LIFE, BLOOD, AND OXYGEN: WOMEN IN THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY AND THE AMERICAN INDIAN MOVEMENT

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Shane Morey
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ABSTRACT

LIFE, BLOOD, AND OXYGEN: WOMEN IN THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY AND THE AMERICAN INDIAN MOVEMENT

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The historiography of the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the American Indian Movement (AIM) abundantly documents the actions of the men in the organizations. Most texts relegate women to a single chapter. The androcentric perspective allows the histories of these two revolutionary groups to ignore the struggles and contributions of the female members. This thesis examines the roles of the women in the BPP and AIM from standpoint feminism. Life, Blood, and Oxygen asks a variation of Julie D. Shayne’s “revolution question:” what did revolution offer women and what did women offer revolution? By researching women’s autobiographies and writings as viable historical documents, this analysis gives voice to these women and their contributions to the movement.
By asking the question, “What did revolution offer women,” the thesis studies the triple oppression of race, class, and gender that women from these two communities experienced. It covers the women’s reasons for becoming involved in paramilitary organizations, government programs such as the forced sterilization programs, and other subsequent attacks on the bodies of women compelled the women to take up arms. Women did not just experience discrimination from outside forces, but also from sexual discrimination that prevailed within the Panthers and the American Indian Movement. Given the misogyny in these two organizations, what did revolution offer women?

The final section asks the second half of the question, “What did women offer revolution?” By asserting that a revolution must be defined by the objectives that it desires to achieve, *Life, Blood, and Oxygen* answers it by examining the actions of women during the Panther’s “Service to the People” programs and women’s participation in AIM during the occupations of Alcatraz and Wounded Knee. Both AIM and the BPP released revolutionary statements in their platforms, although it was the women that made these demands possible and delivered them to the masses. Women offered the revolution life, blood, and oxygen by providing their communities with food, education, and medical care to keep the struggle going.

These women had various motives for their actions. Many were mothers and students who witnessed daily the needs of the people in their communities. Today, many of the women who participated in the 1960’s and 1970’s revolutionary movements continue to be active in the fight for justice. Former members of the BPP and AIM continue to fight for social change.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In 1973, Huey P. Newton, co-founder of the Black Panther Party, published his first book, *Revolutionary Suicide*, in which he described his theory on dying a revolutionary death instead of a reactionary death. Newton wrote, “It is better to oppose the forces that would drive me to self-murder than to endure them. Although I risk the likelihood of death, there is at least the possibility, if not the probability, of changing intolerable conditions.”¹ Newton’s activism notwithstanding, Belva Butcher, a member of the Black Panther Party, argued that it was the women in the organization who put their lives on the line to change these intolerable conditions and give their communities “life, blood, and oxygen.”²

To understand how women provided their communities with life, blood, and oxygen one must ask what Julie D. Shayne calls the revolution question. In her book *The Revolution Question: Feminism in El Salvador, Chile, and Cuba* Shayne poses the following question: “What do women do for revolutions and how does revolution relate

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to feminism?” With the patriarchy that abounded in the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the American Indian Movement (AIM), this same question needs to be asked of these movements and the women who participated in them.

Black and Native women joined social resistance movements like the Black Panthers and the American Indian Movement because these movements spoke to the needs and daily demands of people in impoverished communities. Other movements, like Second Wave Feminism of the 1960s, largely responded only to White middle-class women’s issues. Women from poor communities of color required a movement that responded to their unique experiences. Therefore, this thesis examines what these two revolutionary movements offered women and what women offered the revolution.

Women within both groups were responding to their interlocking oppressions of gender, race, and class. The Panthers’ service programs and the demands of tribal sovereignty in AIM resonated more than burning bras and White women’s reproductive demands with women in poor urban communities of color. Even as women in the BPP and AIM joined forces with the men to fight for social justice, they continued to face gender-based oppression and discrimination. Looking at the common experiences of women in the Black Panther Party and in the American Indian Movement underscores what women from historically-oppressed communities faced in their fight for equality.

