through the woods and into the marsh by the river. Under Sam's order, Warren Kimbro shot the teenager, just thirteen days shy of his twentieth birthday, in the back of a head with a .45 automatic. Also on Sams' orders, which he claimed came directly from the National Headquarters of the Black Panther Party, McLucas then shot an insurance bullet into Rackley's chest.¹⁶³

Though neither was present for the murder nor participated in the torture, as National and chapter leaders, Bobby Seale and Ericka Huggins would be brought up on charges that included conspiracy charges of aiding and abetting murder and kidnapping resulting in the death of Alex Rackley, and, if convicted, they would be facing the death penalty.¹⁶⁴ Yet in everything that the case represented, it was not a "common, ordinary murder case," as State Prosecutor Arnold Markle would argue.¹⁶⁵ The case was much more than simple murder; it brought up issues such as "jury of peers, systemic racism, secret-police and political repression, death-penalty scruples, presumption of innocence and pretrial detention, the rights of bail and due process, and prison

¹⁶³ Bass and Rae, *Murder in the Model City*, 4-5; 9-10.

¹⁶⁴ Bass and Rae, *Murder in the Model City*, 36; Freed, *Agony in New Haven*, 15.

¹⁶⁵ Pam Matz, "Panthers on Trial: The Case of Connecticut Versus the New Haven Nine," *Harvard Crimson*, (28 Sept. 1970). <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1970/9/28/panthers-on-trial-the-case-of/>.

conditions.”¹⁶⁶ As such, the facts of Rackely’s murder (most of which were circumstantial and did not directly tie either Seale nor Huggins to the torture and murder) were only relevant to how “questioning people in power became un-American,” and how young black revolutionaries factored into those concepts.¹⁶⁷ The facts of the case were only important in their position to “America’s war over race, poverty, and the right to dissent.”¹⁶⁸ Rackley’s life never mattered to the State, and his death was merely used as a tool for the war against the Panthers. What mattered more than Rackley himself was that Sams had been able to engage the Panthers in the very behaviors and imagery that was antithetical to the original conception of the Party.

Most critical for Ericka Huggins and those women that came after her, what was at stake in this trial for revolutionary Black youth across the nation watching the trial, went far beyond the facts of the murder. How far would the arm of the State reach in order to take down the Panthers? Could a radical Black woman receive a fair trial in the court of, certainly by this time, Panther-hating America? Much would come out in the cases in answer to these questions, but none so important for Huggins than what her own story could do for her innocence.

Thus, as a mode of resistance, Ericka Huggins elected to testify on her own behalf (whereas Bobble Seale would not). Huggins’ testimony would place her own experiences and that of the Panthers as a whole into public historical record not as excuses but as witness to the brutality they had faced in their quest for freedom and visibility. In so doing, Huggins subverted the dominant modes of control and recaptured her own narrative: “This is not the trial of Bobby and Ericka. America is on trial,” Huggins asserted to her lawyer, David Rosen, at the start of

¹⁶⁶ Freed, *Agony in New Haven*, 15.

¹⁶⁷ Bass and Rae, *Murder in the Model City*, 12.

¹⁶⁸ Bass and Rae, *Murder in the Model City*, 12.

trial.¹⁶⁹ In presenting her experience as counternarrative to the State's manipulated version of events, Ericka Huggins removed herself as the defendant and put the country in her place.

State v. Bobby Seale and Ericka Huggins

“Oh my god. It's all men.”¹⁷⁰ This would be Huggins' first observation of the court facing her in the fight for her life. Her lawyer, Catherine Roraback (who had also represented Ericka's husband John for his arrest in a protest) would be the only woman in the arena aside from the jury, and she “knew that women rarely if ever took part in daily court combat, but until Huggins made the observation, she had never really thought about it.”¹⁷¹ Miraculously, the jury itself consisted of five Black folks—four of them women—out of the total twelve, a sure victory for the defense after a long and arduous selection from an original pool of 1,500.¹⁷² This perhaps explains the outcome of Ericka and Bobby's case: mistrial due to hung jury, and the State declined to bring charges again.¹⁷³ This mistrial, Huggins would find out later, was due almost entirely to the women on the jury who fought for acquittal.¹⁷⁴

On May 11, 1971 Ericka Huggins entered the Superior Court of New Haven County dressed in what Donald Freed describes in *Agony in New Haven* as “her long, serpentine, green dress—partaking of the qualities of a guerrilla, and an adolescent girl in a hand-me-down formal with a black shawl and a homemade necklace, beautiful skin and hair.”¹⁷⁵ This dual description of Huggins—her “serpentine” dress and guerrilla qualities at immediate odds with her adolescent

¹⁶⁹ Huggins and Thompson, “An Oral History,” 71.

¹⁷⁰ Bass and Rae, *Murder in the Model City*, 36.

¹⁷¹ Bass and Rae, *Murder in the Model City*, 36.

¹⁷² Freed, *Agony in New Haven*, 177.

¹⁷³ Freed, *Agony in New Haven*, 315-316; “Seale Jurors End 3rd Day of Deliberating,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 22, 1971, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*; Lesley Oelsner, “Deadlock by Jury Results in Seale-Huggins Mistrial,” *New York Times*, May 25, 1971, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*.

¹⁷⁴ Huggins and Thompson, “An Oral History,” 74.

¹⁷⁵ Freed, *Agony in New Haven*, 288.

beauty—would prove to be a major theme of the case. With little physical evidence to tie Huggins to the actual crimes, the prosecution’s case hinged on the successful portrayal of Ericka Huggins as “racial militant.”¹⁷⁶ That the Panthers were a “militant” and/or “terrorist” organization was then (and still is now) a contested label, with surviving Panthers still refuting it today.¹⁷⁷ “We never called ourselves militant,” noted Huggins in 2015. “We called ourselves revolutionaries.”¹⁷⁸ Ture and Hamilton noted the critical necessity of Black folks to label and describe themselves rather than surrendering to the negative descriptors given by the oppressor. In exposing the distinction between the given-description of militant and the self-description of revolutionaries, Huggins highlights the importance of self-labeling, resists the incorrect labels placed on her and her comrades, and reclaims the power of the narrative.

Even without saying a word, the mere presence of Ericka Huggins in court seemed to cause discomfort, particularly in prosecutor Arnold Markle, and “the court contest came down to the clash between the two Ericka Hugginses.”¹⁷⁹ The question became whether or not Ericka was the seductress, the “cold-hearted interrogator,” the hardened Black “extremist” the State of Connecticut claimed.¹⁸⁰ Or was Ericka actually the “railroad dreamer, the sensitive poetess portrayed by her attorney Katie Roraback?”¹⁸¹ As evidenced by her testimony on the witness stand, the ways in which Huggins’ character were dissected would suggest that she could not be multifaceted—as if the dreamer and the revolutionary aren’t *necessarily* linked and embodied within her. Huggins complicates the attempted separation of the spiritual and political, and

¹⁷⁶ Bass and Rae, *Murder in the Model City*, 114.

