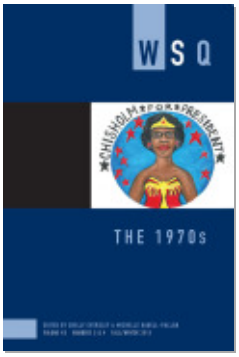
The Power of the First-Person Narrative: Ericka Huggins and the Black Panther Party



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WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly, Volume 43, Numbers 3 & 4, Fall/Winter 2015, pp. 33-51 (Article)

Published by The Feminist Press

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Mary Phillips

In 1971 Black Panther Party (BPP) members Ericka Huggins and Bobby Seale were tried for kidnapping, murder, and conspiracy. In a fury, one juror picked up a chair in the deliberation room and threatened, "Let these defendants go. You know you don't have any evidence. If you want to confine them to prison for the rest of their lives go on and try it, but I swear I will kill you to death."[1] In recalling this moment leading up to her release, Huggins described how this juror's remarks had a "no-nonsense, don't cross me" tone, making note of the female juror's gender, her whiteness, and her occupation as a nurse. She learned about this critical information at the completion of the trial, admitting, "Thank God with everything in me because when it came to declaring a verdict, the women were the ones that said, 'You know there's no evidence. Why are we trying these people?'" Huggins's account illustrates the key role she believes women played in granting her freedom. She also claimed that one white male juror held out to the very end. After two hung juries, she stated, "The judge said, 'Let them go, we cost the taxpayers of Connecticut too much money. The defendants are free to go.'" Evoking her feelings of triumph, she continued, "So Bobby and I walked out that day" (Interview by the author, April 16, 2010). Her words "walked out," represent a feeling of liberation from the bars of injustice. The silence that black women revolutionaries so often encounter became part of Huggins's experience at the trial. Huggins's account of her trial and imprisonment responds to her invisibility in the face of official record keeping, and it serves as an example of the marginalization many female activists experienced during the civil rights and black power eras of the 1960s and 1970s. Her first-person narratives depict the

WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly **43: 3 & 4 (Fall/Winter 2015)**

direct impact of governmental repression similarly shared by Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, Mabel Robinson Williams, and others, whose voices most often remained distorted and excluded from the official public record.

Reframing history through her personal experience, Huggins challenges hegemonic practices of power and knowledge. At the center of the historical record she serves as a critical player in the black radical protest movement. Her stories as a living Black Panther Party member recognize her agency and allow for a new kind of history that invokes passion and feelings. Interviews play a critical role in reconstructing black women's lives and they capture the importance of affect in history making. They offer a way to unpack emotions and provide intimate views of the experiences of BPP members. Black women's personal writing and reflections are important sources for helping us better understand the black power era and notions of gender, feminism, history, and motherhood. Huggins agreed to talk with me on the condition that I produce research "that goes beyond a scholarly approach" (Interview by the author, February 20, 2010). As a case study, Huggins's personal account became critical in the political enfranchisement of women in the BPP. It is a radical intervention that captures an important subjective point of view and functions as a feminist methodological praxis that privileges personal experience. Her story provides an alternative political discourse for understanding the implications of history, allowing Huggins to move from the background to the foreground of the BPP.

The Black Panther Party, one of the most well-known organizations during the black power movement, functioned as a grassroots political coalition-building organization founded in Oakland, California, in 1966. The BPP practiced their cofounder Huey P. Newton's theory of intercommunalism, which transformed over time to meet the changing needs of black and poor communities. Judson Jeffries explains, "Newton suggested that the stage of Intercommunalism will come about when the world's nonruling class seizes the means of production (presumably of the entire imperialist system) and distributes the wealth in an equitable fashion to the many communities of the world" (2002, 80). Intercommunalists believed in a world free of borders, one in which communities share resources. BPP member JoNina Abron-Ervin specified that the group's wide-ranging initiatives for black and poor communities in the U.S. included "police-alert patrols, the *Black Panther Intercommunal News Service*, the breakfast for children program, free medical clinics, the Oakland Community School,