This research examines the common experiences and subjugation of women who participated in the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement through their own words. Both organizations fought against political disenfranchisement and

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agitated for proper healthcare, education, housing, employment, and economic inclusion. While each organization used different tactics to achieve its goals, in both, women played key roles.

Methodologically, this project assumes the significance of women’s standpoint as a viable discourse within the context of these resistance movements. Standpoint feminism, specifically Black feminist epistemology, was developed by Patricia Hill Collins in her book *Black Feminist Thought*. Collins writes,

> Because elite White men control Western structures of knowledge validations, their interests pervade the themes, paradigms, and epistemologies of traditional scholarship. As a result, U.S. Black women’s experiences as well as those of women of African descent transnationally have been routinely distorted within or excluded from what counts as knowledge.⁴

The only way to include the experiences of the women back into the scholarship is through standpoint feminism. By reevaluating the sources of women from the BPP and AIM, standpoint argues that their experiences are just as vital to the understanding of these organizations.

Due to this distortion or exclusion of voices Collins suggests that standpoint theory posits a distinctive relationship among a group’s position in hierarchical power relations, the experiences attached to different groups positionality and the standpoint that a group constructs in interpreting these experiences.⁵

The same ideas remain true for the absence of American Indian women’s voices in the historical narrative. Standpoint theory begins to remove the distortion and exclusion of

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Black and Native women. It argues that women have their own standpoint and provides the basis for this research.

Using standpoint feminism as the main analytical tool, this research focuses largely on what the women in these two movements have written. Primary sources include autobiographies of women involved in the BPP and AIM, articles published by women in *the Black Panther Newspaper*, and the speeches that women in these movements made. Books and literature by their male counterparts are used as a discursive tool to assist in the gendered portrayal of women in the movements. However, using standpoint feminism privileges women in the telling their own stories.

Specifically by using standpoint theory, this research highlights the intracommunal oppression that is common among all of these women. In order to further underscore the challenges women of color faced routinely, this project also utilizes Pierre Bourdieu’s theories on Gender *Doxa*, which has naturalized much of the violence committed toward women.

To make the study manageable I focus primarily on the roles that women in the BPP took during the Service to the People programs and the actions of the women of AIM during the occupations at Wounded Knee and Alcatraz. I draw connections between women from two separate communities who were enduring a legacy of patriarchal control. These women experienced forced sterilization, rampant alcohol abuse from partners and fathers, domestic violence, and poor educational opportunities. Despite these hardships, they met the dual demands of motherhood and political activism. By linking these two organizations, my study offers a nuanced perspective of revolutionary
movements and reveals what militaristic revolutionary movements offered women as well as what women offered the movements.

Chapter II focuses on the historiography of these two groups. Because this research is looking at the groups through standpoint theory, women’s firsthand accounts will be the main focus. Secondary sources will be discussed to put the groups into historical context.

Chapter III examines what motivated women’s participation in groups that accepted militancy and violence as forms of self-defense. This chapter employs different sociological theories to explain the experiences of these women. Additionally, the chapter explores the shared oppression that Black and Native American women experienced. This oppression took the shape of forced sterilization programs, rape, and beating by police officers. It also came in the form of beatings and sexual discrimination from the men within these revolutionary organizations.

Finally, Chapter IV is a historical examination of what women offered the revolution. Both AIM and the BPP issued revolutionary demands of changes that they wanted to see for their people including better schools, health-care centers, and food programs. To meet these demands it was the women who staffed these institutions and stepped into the lead as true revolutionaries.

As a White male historian, I offer an outside perspective of women within these groups. Standpoint theory allows me to acknowledge the shared triple oppression that pushed women into their roles as revolutionaries. It also adds new dimensions to previous research completed on the BPP and AIM. Dr. Collins writes that “Everyone has
spoken for Black women, making it difficult for us to speak for ourselves.  