¹⁷⁷ Shakur, *Assata*, 50-51.

¹⁷⁸ Rofel and Tai, “A Conversation,” 247.

¹⁷⁹ Bass and Rae, *Murder in the Model City*, 189-190.

¹⁸⁰ Bass and Rae, *Murder in the Model City*, 189-190.

¹⁸¹ Bass and Rae, *Murder in the Model City*, 189-190.

similarly the erotic and the political, by embodying them simultaneously and becoming “a poetic revolutionary.”¹⁸²

Though so soft-spoken that both prosecution and defense would repeatedly ask for her answers to be read back, Huggins nonetheless took the witness stand with a fierce resolve to tell her story. Though Bobby Seale, in contrast, elected not to take the stand in his own defense, but encouragement from her lawyers along with Huggins’ own steadfast belief in the importance of telling one’s own story propelled her to speak on her own behalf.¹⁸³ Huggins’ lawyers believed it “was important for [her] to take the stand as opposed to being completely silent so that they jury had no sense of [her]” outside the distortions of the media and the prosecution.¹⁸⁴ Roraback would ask Huggins, “But who are you? They need to know who you are and where you were before you got to Connecticut, and you’ll tell that.”¹⁸⁵ Huggins defense thus hinged upon her and Roraback successfully offering a counternarrative to the distorted image of Huggins’ personal character and the BPP that had been presented by Markle and the media. Rather than “hide behind the mockeries of separation that had been imposed upon [her],” Huggins refused to choke on the weight of silence and instead boldly spoke her truth.¹⁸⁶

Audre Lorde warned that silence would not protect Black folks, particularly not Black women.¹⁸⁷ Huggins refusal to remain silent falls into a history of Black women’s subtle yet critical contextual resistance dating back through 19th century U.S. slavery.¹⁸⁸ Huggins herself

¹⁸² Lorde asks us to consider, ““What do you mean, a poetic revolutionary, a meditating gunman?”” in “Uses of the Erotic,” 56.

¹⁸³ Phillips, “The Power,” 38.

¹⁸⁴ Huggins and Thompson, “An Oral History,” 75.

¹⁸⁵ Huggins and Thompson, “An Oral History,” 75.

¹⁸⁶ Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence,” 43.

¹⁸⁷ Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence,” 41.

¹⁸⁸ Angela Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 22. Angela Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves,” *The Massachusetts Review* 13, no. 1/2 (1972): 81-100.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25088201>.

has compared the resistance efforts of her generation to those of our 19th century foremothers, noting the common goals and universal interest “in uplifting their families and building their communities.”¹⁸⁹ Further, by telling her full story on the stand, Huggins followed the Black tradition of oral history as well as unwittingly situated herself within the participatory archive, stepping into the roles of “protagonist of [her] own history” and “historian of [her] own subjectivity,” as noted by Mary Phillips in “The Power.”¹⁹⁰ In so doing, Huggins was able to partake in “the performance of making history,” coming closer to freedom through the performance of acting as narrator of her own story.¹⁹¹

Under direct questioning from her own lawyer, Huggins attempted to correct the “narrative violence” and “betrayal” enacted by Markle, by Hoover and COINTELPRO, and by the media in their distortions and manipulations of Panther imagery.¹⁹² As Huggins took her place on the witness stand, everyone already had their own version of who she was, a version they would insist was her true character. Markle attempted to reveal a terrorist under cross-examination, while Roraback aimed to allow Huggins the space to tell her own story and resist the images thrust upon her. Through her carefully crafted line of questioning, Roraback took Huggins on a narrative journey to explore her history and experiences, repositioning the Black woman as subject and centering storytelling as evidence. Thus, in taking the stand and demanding that her story be heard, “Huggins’s oral history represents a black woman’s subjectivity as the counter narrative to the institutional modes of knowledge and power that

¹⁸⁹ Phillips, “The Power,” 37.

¹⁹⁰ Phillips, “The Power,” 38; Karida L. Brown, “On the Participatory Archive: The Formation of the Eastern Kentucky African American Migration Project.” *Southern Cultures* 22, no. 1 (2016): 116. doi:10.1353/scu.2016.0002.

¹⁹¹ Brown, “On the Participatory Archive,” 118.

¹⁹² Phillips, “The Power,” 42; Huggins and Thompson, “An Oral History,” 75.

would render her silent.”¹⁹³ Huggins used the witness stand as ground for her resistance and her voice as her tool of power in order to push back against an attempt to erase her truth. Phillips asserts that storytelling functions for Huggins as “a form of self-defense and personal agency despite historical silences and targeted violence by governmental authority.”¹⁹⁴ In taking the witness stand and fully telling her story for the court record, Huggins reclaimed her agency as a Black revolutionary woman and placed herself directly into an archive where few dissenting Black voices had been able to venture.

In response to Markle’s repeated objections to the relevancy of Huggins’ narrative testimony, Roraback stood by the assertion that her client’s history should be heard, in fact should be preserved and documented by the court.¹⁹⁵ Roraback recognized “Huggins’ vulnerable position as a woman and as a black activist in a courtroom hostile to both,” and the best act of self-defense would be to let Ericka narrate for herself. ¹⁹⁶ For instance, Roraback’s asking Huggins about her activities with the Black Panthers allowed Huggins an opening to discuss the Panther’s primary goals of uplifting their communities with grassroots organizing and free programs that directly addressed needs expressed by those in the community.¹⁹⁷ In order to correct the militant narrative that dominated about the Party, and in line with Party political praxis, Huggins used her place on the stand to center her lived experience as critical to historical memory.¹⁹⁸ Huggins positioned herself within that tradition of Panther women who “were crucial in demonstrating the ways in which the personal is always political.”¹⁹⁹ As Huggins

¹⁹³ Phillips, “The Power,” 40.

¹⁹⁴ Phillips, “The Power,” 36.

¹⁹⁵ Ericka Huggins testimony, *State v. Seale and Huggins*, 2817-2818.

¹⁹⁶ Phillips, “The Power,” 48.

¹⁹⁷ Ericka Huggins testimony, *State v. Seale and Huggins*, 2817-18; Rofel and Tai, “A Conversation,” 239-240.

¹⁹⁸ Phillips, “The Power,” 39.

¹⁹⁹ Phillips, “The Power,” 47.

detailed her husband's murder and her subsequent detainment by the Los Angeles Police Department, Huggins made records of the very ways in which, for women and mothers especially, the personal is always political. Thus, telling her story is not only an act of literal self-defense, but it also highlights the ways in which "personal testimony becomes political praxis."²⁰⁰

Further, Roraback and Huggins' insistence on telling the story of John's murder and Ericka's arrest, along with that of their 3-week-old daughter, was a deliberate action to reframe history and display the "institutional cruelty" and state violence that Huggins had endured.²⁰¹ Markle would object to this display, and the Court would agree.²⁰² In defense of the importance of the testimony, Roraback would argue:

"I think that Mrs. Huggins experience with the Los Angeles Police Department and her subsequent experiences with the New Haven Police Department are highly relevant to what her reactions were in that weekend of May 17th through the 21st, and to cut me off and not be able to describe what occurred in that house is highly unfair and prejudicial to my case."

