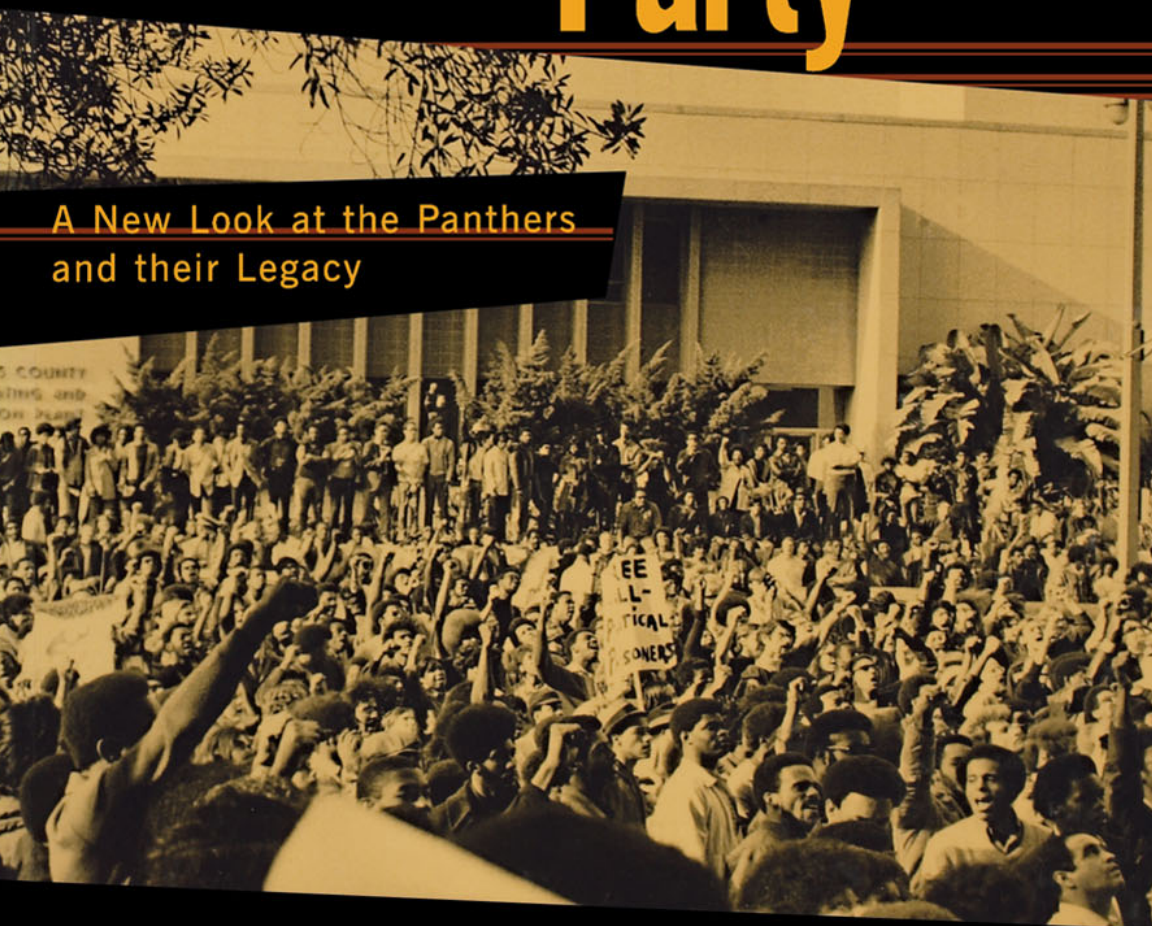


LIBERATION, IMAGINATION, AND THE

Black Panther Party

A New Look at the Panthers
and their Legacy



Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas, EDITORS

More Praise for
Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party

“I was the national organizer and chairman of the Black Panther Party when it catapulted into a dynamic resistance movement that drew thousands of members into forty-five chapters across the country in less than four years, a time Huey Newton mostly spent as a political prisoner. The essays collected here help clarify the way we seized the time with revolutionary grass roots programs, broad coalition politics, and empowerment strategies. However, I think the work is incomplete since it neglects to include our electoral campaigns, coalitions, and service programs in the vision for revolutionary change. Understanding this legacy is significant—we must continue the struggle for human liberation in this fast-paced, computerized, globalizing, scientific social order and we need to create a broader paradigm of revolutionary humanism.”

—Bobby Seale, co-founder and former chairman,
Black Panther Party

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Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party

*A New Look at the
Panthers and Their Legacy*

*Edited by Kathleen Cleaver
and George Katsiaficas*

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Contents

Introduction *vii*

GEORGE KATSIAFICAS

Part One: Revisiting the Liberation Struggle **1**

- 1 Repression Breeds Resistance: The Black Liberation Army and the
 Radical Legacy of the Black Panther Party 3
 AKINYELE OMOWALE UMOJA
- 2 Global Solidarity: The Black Panther Party in the International
 Arena 20
 MICHAEL L. CLEMONS AND CHARLES E. JONES
- 3 A Life in the Party: An Historical and Retrospective Examination of the
 Projections and Legacies of the Black Panther Party 40
 MUMIA ABU-JAMAL
- 4 Mobilizing for Mumia Abu-Jamal in Paris 51
 KATHLEEN NEAL CLEAVER

Part Two: Understanding the Fight for Freedom **69**

- 5 Every Nation Struggling to Be Free Has a Right to Struggle, a Duty to
 Struggle 71
 GERONIMO JI JAGA
- 6 “To Disrupt, Discredit and Destroy”: The FBI’s Secret War against the
 Black Panther Party 78
 WARD CHURCHILL
- 7 The Split in the Party 118
 DONALD COX
- 8 Women, Power, and Revolution 123
 KATHLEEN NEAL CLEAVER
- 9 Black Fighting Formations: Their Strengths, Weaknesses, and
 Potentialities 128
 RUSSELL SHOATS

Part Three: Envisioning the Imagination of the Movement 139

- 10 Organization and Movement: The Case of the Black Panther Party and the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention of 1970 141
GEORGE KATSIAFICAS
- 11 The Influences of the Black Panther Party (USA) on the Vanguard Party of the Bahamas, 1972–1987 156
JOHN T. MCCARTNEY
- 12 Cuba, the Black Panther Party, and the U.S. Black Movement in the 1960s: Issues of Security 164
RUTH REITAN
- 13 “Revolutionary Art Is a Tool for Liberation”: Emory Douglas and Protest Aesthetics at the *Black Panther* 175
ERIKA DOSS
- 14 White Radicals, Black Panthers, and a Sense of Fulfillment 188
STEW ALBERT

Part Four: Continuing the Resistance 195

- 15 Shadow of a Clue 197
ERROL ANTHONY HENDERSON
- 16 Rediscovering the Black Panther Party 208
VICTOR WALLIS
- 17 Tracking Down the Empirical Legacy of the Black Panther Party; or, Notes on the Perils of Pursuing the Panthers 212
CLAUDIA DAHLERUS AND CHRISTIAN A. DAVENPORT
- 18 Remembering King's Assassination 227
KATHLEEN NEAL CLEAVER
- 19 Lockdown at Angola: The Case of the Angola 3 229
SCOTT FLEMING

Notes 237

Appendices 285

About the Authors 301

Index 305

Introduction

George Katsiaficas

Although we like to think in linear terms, history has its own cunning that carries us along strange and mysterious paths. Long-forgotten, “defeated” movements and their ideals sometimes emerge with a renewed popularity unpredictable only the blink of an eye before. Victors may define the history of an era in large type, but between the lines of the boldface script of textbooks or news programs, a better sense of the future may be gleaned from the margins.

This book gathers writings from the margins of the present to reconsider the historical impact of the Black Panther Party (BPP), the most significant revolutionary organization in the United States during the latter half of the twentieth century. Following in the footsteps of Charles Jones’s pioneering work, *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*,¹ our book also brings together scholars and activists to probe the history of the BPP. Silenced voices reach across the caverns of imprisonment or exile and speak with an eloquence forged by years of reflection, tempered by thousands of sacrifices. Some famous movement martyrs are known: Fred Hampton, Mark Clark, Bobby Hutton, John Huggins, Bunchy Carter (to name only a handful). For every one of them, dozens more whose names are forgotten also lost their lives while fighting for liberation during the 1960s and 1970s.

Compared with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the sixteen-year existence of the Black Panther Party seems brief indeed. While its revolutionary period lasted for less than half its life, the Black Panther Party gave organizational expression to a tendency in the movement that long pre-dated the BPP: the idea that the entire system is corrupt and needs to be reconstructed. Dozens of groups dedicated to revolutionary change appeared in the United States during the 1960s, but the BPP was the only one able to develop a massive following and appeal to a broad constituency.

The Panthers’ notoriety initially turned on their overt practice and explicit advocacy of armed self-defense. This dimension of the larger movement has systematically been deleted from history books and recollections of past struggles. Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964, mythologized by sociologists and screenwriters alike for its nonviolent resistance to racist terrorism, contained a militant theme of quiet self-defense woven throughout its history. Our meticulously researched essay by Akinyele Umoja touches on that in his examination of the development of the Black Liberation Army. That dozens of films, award-winning books, and Hollywood scripts and intense media coverage could universally ignore, overlook, and distort this aspect of the resistance movement in Mississippi is itself worthy of study. No doubt such an analysis would reveal a great deal

¹Charles Jones, *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998).

about the ways that prevailing ideologies deform accounts of social movements, emphasizing superficial characteristics and ignoring deeper connections to broader historical currents, suppressing in fact movements' appeals, ideals, and actions. In portrayals of the Panthers trickling through the media gatekeepers and exhibited before millions of us in Hollywood accounts of the 1960s, militant actions are treated as episodic, whereby the fundamental break with the legitimacy and power of the established system that the Panthers represented is hidden from view.

As the Panthers' influence spread far beyond U.S. borders, they affected the entire global movement of the 1960s. A global awakening to the need for freedom shook the planet, and in at least six countries, organizations formed that modeled themselves on the BPP. For its part, the BPP drew inspiration from several African, Latin American, and Asian revolutions, particularly through the work of Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, and Kwame Nkrumah. In their groundbreaking essay on the Black Panther Party's international impact, Michael Clemons and Charles Jones (chapter 2) joyfully recount many of the places where the BPP resonated with indigenous activists. In nearly every country in the world in 1968, movements pressed for revolution. From Vietnam and China in the east to India, Czechoslovakia, Senegal, Syria, Mexico, Brazil, and France, a globally united upsurge suddenly emerged—and everywhere the Panthers were intuitively (if not actually) tied into the fabric of feelings, images, and actions. Once again, most histories of this period neglect a critical dimension of the movements: the international bonds and global imagination—how we inspired each other and went far beyond the patriotism propagandized by every government. Love for each other as human beings was a palpable wave that rolled over the whole planet.² Nonetheless, the vast majority of histories in every country describe the 1960s as a *national* phenomenon.