6 My intention is to allow the women to speak for themselves through their written accounts.

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CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In her 2009 book, Assata: In Her Own Words, Assata Shakur, a former member of the BPP, acknowledges that “like most poor and oppressed people in the United States, I do not have a voice. . . . We have no voice, so you must be the voice of the voiceless.”\(^1\) The autobiographies and other writings from women active in the Red Power and Black Power movements provides viable historical documents. Giving credence to the literature created by oppressed peoples enables historians to provide the standpoint of the voiceless.

Because autobiography is so subjective, an argument can be made that relying solely on it to tell the story of women in the BPP and AIM may not be historically accurate. Nonetheless, it offers a profound insight into the standpoint of the women within these movements. It details how they saw and interpreted the events that took place and shaped their activism. It is through these books and articles that we can glimpse the different perspectives of women in the BPP and AIM.

Black Panthers

Both the BPP and AIM grew out of the era of the Civil Rights Movement. However, the same peaceful tactics deployed inside the American South could not be

\(^1\) Assata Shakur, Assata: In Her Own Words: I Have Advocated and I Still Advocate Revolutionary Change (Atlanta: Talking Drum Collective, 2009), 30.
utilized. The Southern Civil Rights movement engaged in non-violent marches and demonstrations in order to change their *de jure* segregation. Outside of the American South such tactics would be totally ineffective in overcoming the pervasive and institutionalized *de facto* racial barriers that permeated all of American life. Consequently, the BPP and AIM adopted much more militant and violent methods. Precisely because the movements were more aggressive, women found these groups appealing.

Many members of the BPP had already experienced the racial barriers in southern states. It was during World War II that Black families left the social and economic inequalities and headed to California and a new life. During this time, the port city of Oakland, California experienced a wartime economic boom. Many southern Black Americans fled the institutionalized racism and lack of opportunity they had endured their entire lives and sought new opportunities in the American West. In Oakland, though, they faced new barriers to jobs and prosperity. In *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California*, Donna Jean Murch cites these *de facto* barriers as the force that gave rise to the revolutionary ideology of the BPP. She argues, “out of this historic encounter emerged a new and more militant strain of black activism.” Consequently, the children of these migrants favored the more radical ideology of Malcolm X over the pacifistic marches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Therefore, from 1966 until its demise in 1982, the Black Panthers were a militant, politically-active organization.

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In recent years, there has been an explosion of histories around the Black Panthers. This interest was sparked in 1989 by the shooting of its former co-founder, Minister of Defense, and principle theoretician, Huey P. Newton. Newton was murdered on the streets of Oakland by a member of the Black Guerilla Family.³ His death reignited interest in the Panthers, and many former Party members started publishing and republishing their autobiographies. This renewed interest was taken up by popular culture with the rise of rap and hip-hop artists singing about the BPP and its leaders. The distortions caused by pop culture are characterized by the 1995 film Mario Van Peebles released, Panther, and the portrayal of the Panthers in the movie Forrest Gump.

Van Peebles’ Panther is an oversimplified view of the Panthers as a community service group. At the other end of the spectrum is the depiction of the group in Forrest Gump, where the BPP is portrayed as militaristic males who beat White women. The truth, however, is that the Panthers were a group of young people—often community college students—who were trying to find their own path in a struggle for equality. The group made many mistakes, often exacerbated by the U.S. government, but there were different members with numerous intentions, and the group deserves a more critical analysis.

One author who provides a critical analysis is Charles E. Jones. Jones identifies this rekindling of interest as his motivation for editing The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]. He notes that his intentions were to reconstruct “the history of the Black Panther Party, perhaps the most visible and controversial radical organization of the

³ The Black Guerrilla Family was a street and prison gang. They were started by former Black Panther George Jackson. However, after the murder of George Jackson in 1971, tensions grew between Newton and the Family after they thought he had deserted the imprisoned members.
Black liberation struggle.”⁴ To do this, Jones published a collection of articles that features three essays written by ex-Panther members who focus on women’s roles and gender in the Party. This was one of the first publications that added women back into the narrative as central figures in the BPP.