In the assertion that Huggins' personal experience with the police state was necessary for the court record, Huggins and her lawyer were entering into a tradition of Black truth-telling as resistance and insinuating that stories about police harassment of Black people, and especially revolutionary Black people, are not only worthy of documentation, but in fact demand it in the hopes that it will create the "demand that justice be done through the heavens fall."²⁰³

²⁰⁰ Phillips, "The Power," 44.

²⁰¹ Phillips, "The Power," 36.

²⁰² Ericka Huggins testimony, *State v. Seale and Huggins*, 2829-2830.

²⁰³ Ida Wells-Barnett, "SOUTHERN HORRORS: Lynch Law in All Its Phases," in *The Light of Truth: Writings of an Anti-Lynching Crusader*, Mia Bay and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 58.

In one of Markle’s more comedic interruptions, while Huggins was mid-sentence he groaned, “The question was, did she join the Black Panther Party, and when? And we get a dissertation. Can she be instructed to answer the question?”²⁰⁴ In addressing this objection, Roraback emphasized her “right to bring out Mrs. Huggins’ background and some of her history” and asserted, again, that “who she is and where she came from is highly relevant.”²⁰⁵ Huggins and her lawyer were determined to use the opportunity to have space in the historical record, particularly one as meticulous and structural as the court record. This act of resistance created a space for Huggins to claim visibility in a way that made her both vulnerable and powerful.²⁰⁶ In recounting her own history for the court record, “[Huggins] insists on the recognition of her humanity, her feeling, as part of the historical record.”²⁰⁷ Thus, in reframing history through her personal experiences, Huggins used her testimony to center her emotions, her agency, and her humanity while the State had and continued to attempt to disrupt and discredit all three. In this case, her storytelling on the witness stand restored “power to the subject as the narrator of her own story, and it honor[ed] the fundamental principles of grassroots politics.”²⁰⁸ Huggins used her knowledge, based in her lived experience, to refute the dominant narrative of and to humanize not only herself, but radical Black people in general as well—“and I think it impacted the jury.”²⁰⁹

²⁰⁴ Ericka Huggins testimony, *State v. Seale and Huggins*, 2815.

²⁰⁵ Ericka Huggins testimony, *State v. Seale and Huggins*, 2808-09; 2826-2827.

²⁰⁶ Lorde, “Transformation of Silence,” 42. For a thorough look at police violence and visibility of Black women, see Andrea J. Richie, *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017).

²⁰⁷ Phillips, “The Power,” 38.

²⁰⁸ Phillips, “The Power,” 40.

²⁰⁹ Huggins and Thompson, “An Oral History,” 76; Rofel and Tai, “A Conversation,” 238.

“Panthermania”: A Media Analysis

As the State actively presented its narrative, the mass media also played a role both in this specific trial and in the conception of current memory of the Black Panther Party. By the early 1970s, the Panthers had already saturated newspapers, television, and magazines; in the process, a specific image was cultivated through mass media: mainly that of violent Black Nationalists, all of which were male, wearing all black and toting weapons.²¹⁰ The Panthers were already imprinted into historical and popular American media to the degree that simply invoking the organization’s name would be sufficient to call forth “ideas and assumptions about who its members were and what they stood for.”²¹¹ Even as the Panthers worked to undo these misunderstandings, a distorted image of what it meant to be a Black Panther had already emerged and embedded itself into American history and culture.

In the midst of that image-making, done largely without the permission of the participants themselves, small truths were distorted and/or exaggerated. For instance, the most recognizable image of the Black Panthers are the all-black “uniforms,” often including leather jackets and black berets, and almost always with guns in tow. Yet this “uniform” was only worn the first “three, maybe two and a half” years of the Party’s sixteen-year existence.²¹² “Why did that image stay?” Huggins asked in 2015. “Because mass media kept sending that out.”²¹³ The uniform example is small in comparison to the bombardment of misleading media images, but it shows the media’s propensity to take a single, often unflattering or undesirable image of Black folks in general and Black dissenters specifically, and using that image to create a wider and distorted memory. As the image is reproduced often enough, it becomes the remembered narrative rather

²¹⁰ Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers*, 6.

²¹¹ Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers*, 6.

²¹² Rofel and Tai, “A Conversation,” 240.

²¹³ Rofel and Tai, “A Conversation,” 240.

than the historical fact. Yet, here, Huggins used her lived experience to refute the distorted Panther image and provide an alternative description.

It was within this environment of mainly negative media attention on the Panthers as a whole that the Huggins and Seale trial got underway. The New Haven trial itself garnered much attention in the media, particularly after a large scale rally in support of the Panthers was held at Yale on May Day 1970.²¹⁴ Few of the newspaper articles covering the trial refer to Huggins by name (particularly not in headlines), instead referring to her as the “Seale Co-Defendant” and the trial as a whole as the “Seale trial.” In many narrative histories about the Black Power Era and the Black Panther Party, the Seale/Huggins case is often discussed as is Bobby, but Ericka Huggins is often either absent or treated like a footnote.²¹⁵

In addition to the intense media coverage of the trial generally, there was also a double set of articles written about the trial in November of 1970 for *New York* magazine.²¹⁶ In *Framing the Black Panthers*, Rhodes asserts that Gail Sheehy’s “Black Against Black: The Agony of Panthermania” and “Consequences of Panthermania,” though written with a narrative tone of familiarity and authority with Black folks, they “contained few quotes or attributions.”²¹⁷ This narrative amnesia was in direct contrast with Black Power’s instance centering the importance of self-definition for Black people. Given the misrepresentations the Panthers had seen from the media and the government, Huggins felt that self-definition and personal truth-telling were critical for the Panther organization. Yet Sheeshy, herself a white woman, wrote in a vaguely

²¹⁴ Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers*, 286-290; Bass and Rae, *Murder in the Model City*, 151-163; Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 263-266.

²¹⁵ Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til*, 242.

²¹⁶ Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers*, 288; Gail Sheehy, “Black Against Black: The Agony of Panther Mania,” *New York Magazine*, (16 Nov. 1970), <http://nymag.com/news/features/48649/>; Gail Sheehy, “The Consequences of Panthermania,” *New York Magazine*, (23 Nov. 1970) <http://nymag.com/news/features/48870/>.

²¹⁷ Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers*, 288.