In the United States, the archives of research libraries and availability of information surpass the intellectual resources of any country in history, yet studies here consistently ignore the movement's global character and our fundamental break in the late 1960s with the entire system. Written out of history books and largely ignored in most participants' narratives is the fact that from May to September 1970, the United States was in a prerevolutionary situation in which emergent revolutionary forces led by the BPP organized to transform totally the existing system. During this period, the largest strike in U.S. history occurred. Over 4 million students and half a million faculty on the campuses demanded an end to the war in Indochina as well as freedom and peace for imprisoned Panthers. The events in the United States from May to September 1970 were similar to the now-legendary French *événements* of 1968 in which a student revolt precipitated a strike of 10 million workers—creating a revolutionary situation. When the spiral of militant actions and massive resistance in the United States reached its apex in 1970, the consciousness-in-action of millions of people called for the abolition of the existing system and the creation of one based on justice and peace. In place of patriotism, millions of Americans acted according to norms of international solidarity; they rejected hierarchy and competition for equality and cooperation; racial division for solidarity; conformity and acquisition for free experimentation and altruism. People not only thought about revolution, they acted on their beliefs and convictions.

Recognizing this dynamic, the BPP called for a gathering of representatives of all radical constituencies in Philadelphia in September 1970 for a Revolutionary People's

²I develop the concept of the “eros effect” to describe the rapid spread and spontaneous emergence of social movements. See my book *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* (Boston: South End Press, new printing 1998).

Constitutional Convention (RPCC), and the vision produced there by the popular movement went a long way toward reconceptualizing America. Although the police terrorized the Philadelphia Panthers and threatened to stop the convention, nearly 15,000 of us assembled to rewrite the Constitution. Led by the Panthers, an extraordinary alliance was forged, including the American Indian Movement (AIM), the Brown Berets, the Young Lords, I Wor Keun (an Asian-American revolutionary organization), women's liberation groups, former members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS, which had a membership of well over 70,000 at its high point), and the newly formed Gay Liberation Front. As I discuss in chapter 10, "Organization and Movement: The Case of the Black Panther Party and the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention," the outline of a freer society is visible in the proposals from the workshops, and the energy and enthusiasm of the popular movement made the Panther program of 1966 appear to be quite modest.³

These were times when history accomplished more in days than in other years. In this volatile period Huey Newton was released from a three-year imprisonment; eighteen-year-olds were granted the right to vote; the Chicano moratorium was viciously attacked in Los Angeles; women called for a national strike, and the symbol for feminism was born; troops in Vietnam mutinied and sometimes killed their officers; and millions of Americans viewed themselves as revolutionaries and acted accordingly. The Army Math Research Center in Madison, Wisconsin where research used to capture and kill Che Guevara was conducted, was gutted by an explosion, and in California, Jonathan Jackson took over a courtroom, kidnapped a judge, and demanded the liberation of his brother before a volley of gunfire killed him and two prisoners who had joined him.⁴

The Panthers were intricately connected to all the events of this period. When a group of us who had been arrested at Boston University (and savagely beaten inside a Boston police station) were arraigned in court, my most vivid memory is of Eric Mann, a leader of the local Weathermen, grimly informing us during a break in court proceedings that Fred Hampton had been murdered earlier that morning. By April 1970, after Bobby Seale had been severed from the Chicago 8 conspiracy trial and taken to New Haven, where he faced murder charges and the death penalty, many of us felt nothing was more important in our lives than banding together with those whose lives were also dedicated to the movement.

These were extraordinary times. Hundreds, sometimes thousands, of Vietnamese were killed every day, and police repression in the United States, already murderous, threatened to become sanctioned by the judicial system. Something had to be done to save Bobby Seale. When a few of the Panthers asked two of us they knew from the Rosa Luxemburg chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) at MIT to speak for them at a movement meeting (since they rightfully felt that if they said what we were prepared to say, they would simply be arrested), we agreed. The April 15 antiwar moratorium, an event sure to draw tens of thousands of people, was nearly upon us, and we thought that a "white riot" for Bobby Seale was our best shot at saving his life. When my friend Peter Bohmer and I were introduced by the Panthers as brothers who had important things to say, we had everyone's rapt attention. Over the next few weeks, as a small group of us worked day and night to bring our project to fruition, the treatment we received at the hands of movement activists changed radically. As the date approached, some people became openly hostile to our project—to the point of throwing us out of the movement offices and effectively ostracizing us from any gatherings. The

³These documents and others are included at the end of this book.

⁴As Russell Shoats reminds us in chapter 9 in this book, Ruchell Magee, the only survivor, has spent nearly all of the intervening thirty years in the hole.

night before the action, a delegation arrived at our Cambridge apartment in a final attempt to forestall any violence. I alone refused to agree to call off the event, motivated among other things by my commitment to free Bobby Seale and my conviction that radical street actions were one of our few avenues to have an impact.

The next day, at least 100,000 people gathered on the Boston Common for the anti-war moratorium. The radical contingent there, noted by their red, yellow, and blue National Liberation Front (NLF) flags, began to gather as Abbie Hoffman's time to speak approached. I had spoken with Abbie hours earlier, and he agreed to help form the Bobby Seale Brigade out of the diverse participants in the rally. When his turn finally came, he gave a magnificent speech, probably enhanced by his being high on LSD. Pointing at the John Hancock Building, he screamed at the top of his lungs, "John Hancock wasn't a life insurance salesman. He was a revolutionary! Here we are in the cradle of liberty. Are you going to rock that cradle or are you going to cradle that rock?" The thunderous response left me assured that our action would succeed.

As the rally broke up, the Bobby Seale Brigade assembled on Beacon Street. First hundreds, then thousands of us made ready to march across the river to Cambridge, and "do more than march and shout." We had made elaborate preparations to march across the Longfellow Bridge and made sure the Cambridge police caught wind of them. As we began to march, rather than heading down Charles Street, however, we directed everyone to march down Beacon. I rode ahead on a motorcycle, checking for police roadblocks and activity. I rode back and forth, communicating with only two or three other people. As we turned the crowd over the Harvard bridge, it became apparent we were a huge gathering, since we completely filled the bridge where the Charles River Basin was at its widest. Busloads of Cambridge police dressed in riot gear were moving from the foot of the Longfellow Bridge to Central Square, where they were setting up a blockade. Quickly driving to the various projects and informing people there of the march and impending action at Harvard Square (to which they responded with boundless enthusiasm), I rode back to the march and roared through the crowd until I located a friendly attorney. With him on the back of my motorcycle, waving the permit gotten a week before, we rode ahead to the police line and convinced them we were a legal march and had no desire for a riot in Central Square. Miraculously, the police lines parted as the march approached, and we had made it to Harvard Square. The rest is history—the largest riot in the history of Cambridge, one that unfortunately resulted in many injuries and arrests, but one that also changed the fate of Bobby Seale. Before the end of the month, Kingman Brewster (president of Yale University, where protests were scheduled for May 1) offered his most famous opinion, one with far-reaching implications and effects: he was skeptical that a black revolutionary could get a fair trial in America.

Today, three decades later, ample grounds remain for such skepticism—as can personally be verified by Mumia Abu-Jamal, currently locked up on death row in Pennsylvania. As a seasoned member of the Black Panther Party in 1970, Abu-Jamal was one of the hosts and organizers of the RPCC. Unlike many 1960s activists, he continued to organize well into the 1980s, despite being continually targeted by the police. Convicted under highly dubious conditions in 1982 of killing a Philadelphia policeman. Abu-Jamal appealed for a new trial. The appeal was rejected by Albert Sabo, the same judge who had so arbitrarily presided over his trial. Sabo has sentenced more people to death (thirty-two—all but two of whom are racial minorities) than any other judge in the United States. From death row, Abu-Jamal has continued his work as an award-winning journalist and completed his master's degree. He has received so much support from around the world that all his mail cannot fit into the cell in which he lives. In chapter 3 we include a small portion of rich text he produced when he wrote his

dissertation, "A Life in the Party: An Historical and Retrospective Examination of Projections and Legacies of the Black Panther Party." Abu-Jamal's firsthand account of Panther meetings and his humorous recollection of the times provide an invaluable sense of what it meant to be a Panther. Responding to author Hugh Pearson's one-sided attacks on the Panthers, he relates the experiences of female party members to illustrate the vacuous character of Pearson's position.⁵ Using the examples of new Panther-style groups that have formed in the 1990s in Dallas, New York, and Los Angeles, Abu-Jamal traces a direct line from the original BPP to contemporary activism.

For decades, Kathleen Cleaver's remarkable life of courageous actions and intelligent choices has involved being on the defensive against government agencies. From the Free Huey campaign in 1967 to her life in exile with her former husband Eldridge Cleaver and her years working for the release of Geronimo ji Jaga, she has spoken countless times on behalf of imprisoned revolutionaries. She continues to intervene energetically on behalf of those victimized by police and judicial violence, as she relates in chapter 4, "Mobilizing for Mumia Abu-Jamal in Paris." Melding personal reminiscences and political history in a manner in which she is uniquely capable, Cleaver discusses the Mumia support movement in Paris, weaving into her narrative personal observations of contemporary dynamics among French activists.

The former defense minister of the Los Angeles Panthers, Geronimo ji Jaga, in chapter 5 presents his thoughts on the nature of the struggle. Imprisoned for twenty-seven years in California for a murder he did not commit, ji Jaga was offered parole if he would admit his involvement; he refused to submit and finally won a habeas petition that released him in 1997. The office of the Los Angeles district attorney has appealed the order releasing ji Jaga, and for his part ji Jaga has brought a civil action against the Los Angeles Police Department and the DA's office. Like Abu-Jamal, ji Jaga emphasizes the important roles played by female participants in the Panthers. Touching on a wide range of issues, ji Jaga argues strongly for the continuing importance of the BPP's demand for a UN plebiscite to determine the destiny of African Americans. True to Panther positions, he believes that "our enemy cannot be defined by race." For ji Jaga, "revolutionary love" should be the basis of the movement.