free busing to prisons, the free food program, the free clothing and shoes programs, the free ambulance program, sickle-cell anemia testing, Seniors Against a Fearful Environment (SAFE), and the free pest control program" (1998, 179). These programs provided much-needed access to services and resources in the black communities in the face of the failures of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. Carl Hart acknowledges that this initiative "helped bring the percentage of black families living in poverty down from 55 percent to 34 percent between 1959–1969," although there remained high unemployment within black communities (2014, 17). Johnson's legislation "established the vision for the subsequent research and analysis of minority poverty" (Wilson 1987, 131). William Julius Wilson argues, "the emphasis was mainly on the environments of the poor . . . this vision did not consider poverty as a problem of American economic organization" (131). The War on Poverty neglected to solve the systemic problems inherent in 1970s racial politics: the federal government's handling of economic issues and the institutional forms of oppression against people of color. Impassioned by the 1960s assassinations of nonviolent civil rights leaders, the BPP's radical display of community service offered another form of self-defense to challenge institutional violence and police terror within black communities. Their message was of community empowerment and community protection. Their revolutionary spirit coupled with their community programs made them targets for ongoing government assault and violence from programs such as COINTELPRO.[2]

Born Ericka Cozette Jenkins on January 5, 1948, in Washington, DC, Huggins joined the BPP in 1967 in Los Angeles. As a college student at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, she was involved in the Black Student Congress (BSC), a campus organization, despite the fact that the BSC was resistant to female membership: "They didn't appreciate women joining the Black Student Congress as it was called then but they did let me join" (Interview by the author, July 20, 2011). In college, she read a *Ramparts* magazine article on charges against Huey P. Newton for the murder of an Oakland police officer. Moved by the inhumane treatment of Newton after his arrest, Huggins mentioned the "picture in that *Ramparts* magazine article showed Huey without a shirt strapped to a hospital gurney, with a bullet wound in his stomach. The white police officer was obviously guarding the camera" (Interview by the author, July 30, 2011). Inspired by the image and the story, she and her lover, John Huggins, decided to leave school, move to California, and join the BPP. She later married Huggins

and they had a daughter, Mai. In the BPP, Ericka Huggins served in many capacities, including working as editor of the BPP newspaper, the *Black Panther*, also known as the *Black Panther Intercommunal News Service*. When her husband was murdered by COINTELPRO agents, Huggins moved to his hometown and opened a BPP branch in New Haven, Connecticut. After her arrest, trial, and release in 1971, she served as director of the BPP's Oakland Community School (OCS), maintaining its daily affairs from 1973 to 1981. She cowrote the curriculum as well as grants for the school, in addition to supervising and managing staff members. While serving as director, she traveled the country delivering presentations on the school's pedagogy. She became a member of the BPP's Central Committee and she coauthored a book of poetry, *Insights and Poems* (1975), with Huey P. Newton.

Huggins's storytelling functions as a form of self-defense and personal agency despite historical silences and targeted violence by governmental authority. Two years after their move to California, the FBI murdered her husband, John Huggins, along with BPP member Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter on the campus of the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). The UCLA Black Student Union had requested support from John Huggins and Bunchy Carter to assist them in the highly charged meeting concerning the directorship of the High Potential Program, an equal educational opportunity program. According to Huggins, the FBI manipulated the entire process, creating tremendous tension throughout the director's search. This tension reached its zenith on January 17, 1969, at a meeting in Campbell Hall when John Huggins and Carter were shot (Brown 2003, 91–99). Huggins was at home with her three-week-old daughter when the traumatized BPP members gathered at her house after the shooting. According to Elaine Brown, "Ericka Huggins left the world then, it seemed. I watched her stand at the kitchen, her long, thin body surrendered, her eyes glazed" (1992, 167–68). The police came to Huggins's house and arrested her and the others. She recalls, "They booked us on something ridiculous like mischief. They wanted us off the streets. They treated us like members of a gang" (Interview by the author, April 16, 2010). Importantly, her point of view demonstrates an institutional cruelty. This young mother, now a widow, found herself in jail.

Huggins contends the FBI not only infiltrated both the BPP and the US Organization but also the students at UCLA. The police and other governmental forces gained information on the BPP in an effort to de-

stroy, distort, and misrepresent the BPP to the general public. Ward Churchill explains, "The Party was simultaneously infiltrated at every level by agent provocateurs, all of them harnessed to the task of disrupting its internal functioning. Completing the package was a torrent of disinformation planted in the media to discredit the Panthers before the public, both personally and organizationally, thus isolating them from potential support" (2001, 78). In this first encounter with COINTELPRO, Huggins describes the FBI infiltration she saw while contained at the police station:

> We were sitting at the Seventy-Seventh Street Police Station in Los Angeles at that time. Two men in dashikis who Party members knew to be members of the US Organization came into the police station, not in handcuffs like all of us, not escorted in for questioning like us, but freely walking . . . [They] stopped to answer the police, and I hadn't cried up to that point . . . I refused to cry, but that was one of the moments when I really wanted to cry because I could see it, nobody had to tell me anything, something had gone on. This was clearly orchestrated. (Interview by the author, April 16, 2010)

Her statement offers witness testimony that identifies corruption in the legal process. The US Organization members she describes, these "men in dashikis" comfortable among the police, were government agents. She exhibited indefatigable will when she "refused to cry" in the face of this betrayal, and worse, her own personal tragedy. Certain of the FBI's manipulation, she knew this "was clearly orchestrated" by the direct, apparent boldness of the FBI in its strategic plan to destroy the BPP. Recognition of this situation displays the high frequency of espionage acts against the BPP.

Constant infiltrations and trumped-up criminal charges plagued the BPP. Under siege, the BPP struggled to reclaim its identity as community advocates in the public imagination. The BPP consistently challenged the FBI's violent onslaught, and their self-determination and resistance linked them to the long history of black protest. Huggins compared the resistance efforts of the 1970s black freedom struggle to nineteenth-century U.S. slavery. In both, black women organized against the oppressive system of U.S. slavery; they were universally interested in uplifting their families and building their communities. In particular, she highlighted the parallels between black women's activism in the BPP, slave women's resistance efforts, and black women's organizing during the civil rights

movement, emphasizing that "all of them had the same goals in mind" (Interview by the author, February 20, 2010). Their shared goals included the liberation of black and poor communities. In doing this, they encountered obstacles including racism, sexism, and classism. Likewise, Angela Davis writes, "The status of black women within the community of slaves was definitely a barometer indicating the overall potential for resistance. This process did not end with the formal dissolution of slavery" (1998, 126). Both Huggins and Davis recognize female slave resistance as part of the black radical movement.

Huggins's interest in feeling as part of storytelling repositions women as subjects. In interviews, she emphasized the importance of primary sources in telling the experiences of BPP members. In her conversation with me about my research on the BPP she explained:

> It's really important for you because you have taken this on, and I care about your work that you read more things that the party members have written. So before we begin, do you understand where I'm coming from? Because I do not want you to think I am picking apart your work or anybody else's. I just want you to understand how it feels to be written about while we are still alive. (Interview by the author, February 20, 2010)

Huggins establishes her own agency in as much as she also acknowledges the value of my own power as a historian of black women. Her language demands attention to feelings by making them a precondition to the interview. Expressing her commitment to affective relations she stresses, "I care about your work." She declares the importance of empathy as crucial to human connection and political action. She insists on the recognition of her humanity, her feeling, as part of the historical record.

Huggins's personal account serves as political and historical intervention. This BPP intervention included the development of an alternative analysis in understanding intellectual work. It insists on a definition of scholarship that promotes intercommunal solidarity to legitimize the power of the community. Huggins explains:

> All human beings are of value whether they go to the academy or not and . . . the Black Panther Party was itself full of scholars if we unpack the word scholar and reframe it: Huey Newton was a scholar long before he got a doctoral degree, Bobby Seale was a scholar, Elaine Brown was a scholar. It has nothing to do with what the Eurocentric model tells

> us scholarship is . . . who says that a person who's selling drugs at the street level and has an organized and functioning structured network isn't a brilliant business person, isn't a great manager, isn't probably a great accountant and so on. So there's this theory that everyone in the academy is an intellectual and a scholar and everybody outside . . . are thugs. (Interview by the author, February 20, 2010)

Huggins's words dismantle the race hierarchy and class privilege that assert the value of a broader humanity. She places emphasis on the need to "unpack" and "reframe" the term scholar. While some find this position similar to Antonio Gramsci's "organic intellectual," her analysis is more aligned with Walter Rodney's "guerilla intellectual" (Rodney 1990, 113; Christian 2002, 130–31). Defining the scholar as any person with expert knowledge, she compares a drug dealer to a manager—more like an accountant than a criminal. This seeming paradox levels and equalizes the drug dealer and the "brilliant business person." She critiques the rigid definition of the term scholar as exclusively defined through formal education, the only kind of access to the "inside" of complex thinking. While a person participating in an alternative economy might remain on the "outside" of the mainstream, Huggins views experience as qualification for knowledge. She takes black people from a marginal status, "outside," and places them on the "inside" at the center of knowledge production. Similarly, the affect in her personal narrative is repositioned as critical to the inside of history.