“assumed black vernacular” that abounded with racist stereotypes and clichés, yet it would still become part of a book entitled *Panthermania*.²¹⁸ Despite Panther objections and threats to sue for libel, the book would be deemed to be “based entirely on public records and accurately reflects their contents,” proving once again the importance of Black oral histories and lived experience as part of the historical record.²¹⁹ Panthers such as Huggins told their stories in writings, interviews, and films as a means of slipping the unsubstantiated narratives with their own experiences in order to balance poorly researched representations. Though Sheehy was just one example of those journalists who were “committed to reinforcing the established ideologies that condemned these militants, often before they were actually tried in a court of law,” Huggins herself followed the Panther history of self-representation, and her act of self-defense and agency in taking the witness stand during her trial nevertheless challenged these established ideologies.²²⁰

Yet despite the overwhelming negative white media, the Panthers themselves were also active participants in their own image making, albeit as one collective voice among a barrage of opposing voices. In line with Black Power’s ideological premise of self-definition, the prolific *Black Panther* newspaper served as a critical site for the Party’s efforts at self-representation and space for truth-telling.²²¹ As Ida B. Wells had done by exposing the horrors of lynching the Memphis Free Speech and Headlight, the Panthers were used their newspaper to show that “the Afro-American race is more sinned against than sinning.”²²² At a time when the Party was under siege socially and politically, *Black Panther* was the only medium the Party had total control

²¹⁸ Rhodes, *Framing*, 288; Sheehy, “Black Against Black”; Sheehy, “The Consequences of Panthermania.”

²¹⁹ Rhodes, *Framing*, 289.

²²⁰ Rhodes, *Framing*, 290.

²²¹ Rhodes, *Framing*, 96.

²²² Wells-Barnett, “Southern Horrors,” 58.

over, and from 1968-1971 was the most widely read weekly Black newspaper.²²³ Sold at 25 cents a piece, *Black Panther* consisted of artwork, editorials, and poetry (including Ericka's) produced by the Panthers. It also acted as a form of communication to and from incarcerated brothers and sisters via letters printed in the periodical. *Black Panther* covered the course of Huggins and Seale trial, including a letter from Angela Davis to Ericka.²²⁴

Further, in the *Soledad Brothers* newspaper issued March 15, 1971 appeared a letter co-authored a "Letter to the People" in which they articulate the ruling class's fear of Black militants as manifesting in their own incarceration and trial, as well as that of those like them. True to herself, Huggins stressed the importance of educating the people about political prisoners ("POWs") and that it had to be done "with love, you know."²²⁵ Huggins and Seale end their letter by asserting that all power to all the people could be achieved by protecting the rights of political prisoners like themselves and like Angela Davis and Ruchell McGee in California. In using the underground newspaper medium, Panthers asserted their collective agency in image formation by presenting their firsthand accounts as an "antidote to historical amnesia."²²⁶

In *Black Panther*, coverage of the trial always included mentions of Huggins and Seale equally; issues often had the words "Free Bobby" and "Free Ericka" in bold type on the back cover, and Huggins' own image appears several times on the cover. On the cover of the January 30, 1971 issue is a large image of Bobby Seale surrounded by Ericka Huggins holding her daughter, Mai, and text that reads "It will be the people and only the people who will wrest

²²³ Billy X Jennings, "Remembering The Black Panther Party Newspaper, April 25, 1967 – September 1980," *San Francisco Bay View*, (4 May 2015), <http://sfbayview.com/2015/05/remembering-the-black-panther-party-newspaper-april-25-1967-september-1980/>.

²²⁴ Angela Y. Davis, "A Letter to Ericka from Angela," in *If They Come in the Morning*, 123-127.

²²⁵ Ericka Huggins and Bobby Seale, "Untitled," *The Soledad Brothers Newspaper*, 1, no. 1 (15 Mar. 1971), http://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC513_scans/Soledad_Brothers/513.Soledad.Brothers.newsletter.pdf.

²²⁶ Huggins and Seale, "Untitled"; Rhodes, *Framing*, 13.

control of the lives of Chairman Bobby Seale and Ericka Huggins out of the hands of the fascist American administrators.”²²⁷ In contrast to every other depiction of Huggins during the trial by general media, *Black Panther* not only rendered Huggins herself visible in ways not afforded to her by other media sources, but it also centered her motherhood as essential to both her specific struggle and that of the larger movement.

In the vein of self-definition, language and its critical vitality to the resistance movement would be also an important tool in both the media and the trial itself. Throughout cross-examination from Prosecutor Arnold Markle during the trial, he and Huggins battled over the specific words heard on the tape.²²⁸ Further, in her 1987 autobiography, Assata Shakur confronts the language of the specific charges she faced, which mirrored those that Huggins stood trial for before Shakur. On the charge of murder, Shakur counters the language thus:

“They call us murders, but we did not murder over two hundred fifty unarmed Black men, women, and children, or wound thousands of others in the riots they provoked during the sixties. ... They call us murderers, but we were not responsible for the twenty-eight brother inmates and nine hostages murdered at attica [sic]. They call us murders, but we did not murder and wound over third unarmed Black students at Jackson State—or Southern State, either.”²²⁹

Here, like Huggins, Shakur subverts the labeling of Black revolutionaries as “murderers” and instead puts America on trial by invoking established murders carried out by the United States government. Shakur provided a counternarrative that positioned the American political machine as murders themselves; in her analysis, Shakur does not remove agency from either the Panthers

²²⁷ *The Black Panther: Intercommunal News Service* VI, no. 1, (30 Jan 1971), http://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC513_scans/BPP_Paper/513.BPP.ICN.V6.N1.Jan.30.1971.pdf.

²²⁸ Ericka Huggins testimony, *State v. Seale and Huggins*, 3049-3050.

²²⁹ Shakur, *Assata*, 50.

nor the government, but instead, through the language of murder and the subverting of “good and evil” roles, Shakur places it front and center for the reader

Huggins, for her part, was a Panther who “didn’t try to sugarcoat the story. She didn’t make excuses for the Party’s mistakes. She came off as proud of the Party’s original goals and accomplishments, and determined to learn from its mistakes.”²³⁰ It was not a perfect Party, nor did Ericka ever claim it to be, because revolution could never be that easy or pretty. Yet Ericka Huggins stood as a leader, a dreamer, a revolutionary, a poet.

²³⁰ Bass and Rae, *Murder in the Model City*, 267.

Chapter Three: Toward a Poetic Revolution

*“The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears
are cobbled by our poems,
carved from the rock experience of our daily lives.”
-Audre Lorde*

It is often those who “dream out loud,”²³¹ who can imagine a world beyond the bounds of the present, who are drawn to revolutionary politics such as those dreamed by the Black Panther Party and organizations like theirs during the Black Power era. That imagination, “poetry or poetic knowledge,” is itself a necessity for emancipatory world-building.²³² Many Black nationalists and Black Power activists were themselves artists and writers, including many of the Panthers, using their art to extend the boundaries and definitions of freedom, collective action, and the self. Particularly for political prisoners such as Ericka Huggins, then, autobiographical writing in the form of letters, poems, and stories were critical sites of resistance, survival, and self-making.