The hope and optimism of ji Jaga, Cleaver, and Abu-Jamal is a tribute to their humanity, which they sustained and enhanced despite the murderous repression meted out by the U.S. government. In an essay that gives for the first time a comprehensive overview of the brutality inflicted on the BPP by the FBI, Ward Churchill demonstrates in chapter 6 that the BPP was so massively assaulted that by the end of 1971, it was "effectively destroyed." With mammoth documentation, Churchill provides details of the assassination of Fred Hampton and the murder of twenty-seven other Panthers; the arbitrary arrest and persecution of hundreds of other BPP members; the FBI media campaign against the Party; the use of dozens of infiltrators; the neutralization of the Black Panther newspaper; the shutting down of Breakfast for Children programs; and the generation of negative publicity through circulation of rumors that Party leaders were anti-Semitic, embezzlers, or extortionists (depending on the audience). FBI counterintelligence programs undermined coalitions (as between the Panther and SNCC); exacerbated interorganizational tensions to the point of gunfire (as with the US organization); defamed and incapacitated key Panther supporters; coordinated military assaults on Panther headquarters around the country; and maliciously and falsely prosecuted leaders like Geronimo ji

⁵Hugh Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1994).

Jaga, Bobby Seale, the New York 21, the Los Angeles 13, and so on. By the end of 1969, some thirty Panthers were in jail facing the death penalty; another forty were looking at life imprisonment; fifty-five were up on charges punishable by thirty years or more; and over 150 others have been forced underground. To complete the destruction of the BPP, the FBI fomented an internal split that tore the organization apart. Churchill's article is essential reading if we are to learn from history how to counter and offset government repression.

If not for the carefully orchestrated disintegration of the leadership of the Panthers, who knows where the revolutionary impetus they led could have taken us? Although it occurred some thirty years ago, little has been written about the split in the Panthers. For too long, the Newton-led Oakland Panthers, who used intimidation tactics when the abject flunkysm of Newton's followers failed to silence criticism, were assumed to be the "real" Panthers. Their version of the split—that Eldridge Cleaver's wackiness abetted the mindless advocates of armed struggle—was largely accepted without question. Don Cox, former BPP Field Marshal, now living in exile in France, in chapter 7 sets out some of his own observations of the split based upon his firsthand knowledge of this tragic chapter in the movement. Cox recounts for us murder and mayhem, not as grist for right-wing propaganda but as an appeal for sane and humane treatment of each other—and as a way of understanding how he, too, has been left alone to deal with the historical consequences of being part of a revolutionary movement. Anyone who has participated in such movements knows how quickly and loudly established voices are raised to denounce us, and how heavily we are called upon to struggle with the agony of defeats, recriminations, betrayals, and acts of sabotage. In the glare of media spotlight and police surveillance, it is nearly impossible to find a space where free discussions of our failures can occur.

This book attempts to unlock some of the doors that have concealed an accurate comprehension of history, as well as to respond to malicious critics. None of us sees the Black Panther Party as error-free. We acknowledge the need for a broader discussion of many of the issues raised here. Patronizing outsiders, looking at the history of the Panthers as concerned radicals, often paint the picture of female involvement in the Party as one of subservient members seeking to gain equality. Based upon her own experiences and unique insights, our coeditor Kathleen Cleaver offers a different reading in chapter 8, "Women, Power, and Revolution." She reveals for us a glimpse of the power of women in the Black movement. From Gloria Richardson to Assata Shakur, we can see a generation of women whose leading role is difficult to conceal—unless one falls victim to the mass media's portrayal of male spokesmen as indicative of substantive power.

Like ji Jaga, Russell Shoats has served decades in prison as a survivor of the often-overlooked wave of repression that rolled back the revolutionary tide sweeping the country (and the world) in 1970. Today he finds himself encased within the same prison as Mumia Abu-Jamal, serving a life sentence for a murder of a policeman at which he was not even present. Shoats's essay "Black Fighting Formations: Their Strengths, Weaknesses, and Potentialities" (chapter 9) is remarkable for its reconstruction of details from the past as well as for Shoats's ability to show how even the Panther leadership in Oakland refused to acknowledge and take responsible leadership of the revolutionary upsurge. As a result of the sea change that so rapidly eviscerated the movement, Shoats—as well as hundreds of others like him—was left hanging out to dry as the revolutionary momentum was arrested, fractured, and finally collapsed.

John McCartney's incisive essay (chapter 11) on the impact of the BPP on the radical movement of the Bahamas provides an empirical case study that validates Clemons and Jones's general analysis of the global importance of the Panthers. McCartney was

himself involved in the Vanguard Party of the Bahamas. From his vantage point of participant and using his own keen analytical powers, he presents for us an example of how acting locally can be a global event.

Eldridge Cleaver sought refuge in Cuba in 1968, and Huey Newton spent years exiled there during the 1970s. In her well-researched analysis of the relationship between Cuba and the Black movement, Ruth Reitan furnishes us in chapter 12 with previously unrecounted details of the intricacies of the ebb and flows of Cuban hospitality and solidarity. From the outside, Cuba and the BPP are two sides of the same coin, but Reitan shows us how internal developments in the BPP and Cuban responses to changing international dynamics led to periods of more and less collaboration.

Anyone who remembers the Panthers and their weekly newspaper has images penned by Emory Douglas sketched somewhere in their cranial walls. We are pleased to present an analysis of Emory's art by Erika Doss (chapter 13). She is able to provide us with an understanding of the significance of art to the BPP as well as to demonstrate conclusively how much Emory's images were structured according to the precise beliefs of the Party.

Eternal Yippie Stew Albert graces our book with his Panther reminiscences from the San Francisco Bay Area (chapter 14). Identifying himself as the "official best white friend of the BPP," Albert pens fascinating accounts of his interactions with Eldridge, Huey, and Bobby. Framing the Panthers within the context of white radicals' own liberation movements, Albert draws the Peace and Freedom Party into the picture, and in so doing offers hilarious remembrances of inner movement antics as well as of bringing Huey to meet John Lennon and Yoko Ono in New York. Albert presents a very different side of Newton than the one generally seen.

As the BPP disintegrated, Newton became addicted to cocaine. Having long been vilified by both mainstream and movement writers. Newton's character was assassinated in Hugh Pearson's unbalanced and poorly researched book *Shadow of the Panther*. Understanding a man as complex and dynamic as Newton is no easy task, but Pearson glibly recasts Newton's bravery as thuggery and his genius as little more than enlightened criminality. In a thoughtful response to Pearson, Errol Henderson (chapter 15) patiently dissects his work and carefully notes the superficialities and inadequacies of his analysis. After taking Pearson to task for reducing Huey—and through him the entire BPP—to a caricature of reality, Henderson calls on us to understand better the character of Newton and the BPP in order to carry on the struggle.

In 1996, former Panther Lee Lew-Lee released a documentary about the destruction of the BPP entitled *All Power to the People*. Lew-Lee presents a great deal of previously undisclosed material on the use of infiltrators and the ultimate demise of the Party. His film grew out of his own experiences as a cameraman during the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, and after viewing it, Victor Wallis was inspired to assess the Panthers, as someone rediscovering them today (chapter 16).

Decades ago, local police departments and the FBI amassed huge files on the BPP, using them to fabricate charges against thousands of suspected Panthers and their supporters. While these materials are part of the public's repository of knowledge, accessing them is no easy task. Claudia Dahlerus and Christian Davenport in chapter 17 recount some of the firsthand difficulties they have encountered in doing empirical research on the BPP. Judging from the experiences of Dahlerus and Davenport, police willingness to provide access to information is sadly constrained by some of the same unjust and prejudicial attitudes that pervaded these same agencies years ago.

Although society today celebrates Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., dozens of activists from the movement remain unjustly imprisoned. In chapter 18,

“Remembering King’s Assassination,” written on January 17, 2000—when the holiday for King’s birthday was observed and also the anniversary of the date when Bunchy Carter and John Huggins were gunned down by the Stiner brothers (FBI informants in the US organization)—Kathleen Cleaver demands a “full-scale, impartial investigation of all federal and state counterintelligence operations.” Nothing less will do justice to those arbitrarily imprisoned, assassinated, and otherwise victimized by the forces of law and order. We call on our readers to heed her call (for which the Human Rights Research fund has been newly formed to implement).

In our concluding article, we include Scott Fleming’s synopsis of the cases of Albert Woodfox, Robert King Wilkerson, and Herman Wallace (chapter 19). Known as the Angola 3, Woodfox, Wilkerson, and Wallace founded a chapter of the Black Panther Party at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola in 1971. For their efforts, they have been punished with nearly twenty-seven years of continuous solitary confinement, convicted (and framed, the evidence suggests) of the 1972 killing of a prison guard. Building awareness of this case may be a small step in winning justice for the Angola 3 (and others like them), but we hope it—and this book—will become part of a renewed collective commitment to continue on the journey we all depend on for our freedom.

The previous publication of many of the articles in this book as a special issue of *New Political Science* gave Kathleen Cleaver and me a tremendous sense of accomplishment. Celebrating the appearance in print of long-suppressed voices, she remarked that she “hadn’t ever expected to see this material in print.” Over the past five years, it has been enormously edifying to work with her on this project. Her political acumen and patient ability to clarify even the most difficult issues are extraordinary gifts. For years I felt isolated when I contemplated many of the issues we discuss. As I have gotten to know many of our authors, new friendships and a renewed hope for the future have come into my life. Recent protests in Seattle against the World Trade Organization (at which I am happy to have been present) are one indication that history is shifting once again in the direction of a global upsurge against world structures of domination.

In its day, the BPP improvised and innovated, rapidly developing a new organization that inspired revolution globally. In the face of overwhelming force wielded by armed government agents, the Panthers struck back. A challenge of the next phase of struggles is to reveal those painfully learned lessons of the past to future activists who will attempt to transform existing social orders, neither unduly glorifying our accomplishments nor falsely deprecating them. History’s rapid pace and humanity’s density ensure that future insurgencies will experience wide fluctuations in popular support and activism. This book anticipates the future emergence of organizations with the temerity and vision of the BPP that will inspire and activate millions of people—and it is to their success that we dedicate it.

PART ONE

Revisiting the
Liberation Struggle

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1

Repression Breeds Resistance

The Black Liberation Army and the Radical Legacy of the Black Panther Party

Akinyele Omowale Umoja

The Black Panther Party (BPP) was one of the most significant radical movements in American history. As an organized political organization, the BPP existed from 1966 to 1982. Many activists and scholars argue that the BPP only existed as a revolutionary organization from 1966 until 1971, in the initial period of its existence. In these years the BPP emphasized armed resistance as a primary means of achieving social change. After 1971, historians of the BPP argue, the organization dropped its revolutionary, pro-armed resistance agenda to pursue reformist politics.¹ For example, Charles Hopkins's study "The Deradicalization of the Black Panther Party" argues that governmental repression was a central factor in transforming of the organization from radicalism to reformism: "The result of the interaction between the Panthers and the government from 1966 through 1973, was the transformation of the Black Panther Party (BPP) from a black radical organization to a deradicalized social protest group."² While governmental repression led to the ascendancy of a reformist agenda for one faction of the BPP, this was not the only organizational response. Some BPP members committed themselves to involvement in or support of clandestine military resistance, which accelerated the development of the armed movement called the Black Liberation Army (BLA).