Huggins's approach to history resolves the kinds of exclusions that would otherwise marginalize black people. This view reframes the very notion of legitimate sources and the official historical record. She adds, "The prostitutes and the former gang members that were in the Los Angeles chapter that I first joined were scholars. They could tell you how the United States's infrastructure oppressed us. They didn't read it in a book, they didn't learn it in a class" (Interview by the author, February 20, 2010). In its confrontation with the status quo, Huggins's point of view inverts social hierarchy to render the underground as mainstream. She acknowledges the marginal as critical in articulating a complex understanding of social power structures. Like Huggins, the BPP defined intellectuals very differently. BPP leaders mandated no formal training for members to be recognized as scholars.[3] In their political praxis, Panthers considered lived experiences as knowledge. Consequently, the black community already consisted of individuals whose members possessed and maintained crit-

ical insight into the political discourses of the structural inequalities that affected them.

Huggins's oral history represents a black woman's subjectivity as the counter narrative to the institutional modes of knowledge and power that would render her silent. As Robyn Spencer explains, "Black women have remained on the outskirts of Black Power: their marginality central to the movement's definition, but their agency and empowerment within the movement effectively obscured" (2008, 91). To date, there are few book-length manuscripts and an even smaller amount of oral histories on women in the black power era and the BPP.[4] Huggins's recollections also attest to the inefficiencies of mainstream historiography and its attendant role in ranking social value. Interviews allow women to serve as the "representations of their own reality" (Gluck and Patai 1991, 3). This analysis still resonates in thinking about the value of oral history as a form of scholarship. In their argument, the interviewer and interviewee engage in a crucially important relationship of trust and negotiation in the oral collaboration process. Intimacy with the source privileges a new "inside," in which the personal narrative gives voice to the humanity of the marginal. Nwando Achebe adds that this allows for "a true exchange of ideas and experiences based on mutual respect, support, and accountability" (2002, 14). This returns to Huggins's need for mutual understanding—"I just want you to understand how it feels"—and the importance of feelings in transgressive history. Oral history restores power to the subject as the narrator of her own story, and it honors the fundamental principles of grassroots politics.

The personal exchange necessary to oral history inserts the feeling that gets lost in other kinds of history. Particularly, oral history insists on personal sensibilities—emotion and affect—as central to social relations. Sara Ahmed recognizes that "emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments" (2004, 119). Their powerful effect allows for human connection, encouraging empathy to create political urgency, which mobilizes and aligns communities. Here, feeling inspires political action. BPP identity as a political group depends on the shared outrage of its members and their mutual commitments to justice, producing a conscious awareness. In the BPP context, these kinds of intense attachments not only organize the community but also inform the personal feeling that characterizes Huggins's exemplary voice in 1970s black women's political

history. Moreover, this energy, mobilized to align communities, serves a vital role in challenging the lens of a traditional history that marginalizes the political and social experience of black people.

The BPP personification of blackness as political links shared feelings to consciousness of a larger struggle. Just as Huggins's story shows how political conflict has personal effects, personal feelings activate politics. The 1978 Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement" announces the crucial importance of feelings within radical feminism:

> There is also undeniably a personal genesis for black feminism, that is, the political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual black women's lives . . . We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity. (2014, 272–74)

For this working group of black feminists, "personal genesis" reiterates the fact that political practice begins with feeling. They insist on personal experience as crucially bound to radical community politics. It announces the political in the personal. This thinking defines second wave feminist organizing as well as BPP politics. The statement continues:

> We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. (2014, 271)

They assert that black feminist politics are intersectional and that their beliefs combat structural inequalities affecting the individual and collective lives of black women. Recognizing the importance of this praxis, *Ms.* magazine cofounder Gloria Steinem credits black women for having "invented the feminist movement" (Tisdale 2015).