Huggins spent the two years of her trial incarcerated at Niantic State Farm for Women, though she was as much a survivalist while inside as she was as a free woman. Despite being separated into solitary and the racking pains of a new mother ripped from her child, Huggins was determined to find “little flecks of joy” any way that she could.²³³ Throughout her incarceration, Huggins continued to express her visions of freedom and her desire for a connected and liberated community in her poetry. Her poetry, itself a radically imaginative act, offers a space for offers a space for freedom reimagined through the senses, self-making, and glimpses of brown jouissance as a mode for recovery and survival.

²³¹ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 1.

²³² Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 9.

²³³ Huggins and Thompson, “An Oral History,” 64.

While confined in solitary, Huggins taught herself to meditate and wrote poetry that directly articulated both the difficulties and the resilience for freedom she felt in herself and those around her.²³⁴ Her spiritual practice and expressive writing created the bridge, a bridge rooted in the sensual erotic, that connected her to herself and to those comrades inside and out.²³⁵ Autobiographical writing was a form of educational activism for Huggins, and her poetry follows a tradition of Black political prisoners utilizing the medium to address the brutality of their conditions as well as to highlight the love and light that endures through the revolutionary spirit.²³⁶ Further, as she reached into that deep, dark, ancient power—her feelings—Huggins uncovered the language to express a revolutionary demand, the implantation of a freedom (re)imagined.²³⁷ In self-authoring her experiences at Niantic, Huggins interrupted the official record and grasped “a power that positions black women as valiant.”²³⁸

On December 17, 1970, Huggins wrote a poem inspired by a musical performance that had occurred at Niantic the previous Sunday. By highlighting the various senses called forth by the performance, Huggins emancipated sense and created space to allow for a distillation of feeling. In centering the merging of sensation and pleasure, “Huggins interest in feeling as part of storytelling repositions women as subjects.”²³⁹ Huggins poetry connects the physical experience of incarceration and engaging with the musical performers through the senses as a means for all of them together to reach that feeling of freedom. The poem opens:

²³⁴ Huggins, “Biography”; Huggins and Thompson, “An Oral History,” 62-64; Huggins, “Poems from Prison,” 110.

²³⁵ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 56.

²³⁶ Washburn, “The Pen of the Panther,” 57; for more examples of Black revolutionary prison writings, see George Jackson, *Soledad: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994); Angela Y. Davis, *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance*, (London: Verso, 2016); Albert Woodfox, *Solitary: Unbroken by four decades in solitary confinement. My story of transformation and hope*,” (New York: Grove Press, 2019). See also: Akinyele Omowale Umoja, “Set Our Warriors Free: The Legacy of the Black Panther Party and Political Prisoners,” in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*.

²³⁷ Lorde, “Poetry Is Not A Luxury,” 38.

²³⁸ Phillips, “The Power,” 48.

²³⁹ Phillips, “The Power,” 38.

“sounds that come from the soul are always the same
 free
 open sounds
 giving
 the kind that reach out and touch—
 that’s what our sisters did / minimum
 touching maximum / showing oppression
 and the wish for its
 removal...
 feeling those sounds
 seeing them felt on others
 watching faces smile
 really smile for the first time in months—
 getting high—on the natural power of the
 people to resist/ to smile/ to laugh/ to sing/
 shout/ love/ give
 even here!!!”²⁴⁰

In a discussion of the performance itself, Huggins connected the senses by highlighting that the sounds that come from the soul are “the kind that reach out and touch”—“touching maximum.” Those in the audience were “feeling the sounds” directly, “seeing them felt on others,” and “getting high” even in a space as desolate as a prison. Words often do not adequately achieve the fleshy experience of a moment, but Huggins gravitation toward sensation opens up new avenues for the experience of performance as a conduit for freedom. Further, this linking of the audible sense with the physical sense could be understood as Huggins’ way of exploring a theorizing through fleshiness.

Amber Musser notes that theorizing can and should be a fleshy activity “both because theory emerges from flesh—positionality matters—and because theory is enacted by bodies; thought can be located outside of the linguistic, in and through the body and its movements.”²⁴¹ When words alone are insufficient, sensation arrives as an alternative articulation of theory.

²⁴⁰ Ericka Huggins, “Poems from Prison,” in *If They Come in the Morning*, 114-115.

²⁴¹ Musser, *Sensual Excess*, 11.

Huggins' fleshy theorizing through sensation served to heal herself and to sustain her survival through the "two years, two months, and some hours" of her incarceration.²⁴² In her own words, "Writing helped me to process the grief from John's death and the unbearable loneliness I felt from not having my daughter with me. I could only see her for one hour, once a week, on Saturdays. Since I was writing with my hands, with a pen or pencil, it was a kinesthetic way of healing."²⁴³ The physical act of writing was itself a way for Huggins to connect with her own body and to channel that sensation into her art; thus, the act of writing was itself a fleshy exercise for Huggins. In this way, Huggins' hands become the conduit through which her grief and loneliness could be transformed into something perhaps more beautiful.

Aside from having a personal kinesthetic connection to it, the act of writing from prison placed Huggins amongst her contemporary freedom fighters such as former Panthers and future political prisoners Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and Mumia Abu-Jamal, to name a few, who similarly utilized the medium while incarcerated under similar conditions. Though it is not exclusive to the Panthers or even to Black political prisoners as a whole, those such as Huggins used the medium to stay connected to the movement and to continue their political engagement. In general, writing from prison can "challenge the state's authority to contain their lived biographies within the boundaries demarcated by the penitentiary walls," particularly if the written work can be disseminated.²⁴⁴ Writing offered a sense of control and agency inside a place whose constructed purpose is to strip away both. Huggins used poetry to break the "ideological

²⁴² Platt and O'Leary, "Two Interviews," 61.

²⁴³ Platt and O'Leary, "Two Interviews," 61.

²⁴⁴ Barbara Harlow, *Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), 10.

chains” of the prison, and in so doing Huggins was positioning her poetry “as a revelatory distillation of experience.”²⁴⁵

Huggins’ December 17 poem continues:

“enjoying it—
crying too—even if not too many
let the tears fall free
... us—black/brown/white/poor—SISTERS
and it was all a total exchange
of energy
communication
even if we did not share words
we all knew their soul-sounds were
saying
we understand
we know
we can see what amerika is doing
to you— mother/ daughter/ child/ woman
of oppression—”²⁴⁶

Huggins and her comrades, both those in the audience with her and those performing on the stage, were enacting a “communism of incommensurability”²⁴⁷ in the way they were able to communicate and understand each other’s similar pains “even if we did not share the words”—their “soul-sounds” were doing the work for them. Huggins had lost her husband, her daughter, and her freedom, but she had not lost her spirit or her hunger for *something*.²⁴⁸ For even “stripped of everything else, a body could still perform, and through performance the flesh could fight for freedom and More Life.”²⁴⁹ In that process of performance, in this case the act of expressing feeling through writing, Huggins could give language to the nameless and formless,

²⁴⁵ Harlow, *Barred*, 14; Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not A Luxury,” 37.