The first of these three essays is by Regina Jennings. Detailing her reasons for joining the BPP and the gender discrimination that existed within the Party, Jennings writes about her own experience and that of other women. She concludes that sexism within the Party weakened its structure and aided in the destruction of the BPP.⁵ This article provides the standpoint of a former Panther who gave up everything for her community. As one of the first women to write strictly about the everyday experiences of a woman within the Panthers, this essay proves necessary for her standpoint and what the revolution offered the rank-and-file women.

The second essay in this collection, by Tracye Matthews, focuses on the gender politics within the BPP from 1966-1971. She writes,

The goal of this essay is to provide an often-ignored aspect of the history and legacy of the BPP, namely its gender politics… My purpose here is to begin this process with an examination of the construction of gender ideology within the context of the Panther Party politics from 1966-1971.⁶

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Matthews has been one of the first researchers to focus on the gendered politics within the BPP. By focusing on 1966-1971, she examines the Party during the inception and the dominate role played by men.

Matthews also explores the sexism that pervaded the leadership of the Party. Her focus, however, is on the organization’s shift from a paramilitary group to a community service group. The changing focus occurred once women began to occupy leadership positions. According to Matthews, from 1968 until 1971, female membership in the Party continued growing. Although she ends her analysis in 1971, Matthews’ work is a much needed contribution to the narrative of the Panthers.

Unlike Matthews who ended her research in 1971, the final essay on gender in *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]* is written by Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest who examines women’s roles in the BPP from its inception in 1966 to its demise in 1982. LeBlanc traces the entire history of the Party, as after 1971 women came into prominent leadership positions resulting in a more community-centered organization. In 1974, women stepped into the forefront when Elaine Brown became the chairperson of the organization. This is an important and, as LeBlanc notes, often neglected chapter in the history of the Panthers. To write from the standpoint of the female members, this fuller timeline must be researched.

Another critical collection of essays is Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas’ *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party*. They wanted their collection “to unlock some of the doors that have concealed an accurate comprehension

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of history, as well as to respond to malicious critics.”8 The selected essays follow the rise of the BPP through the government-sponsored infiltration to the eventual collapse of the Party. By including the entire time span of the BPP, the authors are able to further engender the narrative of the Panthers.

A fine example of this engendering comes from Kathleen Cleaver, former BPP member and one-time wife of Minister of Information, Eldridge Cleaver. Cleaver focuses specifically on gender in her essay Women, Power, and Revolution. She returns women to their rightful place in the narrative of the Party and demonstrates their centrality in the organization. In her words, “It’s the same as men. We are revolutionaries.”9 Cleaver’s essay documents the discrimination Black women faced both within and from outside the Party. She concludes the essay by debunking the good revolutionary/violent Black male dichotomy that many people have of the BPP. Revealing that two-thirds of the members of the BPP were women, Cleaver asks “Why isn’t this the picture that you have of the Black Panther Party?”10 While criticizing the BPP’s institutionalized sexism, she acknowledges that the organization’s favorable position on women’s liberation, dating from 1970, outpaced much of the rest of society, accounting for what revolution offered women.

Because most history on the BPP has been written by men, women are usually relegated to one or two separate chapters. These four essays started the process of


10 Ibid., 126.
examining women’s roles as central to the operation of the Party. The re-interest in the Party allowed former members and researchers the opportunity to move women from the margins to important historical subjects.

Like Jones and Cleaver, Paul Alkebulan’s *Survival Pending Revolution* seeks a more accurate history on the BPP. Alkebulan is a former member of the Party and currently is an Associate Professor of History at Virginia State. He traces changes in the Party’s ideology by dividing the group’s history into three eras. The book delineates 1966 to 1971 as the origins of the Party. It then chose 1971 to 1974 because of Huey Newton’s ideological shift which resulted in the creation of the Service to the People Programs. This shift from militancy to community service resulted in a leadership split between Newton and Eldridge Cleaver. The more violent factions of the Party resigned and followed Cleaver. The final phase, 1974 to 1982, is when Elaine Brown ran the party and women dominated position of authority.