Huggins's historical intervention stands at the crossroads of racism and sexism, building on the intersectionality detailed in the Combahee River Collective's manifesto. BPP member Assata Shakur describes her dealings with racism and sexism while in police custody in connection with the 1973 murder of a New Jersey state trooper, which she believes is another COINTELPRO initiative. In the hospital room after her arrest, Shakur writes:

> Two Black nurses were very kind to me . . . One night one of the nurses came in and gave me three books. i hadn't even thought about reading. The books were a godsend. They had been carefully selected. One was a book of Black poetry, one was a book called *Black Women in White Amerika*, and the third was a novel, *Siddhartha,* by Hermann Hesse. Whenever i tired of the verbal abuse of my captors, i would drown them out by reading the poetry out loud. "Invictus" and "If We Must Die" were the poems i usually read. i read them over and over, until i was sure the guards had heard every word. The poems were my message to them. When i read the book about Black women, i felt the spirits of those sisters feeding me, making me stronger. (1987, 16)

Appearing in both Huggins's and Shakur's testimonies, nurses are caretakers that provide a lifeline. Both stories insist on women's collaboration as a requirement for survival. For Shakur, literature feeds the revolutionary spirit. The book *Black Women in White Amerika* (Lerner 1992) includes a collection of writings by Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, Amy Jacques Garvey, Fannie Lou Hamer, Shirley Chisholm, and Anne Moody among others. Shakur also highlights Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1951), which describes the journey of an individual from suffering to enlightenment. Both of the poems Shakur mentions reclaim the humanity of the oppressed. The nineteenth-century English poem "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley includes the line, "My head is bloody, but unbowed" (stanza 2). It highlights resistance in the face of injustice. This declaration corresponds to the other poem she discusses, Claude McKay's "If We Must Die," specifically in the line, "If we must die—oh let us nobly die" (line 5). This poem announces, "let us show us brave" (line 10), encouraging for Shakur fearlessness in combating structural inequalities. McKay ends his poem "Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!" (line 14), which speaks to the miscarriage of justice that Shakur was experiencing (1987, 53). The literature impassioned her strong sense of agency despite hospitalization and containment, helping her demonstrate resistance.

Huggins's 1969 incarceration marked the inauguration of a series of arrests and detainments of black women political activists during the 1970s, and it became an important symbol of black women's political empowerment. The 1969 BPP pamphlet "Panther Sisters on Women's Liberation" credits Huggins's leadership as an example of women's agency in the BPP: "Then there's Ericka Huggins. The Brothers had to look on Ericka with

a new light because she had been thru a lot of things that some Brothers hadn't even been thru. The sisters looked up to her and we all saw what we had to do. The sisters have to pick up guns just like brothers" (1976, 339). This record positions Huggins not only as an important figure for women but also for men in the BPP. It transcends the apparent gender divisions inside the BPP, and it shows the BPP's perception of women as crucial to the larger organization. It also attests to the BPP's commitment to rewrite the narrative violence of the official record. It recognizes personal stories as necessary to the record keeping. On January 20, 1970, the BPP published the article "Telephone Conversation with Frances Carter," where Carter discusses the maltreatment she, Huggins, and other members of the New Haven 14 received in prison. She testifies:

> We are isolated in Niantic State Prison for Women . . . When we go to court, we are escorted to court by two state troopers in front and two state troopers in back . . . Our mail is censored. It takes sometimes 15 days for it to get from one place to another. (*Black Panther* 1970)

Frances Carter's account describes the daily experiences with isolation and high surveillance, familiar tactics of military interrogations and imprisonment. Like Shakur, Carter gave birth in prison under torturous conditions. She recalls, "First they had a lot of FBI in the delivery room . . . I had gotten very, very sick . . . I had gangrene, stinking like I don't know. They would not wash me. I was full of crabs" (Hilliard and Cole 1993, 291–92). Her story emphasizes government control over her body and when confronted with the impossible option to either testify against her peers or lose contact with her newborn, Carter demonstrates the courage of her convictions: "I in no way fear for my life or health. At least I have no such fears from sisters and brothers with whom I have always stood in the fight for human dignity" (Lewis 1970). Her voice in the *Black Panther* emerges despite the silencing of incarceration, and it exposes the full extent of institutional control over her black female body.

Carter's personal narrative inserts the feeling that renders her experience a political one. Her history builds on the intercommunal service of the BPP's political practice but it also declares a powerful sisterhood. Carter credits Huggins for her leadership, declaring, "Out of us all, Ericka went through the hardest time. She had already lost her husband, John. Now she was pulled away from her daughter" (Hilliard and Cole 1993,

291). Huggins served alongside a larger group of fourteen political prisoners, all collectively empowered. Even in their shared trauma, the women in this collective understood Huggins's struggle as exemplary. Her political imprisonment became their symbol of survival while Huggins maintained a vocal defense of the BPP. From prison she writes:

> It is needless to say that the people are confused at this point as to what the Party's politics are. They are not to threaten or harass the people. The blundering of the mass media and the power structure must not be misinterpreted. The party is neither vicious nor dogmatic, but we are fighting for the liberation of all political prisoners . . . The Party will never die because the people will never allow that . . . They cannot break our spirits; we will win! (Huggins 1969)

This historical rebuttal asserts the harmful effects caused by the media and other institutions' falsification of BPP politics. Huggins speaks in a collective voice in her letter, advocating for the freedom "of all political prisoners." Intercommunalism shaped her ideas around community, and her pronouncement, "They cannot break our spirits; we will win," expresses the BPP's intercommunal determination in challenging the institutional onslaught against them. Huggins insists on the collective "we," whose mission and determination incorporates the individual and the political. Her letter represents a movement from private to public, illustrating a shift from the singular to the collective.

Personal testimony becomes political praxis. Huggins's storytelling reproduces the emotion that motivates action. While personal testimony offers an alternative history of her present political struggles, Angela Davis also follows this model in her 1971 letter to Huggins:

> You had been immediately arrested on a manifestly fabricated charge—conspiracy to retaliate, or something equally ridiculous. We were hurting with your pain. While we watched your approach—you were walking through the jail's iron gates—our silence was throbbing with inexpressible pain. And as we were desperately searching for words to convey our unyielding solidarity, it was your strong, undaunted voice that broke the silence . . . Your unflinching determination as you clenched your fist and said, "All Power to the People," prompted me to think to myself, this must be the strongest, most courageous Black woman in America. (123)

Davis begins by indicting the U.S. justice system for what she believes is a "manifestly fabricated charge" against Huggins in its attempt to silence her political activities. She uses the personal letter to interrupt the official script. Davis expresses collective empathy when she comments, "We were hurting with your pain." Davis's transition from "we" to "you" showcases her individual feeling and political connection with the New Haven 14 and the community of activists who share her perspective. Her letter is a public document, one that politicizes the personal. She recognizes Huggins's absence in the official record when she writes, "Our silence was throbbing with inexpressible pain," and she reflects on the collective inability to challenge the institutional power in which she compares powerlessness to speechlessness. Her letter identifies Huggins's example as more than speech but also as defiance against institutional injustice. In Huey P. Newton's words, "'All Power to the People' sums up our goals for Black people, as well as our deep love and commitment to them. All power comes from the people, and all power must be ultimately vested in them" (1995, 167–68). Huggins's "clenched fist" thus represents a declaration of emotional intensity, of "deep love." As she chants "All Power to the People," she stresses the community praxis of love, action, authority, and change, all of which depend on the community.

As part of black women's political solidarity, BPP Communications Secretary Kathleen Cleaver also published a letter in the *Black Panther* in 1971. It articulates the shared political practice of using the personal letter to declare one's politics and create a new history. Reading these letters together shows a pattern and a new methodology in approaching the absence of a radical black feminist political praxis. As part of this collective solidarity she writes:

> I always think of the pain you feel at being torn asunder from Mai . . . [T]he picture of you standing in front of the New Haven courthouse with clenched fist raised, shouting "Free Huey," gives me new encouragement to persist and perform even more powerfully . . . Your courage in the cage of death enables us all to have greater strength, and your heroism is what will bring the oppressed people of the whole world the salvation of liberation and the peace of self-determination. (Cleaver 1971)

As a fellow mother in the BPP, Cleaver opens by expressing empathy for Huggins's trauma of being separated from her daughter as a result of state violence. Gender becomes an important condition of her heroic status.

Similar to the black mothers who organized Sojourners For Truth and Justice decades earlier, Cleaver builds on their example to elaborate on a longer tradition of black women mothers, of women imagining new futures for their children.[5] Her letter also highlights the intersectionality of the personal—a mother, a black person, and an intellectual. Her language moves from "you" to "us," reiterating the shift from the singular to the collective. Huggins's "clenched fist raised" delivers an explicit statement of solidarity, authority, and defiance. For Cleaver, "the cage" represents subjugation and the dehumanizing circumstances that would impart "death," the poisonous injustices perpetuated by a corrupted legal system. She elevates Huggins above a problematic power structure by highlighting her "greater strength" and her "heroism." Importantly, she connects Huggins's example with "oppressed people of the whole world," linking the black power movement as critical to other social justice movements, including the antiwar, anticolonial, labor, and gender equality movements of the 1970s.