Some accounts of the Black Liberation Army argue that "the BLA grew out of the B.P.P. and its original founders were members of the Party."³ The BLA is often presented as a result of the repression of the BPP and the split within the Panthers.⁴ Other participants in the Black revolutionary movement give a different perspective to the BLA and its relationship to the Panthers. For example, former political prisoner and Black revolutionary Geronimo ji Jaga suggests that the BLA as a movement concept pre-dated and was broader than the BPP. Ji Jaga's perspective is that several Black revolutionary organizations contributed to the ranks of the Black underground collectively known as the Black Liberation Army.⁵ Consistent with the view of ji Jaga, BPP and BLA member

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Assata Shakur asserts in her autobiography that “the Black Liberation Army was not a centralized, organized group with a common leadership and chain of command. Instead there were various organizations and collectives working together out of various cities, and in some larger cities there were often several groups working independently of each other.”⁶ Given the character of the BLA as a movement of autonomous clandestine units, one can understand the different interpretations of its origins and composition. While acknowledging the positions of J. J. Jaga and Shakur, this paper argues that the intense repression of the BPP did replenish the ranks of the Black Liberation Army. Since the BPP was the largest revolutionary nationalist organization of the Black liberation movement of the 1960s and ’70s, its membership contributed greatly to the BLA. Panther participation in the BLA represented a continuation of the radical legacy of the BPP and was a response to the counterinsurgency strategy to destroy the Party and the Black liberation movement.

The role of the underground and the armed struggle was a critical issue in the split that occurred within the BPP in 1971. In the split, BPP chapters in Los Angeles and New York, the International Section of the Party, and other members were expelled by the national hierarchy led by Huey P. Newton. These factions of the BPP all supported armed resistance and viewed themselves, not the national hierarchy, as the sustainers of the revolutionary legacy of the BPP.

This study focuses on the influence of BPP members and supporters on the revolutionary armed movement, the Black Liberation Army. This aspect of the legacy of the BPP has not been emphasized in previous scholarly studies, an omission that reflects the willingness of scholars and popular accounts of the BPP to narrow its existence to the national leadership in Oakland. In the introduction to his recently published book *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, Charles E. Jones argues that the Oakland-based BPP existed sixteen years (1966–1982).⁷ This study asserts that the activity of the radical faction of the BPP, in the guise of the BLA, lasted just as long as that of the Oakland-based Panthers, perhaps even longer, since it has current manifestations.

Scholarly research on the BLA is a challenging endeavor. Most books that focus on this organization have been journalistic or biographical.⁸ The journalistic texts have primarily relied on police or prosecution records. American newspapers have also reported on BLA activities based upon information offered to the media to support investigations and prosecutions of Black radicals.⁹ The journalistic literature on the BLA is usually written from a perspective that is uncritical of American law enforcement and its counterinsurgency tactics. Since the BLA is a radical clandestine movement, its activities by their very nature are illegal, making it difficult for scholars to interview its members. Facts are often omitted from biographies and BLA statements to protect incarcerated or indicted members of the movement. The nature of the organization also does not provide the researcher with organizational archives. This study will utilize public documents of the BLA and other movement literature and statements and autobiographies from incarcerated BLA members, as well as from former BLA militants and supporters, as a balance to police and prosecutor-oriented literature and records.

The Black Underground and the Black Freedom Movement

A clandestine insurgent military force has existed in different periods of the Black freedom struggle in North America. The insurrections and attempted uprisings of enslaved Africans utilized secret, conspiratorial organizations. Insurgent Africans certainly could

have brought with them a tradition of secret societies (e.g., Egungun, Oro, and Ogboni among the Yoruba peoples, Zangbeto in Dahomey, Poro in Sierra Leone). Conspiratorial networks were established to connect African fugitive communities with those on the plantation with the objective of creating a general uprising. Northern Blacks also created secret societies to aid the escape of fugitives and to plan for general insurrection.

In 1919, the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB) emerged as a radical Black secret society in American urban centers. The ABB advocated that Black people “organize in trade unions, build cooperatively owned businesses, and create paramilitary self-defense units.”¹⁰ The ABB dissolved as an organization in the late 1920s as its members decided to become the Black cadre of the American Communist Party.

In the 1950s and '60s, in several southern towns and rural locations, armed clandestine networks protected civil rights activists and activities, retaliated in response to acts of white supremacist violence, and served as an accountability force within the Black community during economic boycotts of white-owned business districts.¹¹ The secretive, paramilitary Deacons for Defense and Justice, considered by many to be the armed wing of the southern civil rights movement from 1965 through 1969, never identified the majority of its membership or revealed the size of its organization. Deacons selectively recruited, and its members understood that revealing organizational secrets could result in death.¹² In 1969 activists in the southern movement formed a clandestine paramilitary organization to retaliate against white supremacists who committed heinous acts of violence on southern Blacks.

The early 1960s saw the emergence of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) as a radical clandestine organization within the Black liberation movement. RAM was initiated in 1962 by northern Black radicals who defined themselves as “revolutionary Black nationalists” seeking to organize an armed struggle to win national liberation for the “colonized Black nation” in the United States.¹³ In 1963, due to political repression, the RAM cadre decided to “go underground.” In 1964 RAM members involved in Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) projects in the Mississippi Delta worked with SNCC field staff to develop armed self-defense units to defend the project. In the spring of 1964 RAM chairman Robert Williams, a political exile in Cuba, published an article titled “The USA: The Potential for a Minority Revolt.” Williams stated that in order to be free, Black people “must prepare to wage an urban guerrilla war.”¹⁴ During the fall of the same year, RAM organizers presented a twelve-point program to Black youth at the National Afro-American Student Conference in Nashville, Tennessee, including “development of Liberation Army (Guerrilla Youth Force).”¹⁵ The RAM cadre were active in urban guerrilla warfare during the urban uprisings occurring from 1965 through 1968.¹⁶ In his work *Black Activism*, Black political scientist Robert Brisbane stated that RAM’s objective was “to build a black liberation army consisting of local and regional groups held together under a tight chain of command.”¹⁷ In 1967 RAM began to organize Black urban youth into a paramilitary force called the Black Guards. A RAM document, titled “On Organization of Ghetto Youth” projected developing the Black Liberation Army: “In the early stages of the mobilization of Black ghetto youth we must prepare for the ultimate stage, a protracted war of national liberation; therefore the type of organization that must be established is a paramilitary organization.”¹⁸ This document referred to the paramilitary organization as the Black Liberation Army or BLA.¹⁹ Due to intensive federal and state counterinsurgency campaigns, in 1968 RAM decided to disband the organization and function under other names, including the Black Liberation Party, Afrikan Peoples Party, and the House of Umoja.

The above-mentioned efforts preceded the 1971 split within the Black Panther Party and the subsequent identification of the BLA by state and federal police. While often omitted from the historiography of the Black freedom movement, the concept of armed

struggle and a Black underground has a long history and is a legacy that would influence the early development of the Black Panther Party.

The Black Panther Party and the Black Underground

The question of the underground was a principal issue for the Black Panther Party from its inception. Prior to founding the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense with Huey Newton, Bobby Seale was a member of the Revolutionary Action Movement, but Seale did not share RAM's insistence on the revolutionary vanguard being clandestine. RAM preferred primarily to interact with the public through mass front organizations; RAM structure, membership, meetings, and other activities were secret.

While Seale and Newton disagreed with RAM's clandestine posture, the BPP organized an underground from its earliest days. By developing an underground wing, the BPP leadership prepared for the possibility that its political activities would not be allowed to function in the public arena. In this context, the BPP envisioned a clandestine guerrilla force that would serve as the vanguard of the revolution. In 1968 Newton stated, "When the people learn that it is no longer advantageous for them to resist by going into the streets in large numbers, and when they see the advantage in the activities of the guerrilla warfare method, they will quickly follow this example. . . . When the vanguard group destroys the machinery of the oppressor by dealing with him in small groups of three and four, and then escapes the might of the oppressor, the masses will be overjoyed and will adhere to this correct strategy."²⁰

The Panther underground was not openly referred to or publicly acknowledged; it was decentralized, with autonomous cells in different cities that were referred to by different names at different times. Some large cities contained several autonomous units. These underground units were all part of a movement concept called the Black Liberation Army (BLA). The BLA was broader than the BPP, representing the underground military forces of the revolutionary nationalist Black movement.²¹ By 1968 the official rules of the BPP stated "No party member can join any other army force other than the Black Liberation Army."²² Besides serving as an urban guerrilla force, the Panther underground included an underground railroad to conceal comrades being sought by federal and state police. Clandestine medical units were also developed to provide care to BLA soldiers or Panther cadre wounded in combat.²³

The Southern California chapter of the BPP had an underground almost from its inception. Former Los Angeles gang leader Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter virtually brought a military force into the BPP when he joined in 1967. Carter was the leader of the Renegades, the hard core of the Slausons. In the early 1960s, the 5,000-strong Slausons were the largest street force in Los Angeles. The same social forces (the desegregation struggle in the South, African independence, other anticolonial struggles, and so on) that were politicizing tens of thousands in their generation began to radicalize members of the Slausons, including Carter. Many of the Slausons and other street force organizations engaged in guerrilla attacks on police and national guard during the Watts uprising of 1965. While incarcerated in the 1960s, Carter joined the Nation of Islam and was deeply influenced by former prisoner turned revolutionary Malcolm X. In Soledad State Prison in California, Carter met the radical intellectual inmate Eldridge Cleaver, who taught Soledad's African-American history and culture class. His associations and the changing political and cultural climate motivated Carter to adopt a revolutionary nationalist ideology. In Soledad, Cleaver and Carter made plans to form a revolutionary nationalist organization, including an underground military wing. Upon leaving prison, Bunchy Carter

worked to transform loyal members of his street organizations, ex-inmates, and other Los Angeles street gangs from the gangster mentality to revolutionary consciousness. In late 1967, when Carter joined the BPP, he was also able to contribute an autonomous collective of radicalized street forces organized after leaving incarceration.²⁴