*Survival Pending Revolution* also deconstructs the previously mentioned images of the Party created by popular culture by asserting they were not just “criminal anarchists with political pretensions,” nor were they strictly “a community service organization.”¹¹ Alkebulan finds the truth somewhere in the middle of what the critics and supporters argue.

Focusing largely on internal struggles that the United States government amplified, he includes a chapter that explains women’s involvement in the BPP. Like Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest, he discusses women throughout the life of the Party. He

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briefly mentions sexual division within the Party, the roles that women took, how women affected the Party, and the years under Elaine Brown’s leadership. Nonetheless, Alkebulan falls into the same trap that has dominated the historiography of the BPP. By only offering one chapter devoted to women, his analysis and contribution relegates women to the margins much like many male members of the Party did.

While these collections and sources provide a general historiography of the Panthers, to explore the BPP from standpoint feminism the works completed by the female members must tell the actual history from their experiences. These writings also answer the question of what did revolution offer the women and what did women offer revolution. Elaine Brown, Assata Shakur, and Angela Davis are the only women involved in the Panthers that have published full-length autobiographies.

Elaine Brown’s autobiography, *A Taste of Power*, was written years after leaving the Party at a time of soaring interest in the BPP. Hers is, in part, an account of a woman growing up and coming to terms with racism in America. The early chapters focus on her rejection of her mother and all things Black. She writes about her introduction into the Party and her relationship with Huey P. Newton. Gradually ascending the Party’s hierarchy, she eventually led the Party while Newton was in exile in Cuba. Brown writes extensively about the sexism she experienced as a woman in a position of authority in the BPP. Though written after the demise of the Party, her autobiography provides the only narrative that expresses the standpoint of a woman that held such a high position of authority within the Party.

Assata Shakur’s autobiography, *Assata*, chronicles the life of a young Black woman who experienced racism in both the American north and south. Shakur describes
the White supremacy that she experienced throughout her childhood, especially in school. She covers her decision to join the Black Panthers and later the Black Liberation Army (BLA). In 1977, Shakur was arrested after a shootout with the New Jersey State Troopers. Her autobiography follows her subsequent trial and racial discrimination in the American judicial system. As the only full-length autobiography of a rank-and-file female BPP member who worked in the Service to the People programs, Shakur’s book provides the reader with a personal account of the hardships and accomplishments of a rank-and-file female Party member.

Like Assata Shakur, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*, provides the reader with a Black woman’s standpoint of activism and life in the American judicial system. Davis, who had a “permanently ambiguous status” with the BPP, worked alongside the Los Angeles chapter of the Panthers. Her autobiography focuses on her reasons for becoming involved with radical and socialist groups in the struggle for freedom. Most of the text focuses on her 1970 arrest and trial, during which the BPP mobilized around the Free Angela campaign. Davis’ autobiography offers an insight into a Black woman’s experiences in the American prison and legal system.

All three of these women wrote political autobiographies that are instrumental in delineating the lives of Black women during this period. Brown and Shakur share a look into the lives of Black women growing up and discovering themselves. Neither Brown nor Shakur imagined they would be revolutionaries, and their autobiographies reveal the decisions that led them to the BPP. Davis and Shakur both wrote their

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12 A militant Black nationalist organization that operated during the same time as the BPP.

autobiographies while on trial, fighting for their lives. These are the standpoints of women experiencing the Civil Rights Revolution and facing possible execution.

While these are the only three women who have written full-length autobiographies from the BPP, Joan Bird and Afeni Shakur told their stories in Look for me in the Whirlwind: The Collective Autobiographies of the New York 21. The book contains testimony from sixteen members of the New York Panther 21 who were arrested and accused of plotting to bomb public buildings in 1969. Both women grew up in poor neighborhoods, were troubled youths, and chose to join a militarized civil rights organization. Their stories of oppression, as the only women from the Panther 21, are important primary documents to affix to the historical record.