There is power in self-authorship, a power that positions black women as valiant. Davis's and Cleaver's personal letters function as witness testimony, as indictments of the prevailing political and judicial system. They detail an alternative perspective by recording their observations of endurance despite the horrors of the prison-industrial system, showcasing collaborative personal engagement as proof of women's solidarity and as BPP political actions. Their recollections challenge the official record.[6] Cleaver describes a photograph of Huggins that interrupts prevailing representations of the BPP and repositions them as gender-inclusive freedom fighters. It insists on self-authorship as another instance of witness testimony in which Huggins's body asserts the "peace of self-determination" (Cleaver 1971). The photo taken upon her release from prison also insists on women—on black women—refusing to submit to institutional power. Rather than broken and prone to the institutional power, Huggins's image shows a black woman succeeding on her own terms (fig. 1). Adorned with an iconic Afro, large hoop earrings, and rings on three of her fingers, Huggins's upright pose, as well as the angle of the picture, symbolizes her extraordinary strength and demeanor. This photograph of the moment she walked out of the courthouse, as Leigh Raiford argues, "necessitated an opportunity and a challenge to reclaim, repair, remake, reimagine, and redeem" (2011, 8). The coincidence of these images coupled with the testimonies of BPP women announce political agency as personal politics.

FIG. 1. Photo taken in California in 1971. From the personal collection of Ericka Huggins.

In the 1970s, intercommunal politics began with the BPP. Inside of that, the BPP women were crucial in demonstrating the ways in which the personal is always political. Huggins's liberation story is one that extends beyond racial specifics. Her white female lawyer Catherine Roraback, for instance, in an unpublished interview with Amy Kesselman in Canaan, Connecticut, in 1992, remarked in relation to this infamous trial:

> [Huggins] is a very rare person who educated me in many ways. I'll never forget the beginning of the Panther trial the first day we were in court, and she turned to me and verbalized this—what a male scene it was . . . I suddenly looked at the courtroom from the eyes of a woman defendant, and I thought, My God, what do you do about this? . . . She was one of the most creative clients I ever had.

For Roraback, this BPP trial enlightened her to the gendered particulars of a political confrontation with institutional power. She recognizes Huggins as a scholar and teacher, and her point of view acknowledges Huggins's agency in her resistance to the patriarchal authority of the "male scene." As a woman practicing her profession and her politics in a male-dominated space, Roraback expresses empathy and sisterhood for Huggins when she imagines Huggins's view of the scene. She recognizes Huggins's vulnerable

position as a woman and as a black activist in a courtroom hostile to both, understanding the tremendous odds that inhibit their victory. Roraback also values Huggins as an artist and as an intellectual when she identifies Huggins's creativity. This creativity, this art, is the insight that comes from alternative community politics. It announces Huggins's cognizance that comes from her empathy, her understanding of another that produces her conscious awareness. Self-authorship functions as an interruption to the official record, and it plays a critical role when constructing women's stories that allow for emotions. This provides a greater landscape in developing a complex view of women's experiences in the BPP. Huggins's liberation story reveals the emotional and physical violence and pain experienced in the redefinition of the BPP agenda by COINTELPRO. Her personal account elucidates the power of first-person narratives, which infuses an awareness of humanity. Her narrative provides a radical example of the significance of affective communities and the power of feelings.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my colleagues at the Faculty Fellowship Publication Program, especially Lara Saguisag. In addition, I would like to extend thanks to Amy Kesselman, Pero Dagbovie, Rashida Harrison, Shannon Cochran, and Ericka Huggins.

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Notes

1. Ericka Huggins paraphrased the juror's remarks. She could not remember her words verbatim. The female juror was replying to the male juror who was holding out. The two lawyers who were told this information are deceased.
2. See Churchill 2001; Churchill and Vander Wall 2002a; and Churchill and Vander Wall 2002b.
3. BPP members were required to read works from thinkers and international leaders including Mao Tse-tung, Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du-Bois, Kwame Nkrumah, and John Hope Franklin, among others. Members were also required to attend political education classes.

4. See Shakur 1987; Njeri 1991; Brown 1992; Perkins 2000; Collier-Thomas and Franklin 2001; Gore, Theoharris, and Woodard 2009; and Bukhari 2010.
5. For more information on Sojourners For Truth and Justice, see McDuffie 2011 and Gore 2011.
6. For books on women and prison, see Davis 2003; Richie 2012; Talvi 2007; and Law 2012.

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