²⁴⁶ Huggins, “Poems from Prison,” 115-116.

²⁴⁷ Chambers-Letson *After the Party*, 9.

²⁴⁸ “Something that is everything and so nothing and can’t be named but has to be named because we need it. Something for which we could use the word ‘freedom,’ but knowing that every word imaginable is insufficient to name that thing (whatever it is), let’s settle instead on the capaciousness of *something*,” Chambers-Letson, *After the Party*, 38.

²⁴⁹ Chambers-Letson, *After the Party*, 13.

that which which was “about to be birthed, but already felt.”²⁵⁰ Through her writings, then, Huggins was able to connect with other freedom fighters and make space for a liberation beyond the physical chains. For Huggins, then, “poetry [was] not a luxury. It [was] a vital necessity of [her] existence.”²⁵¹

This hunger for *something*,²⁵² is again part of a long tradition of Black radicals conceptualizing their individual experiences as collective.²⁵³ This poem is one example of the polysemic²⁵⁴ themes Huggins addressed in her writing as a way to work through her struggles and the conditions of incarceration while simultaneously uplifting the joy and love she felt for herself and her people both inside and out. In her writing, Huggins uses “‘we,’ whose mission and determination incorporates the individual and the political,” to highlight these links and to demonstrate the collective action of searching for freedom through the senses.²⁵⁵ In fact, she insists on this collective understanding of her experience as the December 17 poem then continues:

“we can see, they sang
and our voices answered their guitars,
horns flute-voice-cowbell-tambourine demand
for freedom with an unspoken right on
... a feeling there that one day—soon—
 all people will be free ... and
 we left
 stronger
able to smile (for a moment) ...
till we returned to

²⁵⁰ Lorde, “Poetry Is Not A Luxury,” 36.

²⁵¹ Lorde, “Poetry Is Not A Luxury,” 37.

²⁵² Musser describes the particulars of hunger in this context to mean the “radical openness” that comes from “the types of erotic and affective labor that this fleshiness performs while also harnessing it to inhabit something else,” *Sensual Excess*, 9. Chambers-Letson, *After the Party*, 38.

²⁵³ Washburn, *Pen of the Panther*, 60.

²⁵⁴ “Themes of love and hate, time and space, spirituality and religion, racism and nationalism, and sexism and feminism illustrate how polysemy defines Huggins’s political and aesthetic sites of resistance,” Washburn, *Pen of the Panther*, 60.

²⁵⁵ Phillips, “The Power,” 44.

rules that degrade
schedules that destroy sanity
racism they cannot see
sexism that rapes us of our womanhood ...”²⁵⁶

Through the writing of poetry and the use of “we,” Huggins could connect the senses and the mediums of music and writing to give voice to the collective struggle. The “voices [that] answered their guitars” demonstrate the communism of incommensurability Ericka contributed to with her work and the ways in which her words elevated the music. As Chambers-Letson notes,

“The ‘we’ of minoritarian performance is temporary and never fully authorized, but it’s ephemerality and lack of authority give it the capacity to remain fugitive from the majoritarian and totalitarian tendencies of the revolutions of historical communism, while appropriating and amplifying their most revolutionary impulses and drives toward democratic and collective being.”²⁵⁷

The use of “we” throughout Huggins’ work brings together all people experiencing oppression and uplifts their collective voices. This solidarity allows revolutionary agents like Huggins a unique avenue through communism toward a liberation of the senses, itself a radical articulation of the meaning of freedom. Further, “To think of freedom as practice and/or performance (as that which is ephemeral, embodied, and flickering in and out of being) is to understand freedom not as something to be had or used, but instead as *something* to be collectively improvised, produced, and made by and for the undercommons.”²⁵⁸ Through Huggins’ pen, then, freedom is constantly evolving and given new meaning. If we can only access freedom as a vision,²⁵⁹ Huggins’ words

²⁵⁶ Huggins, “Poems from Prison,” 116.

²⁵⁷ Chambers-Letson, *After the Party*, 19.

²⁵⁸ Chambers-Letson, *After the Party*, 25.

²⁵⁹ Chambers-Letson, *After the Party*, 7.

do the sensory work of imagining how freedom might *feel*. Poetry, then, is the space for expressing and sharing the erotic, “the nurturer and nursemaid of our deepest knowledge,” or feelings.²⁶⁰ Poetry is the way to “give name to the nameless so that it can be thought.”²⁶¹ In the process, freedom becomes tangible. The collective power expressed through both the musical performance and Huggins’ writing gave her space to breathe and, if only for a moment, get a sense of how freedom might feel.

Through this process, Huggins also continues to construct her own identity around the collective one. For revolutionary spirits like Huggins, selfhood can be discovered through the collective struggle. In the December 17 poem, Huggins’ self-making can be found in her discussion of the “soul-sounds,” in her disruption of the senses, and in her declaration of the collective power toward freedom that the performance and her writings encapsulate. In her transition from the power of the performance toward the harsh conditions of the jail, Huggins also locates the project of brown *jouissance* in the making of selfhood. As Musser notes, “... brown *jouissance* emphasizes the production of selfhood in relation to the social.”²⁶² As Huggins works through her own senses and connects to those around her, she opens up space for this vision of freedom that cannot be accessed otherwise. The oppression and struggle do not disappear in Huggins’ writings, but rather melt together and mix with her joy and love to create a new sense of being. For Huggins and her writings, then, brown *jouissance*, “occurs in the moments when Thing, Other, and object converge to form selfhood.”²⁶³ Brown *jouissance* surfaces at the moment where Huggins’ joy converges with her pain in her writing. There is a

²⁶⁰ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 56.

²⁶¹ Lorde, “Poetry is Not A Luxury,” 37.

²⁶² Musser, *Sexual Excess*, 3; 13.

²⁶³ Musser, *Sensual Excess*, 13.

tension and a liquidity²⁶⁴ in the display of Huggins' senses; she goes from a collective uplift to a collective despair in the conditions of the jail and back to a collective self-making through brown jouissance.

As art, Huggins' prison poems contribute to the tradition of Black radicals, and specifically that of Black women who use the medium to simultaneously critique systems of oppression and uplift themselves and their comrades. Therefore, "Huggins's work serves as exemplary of the role aesthetic productions played for black women as critiques of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy in ways they could not do politically, socially, and economically due to imprisonment."²⁶⁵ The cage kept Huggins from actively engaging in her activism, but only to a certain extent. Her activities inside, along with her continued use of writing as resistance and survival, show the ways in which the aesthetic is revolutionary.

Another poem written by Huggins during her incarceration displays this sense of self-making through brown jouissance. "The Oldness of New Things" gets into Huggins' hunger for those familiar small joys such as snow and highways that are inaccessible to her while her freedom is compromised.