In his role as southern California minister of defense, Carter made it his responsibility to organize an underground Panther cadre. Carter's most trusted comrades formed the southern California Panther underground, often referred to as the "Wolves." The true identities and activities of the Wolves were not revealed to aboveground rank-and-file Panthers. Carter's Wolves carried out secret operations to support the work of the BPP in Los Angeles.²⁵

Probably the most significant recruit Bunchy Carter made to the BPP underground was Geronimo ji Jaga (then known as Geronimo Pratt). Ji Jaga, an ex-U.S. military special forces commando and Vietnam War veteran, was sent to Los Angeles to work with Bunchy Carter by a relative who had become acquainted with Carter's effort to build a Black freedom organization in Los Angeles. While he did not become an official BPP member, ji Jaga's military skills became a valuable asset in assisting Carter to develop the L.A. BPP underground. After Carter was murdered in an FBI-provoked clash between the BPP and the U.S. organization on the campus of UCLA in 1969, ji Jaga assumed Carter's position as southern California minister of defense. With national minister of defense Huey Newton incarcerated at this time, the national responsibility of organizing the military wing of the BPP also fell upon the shoulders of ji Jaga. Ji Jaga saw it as his responsibility to utilize his military skills to develop the Panther underground and to build a cooperative relationship with other clandestine military forces in the Black liberation movement under the banner of the Black Liberation Army.²⁶

After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, the BPP grew rapidly, transforming itself from a California-based organization to a national movement with chapters in most American urban centers with a significant number of Black people. By 1969 the BPP had "approximately five thousand members in forty chapters."²⁷ In his role as acting minister of defense, ji Jaga helped to develop new chapters of the organization in places like Atlanta, Dallas, New Orleans, Memphis, and Winston Salem, North Carolina, among others. Along with aboveground units of the organization, ji Jaga played a significant role in developing the underground apparatus of the BPP nationally. Besides initiating new chapters, he visited existing party chapters to offer his expertise in establishing their clandestine cadre.²⁸

One of the most significant chapters of the BPP to join after the rapid expansion of the BPP in 1968 was in New York City. As in Los Angeles, a clandestine force was established in the New York BPP virtually from its inception. By 1969 a New York police officer reported at federal congressional hearings that "members of the Black Panthers are not secret, with the exception of those who have been designated as 'underground.' This group are secret revolutionaries, and their identities are kept secret."²⁹

One influence on the development of the Panther underground in New York was the Revolutionary Action Movement. After the assassination of Malcolm X, RAM played a significant role in promoting a revolutionary nationalist program in New York City. New York Panthers had a cooperative relationship with RAM, in contrast to the competitive and even antagonistic relations between RAM and Newton and Seale's BPP in northern California. Some New York City BPP recruits were affiliated with RAM or RAM front organizations prior to becoming Panthers, and many in the New York BPP cadre were influenced by RAM and Republic of New Afrika leader Herman Ferguson. Ferguson, a New York City educator, served as an inspirational leader and mentor to several New York City youth who eventually joined the BPP and became leaders in the New York

chapter. RAM's perspectives on guerrilla warfare and underground organization may have influenced the development of a clandestine wing of the New York BPP.

On September 8, 1968, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover designated the BPP as "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country."³⁰ Hoover's pronouncement signaled an intensified counterinsurgency campaign to destroy the BPP. In his study on police repression, Frank Donner classified 1969 as the "year of the Panther." That year alone, police conducted over thirteen raids on BPP offices across the United States.³¹ Due to the counterinsurgency campaign waged by the U.S. government on the BPP, Donner states that by the end of 1969, "it was estimated 30 Panthers were facing capital punishment, 40 faced life in prison, 55 faced terms up to thirty years, and another 155 were in jail or being sought."³² In December of 1969 predawn police raids on the BPP in Los Angeles and in Chicago (in which Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were murdered) are distinguished in terms of their impact on the national Black liberation movement.

The increased repression enhanced the importance of ji Jaga in the BPP. First, the increased repression made underground organization more necessary. Panthers who faced charges needed refuge in the clandestine network. Those wounded in battles with police often needed care from the underground medical cadre. Geronimo's status as a nationally known BPP leader was also well established after the vigilant defense of the primary office of BPP in Los Angeles. The Los Angeles BPP office, mainly staffed by teenagers, was able to survive a five-hour predawn police attack that included the use of SWAT forces and the detonation of a bomb on the Los Angeles Panther headquarters. While ji Jaga was not present during the raid, the preparations and militarily training provided by him were decisive to the survival of his comrades.³³ After the defense of the Los Angeles Panther headquarters, the *Black Panther* hailed ji Jaga as the "essence of a Panther."³⁴

Upon his release from prison in 1970, Huey Newton inherited a national military force that had been primarily developed during his imprisonment. The military development of the BPP paralleled the tremendous increase in the size of the membership, the transition from a local organization to a national movement, and the recent national and international status of the BPP since the arrest and incarceration of Newton in October of 1967. While the BPP always envisioned an underground military wing to complement its underground activities, Newton was uncomfortable with the military development of the BPP. The rapidly expanded clandestine military wing of the BPP had been primarily organized by ji Jaga. While ji Jaga was trusted by other BPP leaders and rank-and-file cadres throughout North America, Newton became very insecure about his presence. Newton did not trust and did not include in his circle key Panther members he did not know prior to his incarceration in 1967.³⁵ In due time, government operatives and ambitious BPP members convinced Newton that ji Jaga was a threat to his leadership and the party. While the overwhelming repression of the BPP contributed to Newton's decision to move away from his original positions on armed struggle, his fear of ji Jaga and the developing BPP military apparatus must also be taken into consideration. Significantly, the cleavage between Newton and the BPP military played a central role in what has come to be known as the split in the Black Panther Party.³⁶

The Panther Split and the Black Liberation Army

The question of armed struggle and the role of the underground were critical in the BPP split of 1971. It is an acknowledged fact that the divide-and-conquer tactics of the FBI were central to the division within the leadership and rank and file of the Party. The FBI and other government counterinsurgency forces played on internal tensions and

developing ideological differences to encourage the BPP split. The influence of counterinsurgency efforts must be taken into account when examining the ideological tensions in the BPP. Operatives were instructed to manipulate ideological differences and exploit insecurities within the organization. These counterinsurgency efforts created an environment that made resolving internal contradictions within the BPP virtually impossible.

The major ideological conflict was over the question of armed struggle. Newton and Party Chief of Staff David Hilliard were perceived by radical forces in the Party as moving away from their original support for the development of an armed clandestine vanguard at the very moment when repression was forcing members of the Party underground. As early as 1969, the national leadership had initiated a policy to expel those members involved in “unauthorized” military and clandestine activity.³⁷ Simultaneously, the increased political repression of the Black liberation movement, and particularly the BPP, convinced many it was time to develop the underground vanguard. In the face of intense counterinsurgency campaign and court cases, many Panthers concluded it was better to struggle in clandestinity than spend years incarcerated. Panthers’ lack of trust in receiving justice in American courts was well founded. In 1970, even Yale University president Kingman Brewster publicly questioned “the ability of Black revolutionaries to achieve a fair trial anywhere in the United States.”³⁸ Due to the new policy of the BPP national hierarchy against clandestine activity, Panthers going underground to avoid state repression were placed in a precarious position.

The BPP split was the result of a series of “purges” of collectives and groups within the BPP, culminating with the expulsion of leading Central Committee members by Huey Newton. The turning point was the expulsion of Geronimo ji Jaga. In August of 1970, ji Jaga had gone underground to further develop the BLA. Based upon his assessment of the counterinsurgency assault on the Black liberation movement, ji Jaga concluded that the “establishment of guerrilla bases” was “an integral necessary part of the overall freedom movement.” His strategy was to strengthen the revolutionary nationalist clandestine network in urban and rural areas throughout the United States, particularly in the historic Black belt in the Southeast.³⁹ Ji Jaga and his comrades Will Stanford, Will “Crutch” Holiday, and George Lloyd were arrested in Dallas, Texas on December 8, 1970. At another location in Dallas later the same day, BPP member Melvin “Cotton” Smith (later identified as a police informant) was also arrested. Smith had been sent to Dallas by Huey Newton and Elaine Brown to meet with ji Jaga. After the arrests, Newton was encouraged by members of his inner circle who were opposed to ji Jaga’s influence and by secret operatives of governmental counterinsurgency campaigns to expel ji Jaga. In January of 1971 Newton publicly denounced ji Jaga, his wife Nsondi ji Jaga (Sandra Pratt), and their comrades and codefendants Stanford, Holiday, and Lloyd for exhibiting “counterrevolutionary behavior.” A directive carrying Newton’s name but written by Brown (at that time part of Newton’s inner circle) stated, “Any Party member who attempts to aid them or communicate with them in any form or manner shall help to undermine and destroy the Black Panther Party.” Newton’s directive also implied ji Jaga was a government operative loyal to the CIA. Referring to ji Jaga’s involvement in the U.S. Army’s Special Forces prior to joining the Panthers, the Oakland BPP’s leader concluded, “He is as dedicated to that Pig Agency as he was in Vietnam.”⁴⁰ Needless to say, this attack caused major division and confusion in the BPP.

During the weeks following the suspension of ji Jaga, tensions increased between the New York chapter of the BPP and Newton and his followers, in part because of an intensive counterinsurgency campaign by the FBI. The tensions became public after an open letter from incarcerated leaders and members of the New York chapter (aka the Panther 21) to the Weather Underground, a white American left clandestine organization. The

“Weathermen” had engaged in bombing of political targets primarily concerning the Vietnam War and had officially recognized the BPP as the vanguard of the revolution in North America. The Panther 21 letter proclaimed the Weathermen as part of the vanguard of the revolutionary movement inside the United States while criticizing the national leadership of the BPP. In their letter of support to the Weather Underground, the Panther 21 stated, “We feel an unrighteous act has been done to you by the self proclaimed ‘vanguard’ parties by their obvious neglect in not openly supporting you. . . . But they have ignored us also. . . . these ‘omnipotent’ parties are throwing seeds of confusion, escapism, and have lost much of their momentum by bad tactics.”⁴¹ The Panther 21 sentiments reflected the views of many members who believed it was necessary to respond to state repression by strengthening the armed clandestine capacity of the BPP, not abandoning it. The incarcerated New York Panthers called for an underground guerrilla offensive because “racism, colonialism, sexism and all other pig ‘isms’ . . . can only be ended by revolution. . . . ARMED STRUGGLE.”⁴² They believed the Weather Underground was going in the direction that the BPP should take. For their open letter, the Panther 21 were expelled by the national leadership.⁴³ Remaining Panthers struggled to maintain peace in the BPP and negotiate between the national leadership in Oakland and the New York 21. Recognizing the confusion created by the expulsions of ji Jaga and the New York 21, the FBI determined to “more fully exploit” the ideological and factional differences in the BPP. On January 28, 1971, FBI offices in Boston, New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles received the following message from headquarters: “The present chaotic situation within the BPP must be exploited and receipts must maintain a high level of counter-intelligence activity. You should each give this matter high priority attention and immediately furnish the Bureau recommendations . . . designated to further aggravate the dissension within BPP leadership.”⁴⁴ It is important to note that the inability of BPP leadership to transcend their ideological differences was magnified through the divide-and-conquer tactics of a counterinsurgency campaign that manipulated the insecurities of key Panther leaders.