Another former Party member who retold her story in the 1990’s is Akua Njeri (AKA Deborah Johnson). Njeri, the widow of slain Chicago Panther leader Fred Hampton, discusses her membership in the Party in 1991 during an interview with Burning Spear Publications. Burning Spear later released the conversation under the title, My Life with the Black Panther Party. Njeri explains her reasons for joining the Party, the legacy of Fred Hampton, and the racism inherent in the government’s Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO). The publication is a political critique of the FBI’s infiltration of the Panthers.

Developing a gendered history of the Panthers requires the inclusion of autobiographical work by men in the Party. As historian Joan Scott quotes Natalie Davis on gendering history: “It seems to me that we should be interested in the history of both

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14 The New York Panther 21 was a group of 21 BPP members who were arrested in 1969 for conspiracy to commit murder and arson. Only 13 were brought to trial and in 1971, all 13 were acquitted of the charges.
women and men, that we should not be working only on the subjected sex any more than an historian of class can focus entirely on peasants.”

Bobby Seale’s *Seize the Time* and Huey P. Newton’s *Revolutionary Suicide* explain the intentions of the two men who organized the BPP. They provide a masculine perspective of the origins of the BPP and its existence as a movement for Black men. Eldridge Cleaver’s book, *Soul on Ice*, contains Cleaver’s views on gender and a chapter titled “To All Black Women, From All Black Men.” I use these autobiographies for historical context and to exemplify the patricentric thinking of male BPP members.

The American Indian Movement

AIM was started by first-generation urban Native Americans. However, unlike the Black migrants whose offspring started the Panthers, Native Americans had not moved to cities of their own accord. In 1956, Congress approved the “Relocation Act” which encouraged Native Americans to leave reservations and assimilate in cities. The U.S. government used relocation as a way to cut educational and health services for the Natives who remained on reservations. Relocation also was an attempt by the U.S. government to force integration after it had placed Native people on reservations years earlier. In *Self-Determination and Subordination: The Past, Present, and Future of American Indian Governance*, Rebecca L. Robbins explains that the legislation resulted in “35,000 [Indians] being relocated to such places as Los Angeles, San Francisco,

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Denver, Phoenix, Minneapolis, Seattle, Boston, and Chicago during the years 1957-59 alone.\textsuperscript{17} The relocatees and their children became objects of racial discrimination like the southern Black migrants. Relocation, racism, and the spending cuts to reservations, combined with the ongoing Civil Rights and Anti-War Movements of the 1960s, gave rise to a new militancy among urban Indians.

Despite deploying similar tactics and demands, AIM never received the same amount of interest from popular culture that the BPP acquired. Moreover, little work has focused on a gendered historical perspective of AIM. With the exception of Mary Brave Bird, few of AIM’s female members wrote autobiographies or other works documenting their experiences. As with the BPP, almost all the autobiographical materials from AIM comes from men. The autobiographies of Dennis Banks, Russell Means, and Leonard Peltier offer a historical view of what AIM accomplished and how men perceived their female counterparts. They provide a more gendered context of the movement, offering firsthand accounts of what the men saw and chose to focus on during AIM’s lifespan. Other Native American women who were active in the Red Power Movement in different political capacities have written memoirs that are used throughout this research.

Mary Brave Bird, a Lakota woman, published two autobiographies detailing her time in AIM and as an activist. The first, entitled \textit{Lakota Woman}, chronicles her youth and her involvement with AIM to 1977. The book focuses on the racism she experienced going to school, her time in AIM, and her marriage to AIM’s medicine man, Leonard Crow Dog. Having participated in the 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee, Brave Bird offers one of the only accounts of the occupation from a woman’s

\textsuperscript{17} Robbins, “Self-Determination,” 99.
perspective. Brave Bird published her second book, *Ohitika Woman*, which continues her story up to 1993, including her divorce and her years battling alcoholism. She also writes extensively on rediscovering Native American religions and ceremonies.

Just as Brown, Shakur, and Davis’ autobiographies provide the standpoint of women in the BPP, the only full length autobiography by a female AIM member is also an important historical work. Brave Bird’s two books provide the perspective of a Native woman experiencing the American Indian fight for rights and tribal sovereignty.