"the oldness of new things
fascinate me like a new
feeling about love about people
snow, highways that
sparkle at night, talk,
laughter...
that old longing for freedom
that this place constantly
renews—it all makes
me know that humankind
has longed to be free ever forever
since its break from the
whole"²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ Musser, *Sensual Excess*, 14.

²⁶⁵ Washburn, *Pen of the Panther*, 71-72.

²⁶⁶ Huggins, "Poems from Prison," 117.

In pointing out “that old longing for freedom that this place constantly renews,” Huggins highlights the tension between the historical longing for freedom and the new manifestations of freedom. Thus, Huggins’ work “... offers innovative insights into black women’s work by placing aesthetics and politics in dialogue with one another, yet recognizes the richness of their aesthetic work on its own.”²⁶⁷ In this piece and the one from December 17, Huggins pulls both the aesthetic and politics together in a very intentional yet very natural way. The two fit together in her writing because they naturally are enmeshed in each other— “the political is so saliently personal that when it is rendered in art, it is ‘there.’”²⁶⁸ Yet Huggins fleshes out this natural connection by centering sensation in her writing and utilizing the senses as a mode for envisioning what freedom feels like.

This poem continues:

“maybe the longing for
freedom will soon make
others homesick for our
natural state in/with
earth, air, fire, water
not dead but
living
not asking for freedom—
but free”²⁶⁹

Through writing, pain and joy can commingle and create a new sense, something closer to that unnamable thing we can call freedom. It is our most natural state even as we have no active way to conceptualize what freedom feels like. Writing gets us closer to that feeling through the universal senses; thus, as articulated by Washburn,

²⁶⁷ Washburn, *Pen of the Panther*, 72.

²⁶⁸ Washburn, *Pen of the Panther*, 57.

²⁶⁹ Huggins, “Poems from Prison,” 117.

“Writing is such an important medium for activism, for cultural citizenship is granted to all in ways political citizenship is denied to disenfranchised people. In particular, writing disassembles the personal/ political dichotomy, an insidious patriarchal barrier, and instead emphasizes expression, even without mainstream representation.”²⁷⁰

For activists such as Huggins, writing is a comfortable place to explore the salient connection between the personal and the political that is unique to her specific experience as much as it is a universal truth. As she converges freedom with the senses, Huggins creates a new mode of resistance and new methods of survival that highlight rather than hide this liquidity. As a result, this new fleshy sense of freedom can feel close to that *something* we need.

Both of Huggins’ poems offer us guidance toward a collective resistance and survival that is rooted in a communism of incommensurability and brown jouissance. Specifically, as a mother acknowledging the connection of mothers and daughters and sisters, Huggins uses her poetry to think through sensation, aesthetic, and politics, and particularly the way in which all three converge as resistance through art. While indirectly attending to the mother in her work, Huggins’ positionality nevertheless comes through as she moves fluidly between the personal and the political. For as Lorde notes, it is “The Black mother within each of us—the poet—[who] whispers in our dreams: *I feel, therefore I can be free.*”²⁷¹ In attending to her feelings while inside, Huggins found new avenues through her poetic dreaming toward that elusive sense of freedom. Further, if the Black mother cannot be thought of outside of commodification, Huggins’ poetry attempts to disrupt her own commodification through self-discovery and self-definition. Therefore, it is clear that she is thinking with the m/Other even as she does not have to expressly

²⁷⁰ Washburn, *Pen of the Panther*, 72.

²⁷¹ Lorde, “Poetry Is Not A Luxury,” 38; italics by author.

articulate that as her purpose because she “is flesh and possibility; more precisely, she is a condition of possibility.”²⁷² Her writing is sensual and erotic in its attendance to feeling, and her positionality as a revolutionary Black mother allowed Huggins to access feeling and center emotion. It is due to this embodiment of possibility and the expansion of self that, through her writing, Huggins could reach a condition closest to that *something* she needed.²⁷³

Ericka Huggins tapped into her motherhood in order to recover the self and find an alternative mode of freedom through the emancipation of her senses. Robin Kelley refers to the radical imagination of Black folks as itself “poetry” or “poetic knowledge,” a deeply expressive and revolutionary dreaming that cradles visions of liberation.²⁷⁴ Through her poetic knowledge, then, Huggins distilled this emancipatory dream in her writing, her literal poetry. The language of poetry and Huggins’ act of self-authorship mingle with the mother in her to create new imagined a world not yet born from behind bars. Poetry can therefore be seen as the vehicle through which she was able to theorize her emotions through an erotic bridge and produce art that positioned her closest to freedom intellectually and emotionally even as her physical self may have been furthest from it.

²⁷² Musser, *Sensual Excess*, 174.

²⁷³ Musser, *Sensual Excess*, 170.

²⁷⁴ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 9.

Conclusion: The Cowboys and Bandits Don't Own the World²⁷⁵

“And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundation for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.”
-Audre Lorde

In May 1971, two years from the death of Alex Rackley, the conspiracy trial of Ericka Huggins and Bobby Seale ended with a hung jury and mistrial. The women on the jury thought it unnecessary to continue the charade and refused to find either Panther guilty of the state's charges. Huggins' experiences and writings throughout the experience can teach us about revolutionary and deeply feminine power of attention to feeling.

Through the late 1960s and 1970s, revolutionary-minded Black people across the United States engaged in a war with a repressive government. In the midst of it all, a group of young men and women wanted to do for their people what the government would not. Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale could not have known in 1966 that The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense would quickly come to represent “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country” according to J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI's Counterintelligence Program.²⁷⁶ As the Panthers gained in popularity and caught the eye of the world, history would become distorted through the clash of the Panther's initial goals, their manipulated image, and a violent rhetoric.

Yet the Black Panther Party was and is more than cultural symbols and “pig” rhetoric. Beneath the radical exteriors were human beings who desired a more equitable world for themselves and their children, so they fought for it. Some were college students, some were mothers; some were formerly incarcerated, and many were incarcerated as a result of joining the

²⁷⁵ “There is no doubt about it, our people [will] one day be free. The cowboys and bandits don't own the world,” Shakur, *Assata*, 274.

²⁷⁶ Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 210.

Panthers. They were all poetic dreams searching for new visions of a liberated life for Black people both nationally and internationally. As Kelley notes, “Progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society.”²⁷⁷ The stories of a Black Power and the Panthers are rich with a variety of modes of poetic knowledge. Ericka Huggins, a young mother who found herself in police custody many times over due to her activities with the Panthers, found resistance in various forms of storytelling.

The State v. Seale and Huggins turned into a theatrical affair full of both drama and comedy, but Huggins’ testimony on her own behalf is a standout historical moment of resistance through storytelling. Phillips suggests that, “Her story provides an alternative political discourse for understanding the implications of history.”²⁷⁸ In speaking her own truth for the court record, Huggins used the tools of power to enact resistance that demanded visibility and that encouraged personal experience as valid and necessary evidence not only in her murder conspiracy trial, but in asserting the humanity of those within the Black diaspora. Phillips further notes that Huggins’ personal account “functions as a feminist methodological praxis that privileges personal experience.”²⁷⁹ In taking the witness stand, Huggins engaged in self-defense that simultaneously honored Black oral history traditions and centered feeling in resistance.