On February 13, 1971, New York Panthers Michael Tabor and Dhoruba Bin Wahad (aka Richard Moore) and Newton’s personal secretary Connie Matthews were expelled after they went underground. Later that month, Panthers from northeastern chapters called a press conference in Harlem calling for the expulsion of Newton and Hilliard. The East Coast Panthers recognized BPP national leaders Eldridge Cleaver, Kathleen Cleaver, Donald Cox, and Bobby Seale as the legitimate national leadership of the BPP. At the time, the Cleavers and Cox were political exiles in Algeria, and Seale was incarcerated in Connecticut. New York would become the headquarters for this faction of the BPP.⁴⁵ After the split, the East Coast Black Panther Party became the aboveground apparatus of BPP members who joined the BLA. From their New York headquarters the East Coast BPP put out their newspaper *Right On!*, which became a public organ of the armed movement. Through the *Right On!* newspaper, instructions on guerrilla warfare, news about airline hijackings and other military actions were disseminated.

After the expulsions of ji Jaga and key members of the Los Angeles and New York Panthers, exiled BPP members in Algeria entered the fray. One critical objective of the U.S. government’s counterinsurgency program was to create a split between Newton and Eldridge Cleaver, head of the International Section of the BPP.⁴⁶ The members of the International Section were deeply concerned about the expulsions of ji Jaga and the Panthers in Los Angeles and New York, believing these actions represented the ascendancy of authoritarian rule by Newton and Hilliard. Particularly after the expulsion of ji Jaga, Cleaver appealed to Newton and Hilliard from Algiers to no avail. The International Section was also concerned with the lack of support for BPP members and supporters engaged in acts of armed resistance.⁴⁷ On February 26, 1971, Newton arranged a tele-

phone conversation with Cleaver on a San Francisco television show, intending to demonstrate the unity of the two most visible BPP leaders, in spite of the expulsions of Los Angeles and New York Panthers. At the end of the televised conversation, Cleaver called for the reinstatement of the expelled Panthers in New York and Los Angeles and the resignation of BPP Chief of Staff David Hilliard. After the television program, Newton called the BPP international office in Algiers and expelled the entire International Section. Supporting the sentiment of expelled Panthers in Los Angeles and New York, the International Section saw the radical elements of the organization as the “true” Black Panther Party, and criticized Hilliard and Newton because they had “consciously set about to destroy the underground.” Given the repression of the BPP and the Black liberation movement, the exiled Panthers centered in Algeria believed it was “necessary . . . to advance the armed struggle. . . . We need a people’s army and the Black Panther vanguard will bring that about.”⁴⁸ The International Section and the BPP factions centered in New York and Los Angeles all aligned around a more radical pro-armed struggle position than did Newton and the Oakland-based BPP. The radical BPP no longer recognized Newton and the Oakland-based Panthers as a revolutionary organization but considered it an opportunist right-wing clique, the “Peralta street gang” (after the street where the Newton-led BPP was located in Oakland).⁴⁹

Ignoring his previous position, Newton would blame the influence of Cleaver for the development of pro-armed struggle currents in the BPP. Newton argued that Cleaver’s influence overemphasized the “gun” and moved the BPP into military action without the support of the community.⁵⁰ As Newton’s Oakland-based leadership moved in a more reformist direction, some forces supporting the development of an underground military presence maintained loyalty to the Oakland-based BPP. Within the California prison system, BPP Field Marshal George Jackson attempted to transform incarcerated Black men into revolutionary soldiers. Jackson’s published prison letters reveal his desire to develop a clandestine army to defend and complement the activity of the aboveground Black Panther Party under Newton’s leadership. The murder of Jackson on August 21, 1971, and the disruption of his recruits by government forces would eliminate this potential clandestine army for the BPP.⁵¹

While they did not engage in revolutionary violence, Newton and his cohorts did see the need for a military group. In 1972 the Oakland-based BPP created a security force (aka “the squad”) to protect its leadership. In time Newton would use the security force as his personal “goon squad” to maintain internal discipline and to pressure local enterprises to contribute to the BPP. Newton envisioned controlling legal and illegal activity in Oakland. While the BPP became involved in local electoral campaigns, the military elements loyal to Newton struggled for control of drugs and prostitution in Oakland. Increasingly, Newton’s squad would be used for intimidation and criminal activity.⁵²

In response to the development of the split within the BPP, U.S. government counterinsurgency operatives employed a carrot-and-stick strategy in dealing with both factions of the BPP. As the Oakland-based BPP moved in a more reformist direction, the harassment, government-sponsored military raids, and political internment subsided. Within four years the Oakland-based BPP, then under the leadership of Elaine Brown, would receive federal and foundation funding. In 1976 Brown served as a delegate to the National Democratic Convention.⁵³ Panther members and supporters associated with the radical BPP factions, however, found themselves under greater surveillance and harassment by federal and local police. As a result, the aboveground radical BPP factions were generally reduced to being defense committees for captured BLA comrades or as a support and propaganda mechanism for the underground. By 1975, within four years of the split, the radical factions had no visible aboveground presence.

Repression of the East Coast Panthers and the Black Panther Party

The BLA saw its purpose as to “defend Black people, to fight for Black people, and to organize Black people militarily, so they can defend themselves through a people’s army and people’s war.”⁵⁴ Within the context of the Black community, the BLA waged a campaign to eliminate and sanction internal enemies, including thieves and drug peddlers.⁵⁵ In New York, the BLA initiated a campaign called “Deal with the Dealer” to make it “difficult” and “unhealthy” for drug peddlers to traffic in Black communities. BLA units would identify the “hangouts” of prominent drug merchants and drug-processing facilities and raid them. In some cases, drug dealers were physically attacked and even killed. Both Assata Shakur and H. Rap Brown (aka Jamil Al-Amin) were involved in trials related to Black underground attacks on drug activity in the Black community.⁵⁶

BLA members also waged a “defensive/offensive” campaign against police. Between 1971 and 1973, nearly 1,000 Black people were killed by American police.⁵⁷ Of particular concern to the BLA were the murders of Black teenagers and children at the hands of police officers. These killings included sixteen-year-old Rita Lloyd in New Jersey as well as eleven-year-old Rickie Bolden and ten-year-old Clifford Glover in New York City. BLA members saw themselves coming to the defense of an oppressed and colonized people that were victims of a genocidal war. American police were seen as the occupation army of the colonized Black nation and the primary agents of Black genocide. So the BLA believed it had to “defend” Black people and the Black liberation movement in an offensive manner by using retaliatory violence against the agents of genocide in the Black community. In the two years after the BPP split, the U.S. government attributed the deaths of twenty police officers to the Black Liberation Army.⁵⁸

In 1971 the BLA response to police repression and violence was bold and intense. On May 19, 1971 (the forty-sixth birthday of Malcolm X), the BLA claimed responsibility for the shooting of two New York police guarding the home of Frank Hogan, the New York district attorney in charge of prosecuting the New York Panther 21.⁵⁹ Two days later, two New York police officers were killed in an ambush by BLA members. BLA activity was not confined to New York. In August 1971 BLA soldiers carried out several actions in San Francisco, including an attack on two San Francisco police stations and one police car that resulted in the death of one police officer and the wounding of several others. These actions and others were in retaliation for the shooting death of incarcerated Black revolutionary and BPP Field Marshal George Jackson on August 21, 1971, and the FBI and Mississippi police raid on the headquarters of the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika on August 18, 1971.⁶⁰ On November 3, 1971, police also suspected the BLA of shooting a police officer in Atlanta, Georgia. On December 21 of the same year, police accused BLA combatants of participation in a grenade attack on a police car in Atlanta, resulting in injuries to two police officers.⁶¹

In response to these and other actions claimed by the Black Liberation Army, the FBI initiated new counterinsurgency campaigns. One campaign in particular was “NEWKILL,” organized to investigate New York police killings for which the BLA claimed responsibility or were suspected. NEWKILL would signal greater repression of East Coast Panthers and their associates, allies, and supporters. In an FBI memorandum concerning NEWKILL, J. Edgar Hoover stated, “The Newkill cases and others terrorist acts have demonstrated that in many instances those involved in these acts are individuals who cannot be identified as members of an extremist group. . . . They are frequently supporters, community workers, or people who hang around the headquarters of the

extremist group or associate with members of the group.”⁶² As part of its campaign against the BLA, the FBI’s domestic intelligence division (aka Division Five) ordered its field officers to detain East Coast Panthers and other Black revolutionaries and to document the identities of “supporters and affiliates of these groups with your file numbers on each. . . . If you have no file, open files.”⁶³ The selected targeting of East Coast Panthers and affiliated radical organizations and supporters forced even more Black revolutionaries underground.

The FBI and local police also initiated a national search-and-destroy mission for suspected BLA members, collaborating in stakeouts that were the products of intensive political repression and counterintelligence campaigns like NEWKILL. On May 3, 1973, BLA members Zayd Shakur, Sundiata Acoli (Clark Squire), and Assata Shakur (Joanne Chesimard) were stopped by New Jersey police on the New Jersey Turnpike. A shootout ensued, and when the smoke cleared, one of the police officers and Zayd Shakur were dead, and Assata Shakur was severely wounded. After a “massive manhunt,” Acoli was captured days later in New Brunswick, New Jersey.⁶⁴ Police hailed the capture of Assata Shakur, calling her the “black Joan of Arc” and the “high priestess” and “the soul” of the “cop-hating BLA.” The FBI and the New York and New Jersey police attempted to tie Assata to every suspected action of the BLA involving a woman.⁶⁵ Shakur and her legal defense were able to win acquittals on all charges for incidents prior to the shootout on the New Jersey Turnpike. Shakur and Acoli were both convicted by all-white juries (in separate trials) for the murder of the New Jersey state trooper and of Zayd Shakur, and sentenced by New Jersey judges to life plus thirty years. No evidence was ever presented to confirm that Assata ever fired or handled a weapon during the 1973 shootout. Indeed, evidence was presented proving she was shot twice in the back while her hands were up in the air in a position of surrender.⁶⁶

On November 14, 1973, BLA member Twyman Meyers was ambushed by a joint force of FBI agents and New York police in the Bronx. As Meyers was leaving a Bronx apartment, he was surrounded by dozens of police. Meyers responded with gunfire, and a firefight ensued between the twenty-three-year-old Black revolutionary and the New York police and FBI. According to witnesses, Meyers ran out of ammunition and was then killed by police.⁶⁷ With the death of Meyers, New York Police Commissioner Donald Cawley announced that the campaign of the FBI and local police had “broken the back” of the Black Liberation Army. Between 1971 and 1973, police claimed responsibility for the deaths of seven suspected BLA members and the capture of eighteen others believed to be “key figures in the movement.”⁶⁸

Ideology and Consolidation

In the face of the capture and murder of its comrades, the BLA had to reevaluate its position. A BLA communiqué issued in 1975 details the deaths and capture of BLA combatants from 1971 to 1975.