Huggins was incarcerated throughout the two year trial, yet while inside she still found moments joy, brown jouissance, and freedom through an emancipation of her senses within her poetry. Huggins’ poems locate the erotic as “a measure between the beginnings of our sense of

²⁷⁷ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 9.

²⁷⁸ Phillips, “The Power,” 34.

²⁷⁹ Phillips, “The Power,” 34.

self and the chaos of our strongest feelings,” and they and honor her fleshy hunger for the nameless, for the vision, for freedom.²⁸⁰ It is critical to examine such modes of resistance, particularly for Black women, who often resist in the less obvious but nevertheless vital ways. As Phillips notes, “Black women’s personal writing and reflections are important sources for helping us better understand the black power era and notions of gender, feminism, history, and motherhood,”²⁸¹ all of which can be found in Huggins’ court testimony as well as her poems from prison. For the new generation of freedom fighters, examining her story and her writings can offer helpful insights to for locating moments of freedom and joy in resistance. Liberation is as much in the tearing down of the oppressive structures as it is about returning to our bodies and allowing our feelings a chance to breathe life into the experience. Our feelings were not meant to survive these structures defined by profit and institutional dehumanization, so an intentional attention and expression of them is itself a radical act of resistance rooted in the erotic, in love, in a communism of incommensurability, in moments of brown jouissance.²⁸²

Erica Huggins never stopped fighting for herself, for the memory of her husband, the trauma endured by those of her generation who refused to be silenced. Her story centers love, truth, and narrative resistance as reminders that feeling, and the expression and sharing of that deeply erotic power, is revolutionary. Her story also reminds us that poetry can exist beyond the literal poem; it is itself “a revolt: a scream in the night, an emancipation of language and old ways of thinking,”²⁸³ In this way, Huggins revolted over and over again on the witness stand and in her poetry, telling her story. We have to keep telling our stories on our own terms if we wish to transform our world.

²⁸⁰ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 54.

²⁸¹ Phillips, “The Power,” 34.

²⁸² Lorde, “Poetry Is Not A Luxury,” 39.

²⁸³ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 9.

Postscript

“There are so many silences to be broken.”

-Audre Lorde

As May slipped into June in 2020, fifty-five years after Watts burned, the crackle and pop of buildings ablaze once again mingled with the cries and chants of the Black community across the United States, a community that was sick and tired of being murdered by the police. On May 26, 2020, unrest erupted in Minneapolis, Minnesota after white Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin kept his knee on 46-year-old George Floyd’s neck, obstructing his breathing, for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, and while witnesses recorded and pleaded along with Floyd for his life. As Floyd gasped for breath and called for his mother, after he lost consciousness and for at least a full minute after paramedics had arrived, Chauvin’s knee remained crushing Floyd’s neck. The video of Floyd’s brutal murder circulated the Internet even as the Black community across the nation was still mourning the losses of Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man out for a run in a south county Georgia neighborhood on February 23, when Gregory and Travis McMichael, a white father-son duo, mistook him for a burglary suspect, followed him in a pickup truck, and fatally shot him twice in the chest; Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Black woman who was shot by plain-clothes officers at least eight times in Louisville, Kentucky just before 1 a.m. on March 13 after they used a battering ram to crash into her apartment while executing a “no-knock warrant”; Nina Pop, a 28-year-old Black trans woman who was found stabbed to death in her apartment in Sikeston, Missouri, on May 3; and Tony McDade, a 38-year-old Black trans man who was fatally shot by the police in Tallahassee, Florida on May 27. To date at writing, Ahmaud Arbery’s killers were finally charged with his murder a full three months later and only after the graphic video of the assault leaked onto the Internet, and all four

officers involved in George Floyd's murder have been charged following global #BlackLivesMatter protests.

Ignited by these public lynchings and the history of police and white vigilante killings of Black people in the United States, with flames fanned by months spent under state and federal lockdowns in attempts to quell the spread of COVID-19, #BlackLivesMatter protesters in all 50 states and 18 countries around the world defied lockdown orders and curfews and took to the streets to once again demand justice for the loss of Black lives at the hands of white supremacy.

Thus, I found myself completing this project amidst two viral pandemics that are killing Black Americans at alarming rates: the global coronavirus COVID-19 and the murder of Black people by white violence. While the former is a novel respiratory virus that snuck up on the world, the second, as is evidenced within this work, is all too familiar. While I thought about what this project might mean for the academy and myself, I also could not help but meditate on what it might contribute to this new historical moment we are living through and the continued legacy we see of revolutionary Black organizing and the Black Panther Party. Though COVID-19 does not discriminate, it has pulled back the veil and revealed for the masses what the marginalized already understood: that the institutions meant to "protect" us certainly do. As I thought about the impacts we see on our most vulnerable populations — those of us who are Black, brown, Native, poor, incarcerated, immune-compromised and/or otherwise differently abled makes us most susceptible to this airborne virus — I kept returning to this notion that "we are not merely inheritors of a culture but its makers." We are now at the moment of un-making, but we must not lose sight of our vision for collective and radical world-making.

We can and we must refuse, loudly and over and over again, these conditions that serve to suppress our collective erotic power. In the immediate present, we must address the real issues

that these viruses expose in our communities, and we're seeing that as people take to the streets. Just as important, we must think beyond this particular moment and consider how a world that values Black life is built, how it feels. We must contend with the world after and earnestly ask ourselves, "What shall we build on the ashes of a nightmare?"

This is where we must tap into the poetic knowledge present in all of us doing this work. Movement work is difficult. It is painful and it is draining and it can, at times, create conditions of mistrust and harm, as can be seen in the experiences of those young men and women of the Black Panther Party. Liberation will never come easily, but we can, at times, make it feel good. Ericka Huggins found ways to do that through narrative resistance in her witness testimony and her poetry, where she transformed moments of would-be silence into language and action.

We have been taught to separate the erotic from everything but sex because, "of course, women so empowered are dangerous." It is my belief that our collective resistance can be located in that dangerous power; for the power of the erotic, though described by Lorde as a uniquely feminine energy, can be harnessed by all genders. Our feelings weren't meant to survive, but an attention to them is necessary for our own survival, itself a radical act of resistance. As we fight for our vision of a world free of the violence of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism, in honor of our ancestors who shared, birthed, nurtured this dream in all of us, we cannot neglect the power of the erotic. For amidst this vital moment in the #BlackLivesMatter movement, "now is the time to think like poets," to dream without limits and imagine how liberation might *feel*.

*"It is our duty to fight for each other. It is our duty to win.
We must love each other and support each other.
We have nothing to lose but our chains."
-Assata Shakur*

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