With the deaths of Woody and Kimu we launched assaults against the police that set them on edge; their counter-attack saw us at the end of 1973 with four dead, over twenty comrades imprisoned in New York alone. In New Orleans, Los Angeles, and Georgia, B.L.A. members were taken prisoner by Federal agents working with local police to crush the B.L.A. 1974 found the guns of the B.L.A. quiet until April, when with so many comrades imprisoned we assaulted the Tombs in an effort to liberate some comrades; the attempt was unsuccessful; and two weeks later found three more comrades captured in

Connecticut. While our ranks outside were being diminished, our ranks inside started to grow. Within the prisons themselves comrades launched numerous assaults and attempt escapes on a regular basis. Before 74 was over, another comrade was shot and captured, victim of an informant. Now in the third month of 1975 we have one dead, two captured in Virginia, and another escape attempt in New York.⁶⁹

The above quote was part of an assessment done in 1975 by captured BLA militants, titled "Looking Back," in which the BLA reviewed its successes and defeats. Part of their assessment was that "we [the BLA] lacked a strong ideological base and political base." In spite of its losses, BLA members decided to assert themselves as a political force. In the same year, incarcerated BLA members and some of their supporters on the streets attempted to consolidate the ranks of the movement under a central command, the BLA Coordinating Committee (BLA-CC). "Get Organized and Consolidate to Liberate" was among the primary slogans of the BLA-CC, which published and distributed the political document "A Message to the Black Movement" to win support for the concept of armed struggle and expand its political base.⁷⁰ The BLA-CC also began to circulate a newsletter within the penitentiaries and movement circles to create dialogue and ideological unity within the BLA.⁷¹

Some BLA members began to unite with the political objective of the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika (PGRNA). (The RNA was a movement initiated by 500 Black nationalists at the Black Government Conference in Detroit in March 1968. The participants in this conference declared their independence from the U.S. government and called for a Black nation-state to be formed in the southern states of Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. This new nation state would be called New Afrika.)⁷² The New York branch of the PGRNA and the radical New York chapter of the BPP developed a close working relationship that included selling each other's newspapers and jointly organizing forums and rallies, particularly around the issue of political prisoners.⁷³ Some New York Panthers began to identify themselves as citizens of the Republic of New Afrika and pledged their loyalty to the PGRNA. Captured Black Liberation Army members also began to support the New Afrikan independence movement. In January 1975, two captured BLA members declared they were citizens of the RNA and that American courts had no jurisdiction over them. Their positions and the statements of others represented a clear ideological trend developing within the ranks of BLA fighters.⁷⁴

The adoption of a nationalist perspective by BPP members who joined the BLA should not come as a surprise. Besides the role of the underground and armed struggle, another underlying ideological issue in the BPP split was the issue of nationalism. At its inception, the BPP described its ideology as revolutionary nationalism. The BPP saw people of African descent in the United States as a colonized nation. In 1968, the BPP demanded a United Nations supervised plebiscite to determine the political destiny of the colonized Black nation. One cause of tension between the New York BPP chapter and the national leadership based in Oakland was the issue of nationalism. As noted earlier, the Oakland-based leadership had a history of conflict with nationalist organizations, like RAM, while the New York BPP enjoyed cooperative working relationships with Black nationalists. After leaving prison in 1970, Newton began to distance himself from the plebiscite demand. In his philosophy of intercommunalism, articulated in early 1971, Newton argued that nations and struggles for national self-determination were no longer relevant.⁷⁵ Many Panthers in New York disagreed with Newton's ideological shift away from Black nationalism.⁷⁶ New York Panther Assata Shakur commented, "Politically, I was not at all happy with the direction of the Party. Huey went on a nationwide tour advo-

cating his new theory of intercommunalism. The essence of his theory was that imperialism had reached a degree that sovereign borders were no longer recognized and the oppressed nations no longer existed, only oppressed communities. The only problem was that somebody forgot to tell oppressed communities that they were no longer nations. Even worse, almost no one understood Huey's long speeches on intercommunalism."⁷⁷ After the split, New York Panthers and Panthers in the BLA maintained their radical nationalist viewpoints. For many BPP and BLA members, support for the objective of an independent Republic of New Afrika was a logical conclusion.

The BLA Is Not Dead: The Liberation of Assata

On November 2, 1979, members of the BLA conducted an armed action at Clinton Correctional Institution for Women in New Jersey, resulting in the escape of Assata Shakur. Prison authorities described the action as "well planned and arranged."⁷⁸ Three days later on Black Solidarity Day in New York, a demonstration of 5,000 marched from Harlem to the United Nations Building under the slogan of "Human Rights and Self-Determination for the Black Nation." Hundreds of the marchers carried signs stating, "Assata Shakur Is Welcome Here." At the rally that day, blocks away from the United Nations Building, a statement was read from the BLA: "Comrade-Sister Assata Shakur was freed from racist captivity in anticipation of Black Solidarity Day, November 5th, . . . in order to express to the world the need to Free All Black Prisoners is of fundamental importance to protection of Black Human Rights in general. . . . In freeing Comrade-Sister Assata we have made it clear that such treatment and the criminal 'guilt' or innocence of a Black freedom fighter is irrelevant when measured by our people's history of struggle against racist domination."⁷⁹

A statement written by Assata a few days prior to her liberation from the Clinton state prison was also circulated at the rally. Assata's statement condemned U.S. prison conditions and called for freedom for political prisoners, support for human rights and an independent New Afrikan nation-state.⁸⁰ Despite the boasts of the FBI and police of "breaking the back" of the BLA six years prior, the BLA had certainly achieved a victory; one of its most sought after and well known members had escaped captivity through the actions of her comrades. Despite the casualties suffered from 1971 to 1975, the BLA was not dead.

Assata's liberation was hailed by the activist and progressive elements in the national Black community as a heroic event. In December of 1979 the *Amsterdam News*, a New York-based, Black-owned newspaper, published an article, "Run Hard Sister, Run Hard," by the Reverend Herbert Daughtry, the leader of the National Black United Front. Daughtry applauded the BLA soldiers who participated in the freeing of their sister comrade, stating, "They say three brave brothers and a sister went to fetch Assata from the cold confines . . . where she had been held fast against her will. . . . Who the four were, I do know not. But, every Black person knows them and have met them in the collective unconscious mind of the race. Their heroic deed will be told and retold around a million years to come . . . where Black people gather to reminisce about heroes and heroines, great acts of courage and daring deeds, their exploits will be remembered."⁸¹ In January 1980, supporters of Shakur also placed a half-page advertisement in the *Amsterdam News* proclaiming support for the fugitive Black revolutionary. The ad, entitled "Peace to Assata Shakur (aka Joanne Chesimard)," urged Shakur to "stay strong and free" and offered her moral support.⁸²

The liberation of Assata also led to a renewed campaign of repression by federal and state police agencies. One week after the liberation of Assata, a joint FBI and New York

police force raided the home of New York Panther Sekou Hill, a friend of Shakur, who was arrested and held without bond for three weeks. Evidence produced at Hill's bail hearing proved that he was in Brooklyn at the time of Assata's escape. Hill was released, and eventually charges were dropped.⁸³

On April 19, 1980, fifty armed federal agents engaged in a predawn raid of a Harlem apartment complex. Police ransacked the homes of residents in an apparent search for Shakur. Without warrants, police forced their way into residences, breaking down doors, detaining residents, and searching through personal items. One resident, Eburn Adelona, a doctoral student at Columbia University, was awakened by police, with guns pointing in her face, and forced into the hallway of the complex. The police "suspected" that Adelona was Shakur. In the hallway, federal agents demanded she raise up her nightgown so they could search her body for gun shot wounds.⁸⁴ In the summer of 1980, federal agents and local police maintained intense surveillance of a Brooklyn community center called "the Armory," which housed several grassroots programs including Uhuru Sasa (Kiswahili for Freedom Now) school, one of the premier black nationalist freedom schools in the United States. Due to its long history and community support, police officials were hesitant about raiding the Armory.⁸⁵ To collaborate more efficiently, the FBI and New York police decided to form the Joint Terrorist Task Force (JTTF), which would serve as the coordinating body in the search for Assata and the renewed campaign to smash the BLA.⁸⁶

In the midst of the JTTF campaign to capture Assata, during November 1980, the hunted BLA soldier herself released a taped message from clandestinity. This message was played at community programs and grassroots public affairs radio shows across the United States. Titled "From Somewhere in the World," it detailed acts of white supremacist violence that had occurred in the United States in 1979 and 1980. Due to those acts of violence, Assata concluded, "Our backs are up against the wall and more than any time of our history . . . of being captives in America, we need an army . . . to defend ourselves and to fight for our liberation."⁸⁷ She also thanked "the many sisters and brothers who have opened their doors" to her after her liberation from captivity. She described those who offered refuge to her as part of the "underground railroad."⁸⁸

In response to the new wave of repression, Black activists organized a campaign to challenge the JTTF's counterinsurgency efforts and win support for the Black underground, particularly for Assata Shakur. On July 18, 1981, the National Committee to Honor New Afrikan Freedom Fighters mobilized 1,000 people for the first New Afrikan Freedom Fighters Day, to honor Assata Shakur and the Black Liberation Army.⁸⁹ Throughout Black sections of New York, "Assata Shakur is Welcome Here" posters were plastered in visible outdoor spaces and hung in homes.⁹⁰

The Revitalization of the Armed Struggle

On October 20, 1981, an incident occurred that would eventually reveal that there had been a significant resurgence of BLA activity within four years of police claims of the revolutionary organization's demise. Three white revolutionaries—Judy Clark, David Gilbert, and Kathy Boudin—and one Black man with radical associations, Solomon Brown, were arrested in the aftermath of an attempted holdup of a Brinks armored truck and a subsequent shootout at a police roadblock in Rockland County, New York. Several Black men escaped the scene of the shootout. The holdup and shootout resulted in the death of one Brinks guard and two police officers.⁹¹ The JTTF immediately followed a trail of physical evidence that led them to members of the Black underground. On October 23, 1981, in the Queens section of New York City, police pursued two Black

men they suspected of being involved in the Rockland holdup. A shootout between the police and the Black men ensued, resulting in the death of one of the men, Mtayari Shabaka Sundiata, and the capture of the other, Sekou Odinga. Odinga, the former Bronx BPP section leader, had been a fugitive since January 1969 on charges related to the New York Panther 21 case. After his capture, Odinga was taken to a police precinct where he was tortured to extract information from him concerning the Black underground and the whereabouts of Assata Shakur. Police beat and kicked Odinga, burned his body with cigars, removed toenails from his body, and forced his head into a toilet bowl full of urine, repeatedly flushing the toilet. Throughout the torture, Odinga defiantly remained silent. As a result of this brutality, Odinga's pancreas was severely damaged, and the Black revolutionary had to be fed intravenously for three months.⁹²

In the days, weeks, and months following Odinga's capture several others, including many former members of Panther chapters, were arrested by the JTTF, and others were forced underground. By the end of November 1982, several members of the New York Panther chapters, including Kuwasi Balagoon, Abdul Majid, Jamal Joseph, Bilal Sunni Ali, and New Jersey Panther Basheer Hameed, were all captured and charged with acts linked either to the events on October 20, 1981, in Rockland County or to other expropriations and suspected BLA activity. Members of the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika, including Mutulu Shakur, Nehanda Abiodun, and Fulani Sunni Ali were also charged with acts related to BLA activity.⁹³ Abiodun was forced underground and surfaced in Cuba in 1994. The Cuban government granted Abiodun political asylum. Criminal charges were dropped against Fulani Sunni Ali when it was proved she was in New Orleans during the October 20, 1981, incident in Rockland. Even after being cleared of criminal charges, Sunni Ali and several others were interned in a federal prison for refusing to testify to a federal grand jury investigating their friends and comrades in the movement.⁹⁴ Besides Clark, Gilbert, and Boudin, other whites were subsequently arrested and charged, including Silvia Baraldini and Marilyn Buck. Baraldini, an Italian national, was active in solidarity efforts among white anti-imperialists with the New Afrikan and Puerto Rican movements.⁹⁵ Buck had been underground since 1977, and she was charged and convicted of purchasing ammunition for BLA members.⁹⁶ Many other white anti-imperialists were also interned by the federal grand jury for refusing to testify against the BLA and the New Afrikan and anti-imperialist movement.

On November 5, 1981, members of the Black Liberation Army issued a communiqué to put into political context the events in Rockland County and the subsequent arrests. The October 20, 1981, holdup was described as an "expropriation," the seizure of property by political or military forces.⁹⁷ One BLA member defined expropriation as "when an oppressed person or political person moves to take back some of the wealth that's been exploited from him or taken from them."⁹⁸ The BLA communiqué stated that the attempted expropriation was the responsibility of the Revolutionary Armed Task Force (RATF), a "strategic alliance . . . under the leadership of the Black Liberation Army" of "Black Freedom Fighters and North American [white] Anti-Imperialists."⁹⁹ The whites in the RATF not only participated in armed actions but infiltrated right-wing and white supremacist organizations to gain information for the BLA.¹⁰⁰ This alliance was racially diverse and politically diverse; the RATF included underground fighters who identified themselves as revolutionary nationalist, Muslim, anarchist, or communist under the leadership of clandestine forces from the New Afrikan Independence Movement (NAIM).¹⁰¹ This ideologically diverse alliance came together in response to an escalation of acts of white supremacist violence in the United States during the late 1970s and early 1980s, including the murders of Black children in Atlanta and of Black women in Boston, the shooting of four Black women in Alabama, and the acceleration of paramilitary activity by the Ku Klux Klan and other

white supremacist organizations. According to the communiqué, the RATF initiated a “decentralized intelligence strategy” to establish the strength and capability of white supremacist paramilitary forces and their networks, which extended into the U.S. military as well as federal, state, and local police forces. The RATF believed this white supremacist upsurge was connected to right-wing and profascist financial and political elites. Through expropriations from American capitalist financial institutions, the RATF hoped to acquire the resources needed to support a resistance movement to oppose the right-wing, white supremacist upsurge; they planned to “accumulate millions of dollars under the political control of . . . revolutionary elements” to establish self-defense units and community cultural, health, and educational institutions in Black communities throughout the United States. Due to the political character of the actions of the RATF, the communiqué stated, “the comrades who are in jail are not criminals. They are Prisoners of War. . . . They are heroes struggling against RACISM, FASCISM, AND IMPERIALISM.”¹⁰² Supporters of the defendants in these cases argued that proceeds from the expropriations were being used for “the maintenance of the Army and certain other causes.” These causes included grassroots youth and, community health programs and political mobilizations. Movement literature also stated that proceeds were contributed to African liberation movements, particularly the struggle against settler colonial rule in Zimbabwe.¹⁰³

The JTTF and federal prosecutors determined that the Rockland County incident was one of several expropriations by the BLA and its white allies from 1976 until December 1981. Besides bringing New York State criminal charges related to the RATF expropriation in Rockland County, federal prosecutors charged several captured revolutionaries and political activists with RICO (Racketeer-Influenced Corrupt Organization) act conspiracy charges originally designed for the Mafia and other criminal organizations. Charges related to the liberation of Assata Shakur and the providing of refuge to BLA and the RATF were also linked to RICO conspiracy charges.

While not pleading guilty to participation in any particular act, in their legal defense, Sekou Odinga and Mutulu Shakur (in two separate trials) argued that the acts of the BLA and RATF, including expropriations and the liberating of Assata Shakur, were political acts, not criminal offenses. Since the BLA units involved in the RATF were committed to fighting for an independent New Afrikan nation, Odinga and Shakur argued these acts were actions of a national liberation movement. The two New Afrikan liberation fighters and their legal defense teams argued that under international law, these actions of combatants of a national liberation movement should be tried by an international tribunal, not by domestic criminal courts.¹⁰⁴

The investigations of the JTTF led to three separate trials. Balagoon, Clark, Boudin, and Gilbert were convicted by a Rockland County jury on murder and armed robbery charges for the October 20, 1981, expropriation by the RATF. Federal prosecutors held two federal RICO conspiracy trials. In the first, the defendants were charged with twenty-eight counts of criminal conduct. After a five-month trial, a jury of eight Blacks and four whites returned not guilty verdicts on twenty-two of the twenty-eight counts. Bilal Sunni Ali was acquitted of all charges in the RICO conspiracy case. In the same case, Joseph and former PGRNA worker Chui Ferguson were acquitted of racketeering conspiracy, murder, and robbery charges but convicted of acting as accessories, and Odinga and Baraldini were acquitted of robbery and murder but convicted of racketeering and racketeering conspiracy. Federal judge Kevin Duffy sentenced Odinga and Baraldini to forty-year terms.¹⁰⁵ In the second RICO trial, Marilyn Buck and Mutulu Shakur, captured in 1985 and 1986 respectively, were convicted of federal racketeering conspiracy, murder, and armed robbery. New York federal judge Charles Haight sentenced Buck and Shakur to fifty and sixty years respectively.¹⁰⁶

While federal prosecutors acknowledged Odinga was not a part of the events in Rockland County, they viewed the Black revolutionary as the leader of the BLA units responsible for organizing the RATF. Odinga, who escaped a police raid attempting to capture him in 1969, was granted political asylum by the Algerian government in 1970 and served as a member of the International Section of the BPP. Federal investigators estimate Odinga reentered the United States around 1973. A profile on Odinga in movement literature asserts, "In the mid-1970's, Sekou returned to the U.S. to organize . . . and help to build the Black Liberation Army."¹⁰⁷ During the period when federal and local police believed they had destroyed the BLA, Odinga and other Black revolutionaries rebuilt the organization's capacity as an effective radical underground network. The focus of the "revitalized" BLA units during this period (from 1976 until 1981) was different from that during the post-BPP split period (1971 to 1975); in the first period, it seemed to be on retaliation against police, the occupying army of the colonized nation, while in the second period, it seemed to be the development of the infrastructure of the armed clandestine movement and support for aboveground institutions, organizing, and mobilization.

The BLA and the Legacy of the Black Panther Party: The Struggle Continues

The BPP participation in the BLA clearly shows multiple responses to repression by Party leaders and rank-and-file membership. The Oakland-based BPP led by Huey Newton determined that it was necessary to subordinate BPP's association with armed struggle and emphasize community service programs and participation in the electoral arena. Other BPP factions believed that due to the intense repression against the BPP and the Black liberation movement, it was necessary to go underground and resist from clandestinity through the vehicle of the BLA. Possibly the most important issue was not whether the BPP emphasized a reformist or radical agenda in response to counterinsurgency, but its inability to maintain its organizational unity and cohesiveness in the face of repression.

After the split in the BPP, several BPP members joined the ranks of the BLA. While the BLA may have pre-dated the BPP, the influence of the BPP on its ranks cannot be denied. Party members who went underground saw themselves continuing the revolutionary agenda of the BPP from clandestinity. The radical expression of the BPP through the BLA has a history as long as the Oakland-based BPP, if not longer. Scholars of the BPP argue that its organizational expression continued until June 1982, the year its last program in Oakland, the Oakland Community School, closed. According to the JTTF, the last *known* action of Panthers involved in the BLA was in December 1981, six months prior to the closing of the Oakland Community School. Even in captivity, captured BLA members continue to forward political agendas consistent with their involvement in the BPP. For example, in November 1993, former BPP members and associates, including Jalil Muntaqim, Sekou Odinga, Sundiata Acoli, Geronimo ji Jaga, and Mutulu Shakur made a call to revolutionary nationalist organizations, collectives, and individuals to form a New Afrikan Liberation Front.¹⁰⁸ After months of dialogue and debate, inspired by the call of the prisoners, seven revolutionary organizations united to form the New Afrikan Liberation Front (NALF).¹⁰⁹ In 1997, from prison, former Panther and BLA member Jalil Muntaqim made a call for "Jericho 98," a march and rally demanding amnesty for political prisoners in the United States.¹¹⁰ On March 27, 1998, the NALF and the PGRNA sponsored Jericho 98, mobilizing 5,000 people, the largest demonstration in the United States for the freedom of political prisoners. Despite incarceration, death, and exile, the revolutionary legacy of the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army continues.