Other Native American activists such as Wilma Mankiller, Winona LaDuke, and LaDonna Harris, give us a female perspective on involvement with Indian rights groups. Wilma Mankiller’s book, *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People*, is one of the most important for this research. The book combines the history of the Cherokee Nation with the history of her own family. Mankiller became the first female elected chief of a tribe. As Elaine Brown faced sex discrimination within the BPP, Mankiller discusses the misogyny that existed within the Cherokee Nation.

Winona LaDuke’s 2005 book, *Recovering the Sacred*, argues that Native Americans must recover their history and sacred materials from a hostile dominant white culture. LaDuke, an Anishinaabe activist, environmentalist, and writer, exposes the poverty, unemployment, and education problems experienced by people on reservations. Since these conditions largely affect women and children, Laduke’s commentary on these issues reveals women’s reason for being drawn to a revolutionary group.

Another politically active woman who drew attention to issues confronting Native women and children, Ladonna Harris, a Comanche, published her autobiography *Ladonna Harris: A Comanche Life* in 2000. Instead of being on the militant activist side
of the Civil Rights Movement, Harris was working with politicians and getting legislation passed. She was married to Senator Fred Harris (D-OK) and worked within the system to better the lives of Native Americans. Both Laduke’s and Harris’ books offer the standpoint from women who recognized and organized around the poverty they witnessed in their own communities.

All of these autobiographies offer a woman’s perspective as to what is happening inside Native American communities. Mankiller and Harris were mothers who responded to the poverty, malnutrition, and racism they witnessed daily. LaDuke is an intellectual who spent her life speaking out against environmental degradation and theft of Native culture. While all three women have different experiences, their recognition of problems confronting Native Americans often intersect to provide rich primary documents.

To accompany these first-hand accounts, there has also been a spattering of secondary sources focusing primarily on women in AIM. Donna Hightower-Langston, an enrolled Cherokee and a professor at California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly), wrote a scholarly article entitled “American Indian Women’s Activism in the 1960s and 1970s.” She focuses on the role that women played in the occupations of Alcatraz and Wounded Knee. Dr. Hightower-Langston also writes about the leading positions women assumed during the fish-in movements of the 1960s. Though a secondary source, Hightower-Langston’s work helps us understand what women contributed to the movement.

When discussing Native women activists, Anna Mae Aquash must be mentioned. Aquash was a Mi’kmaq woman from Nova Scotia, Canada who joined AIM
in the 1970s and actively participated at the occupation of Wounded Knee. She never had the opportunity to write her own story since in 1976 she was shot execution style near the Pine Ridge Reservation. However, others have chronicled her life. Johanna Brand’s *The Life and Death of Anna Mae Aquash* contains excerpts from letters Aquash wrote to her sisters. Brand focuses on Anna Mae’s childhood and her motivation to join AIM. Absent an autobiography, this book provides the standpoint of a woman who spent much of her life dedicated to the Indigenous struggle for sovereignty and access to resources.

The above sources will be analyzed through standpoint feminism. The methodological sources are found within Dr. Patricia Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought* and *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*. *Black Feminist Thought* explains Collins’ theory on Standpoint Feminism which argues that women’s experiences serve as a point of departure for practicing social sciences. Both of Dr. Collins’ books delve into the history and social conditions that have shaped the experiences of Black women. As such, they are important in helping one to understand how women of color are radicalized by daily experiences. *Fighting Words* concentrates more on the prejudice that Black women face as well as the diminishment of their accomplishments. Together they provide important insights into the thinking of women from communities of color that a White male historian would not have.

Finally, the secondary sources provide the historical background and larger picture of what was happening when the women were writing. I rely upon secondary sources for understanding AIM’s occupation of Alcatraz and Wounded Knee, as well as to deepen my knowledge of what made the Panthers start their patrols and Survival Programs.
These sources combined provide base material for the stories of Black and Native American women in their own words. By comparing autobiographies and other writings of members of these movements one gains a more nuanced view of these organizations. For example, Assata Shakur’s autobiography is much more condemning of prevailing racism in the United States, Elaine Brown’s writings focus on the sexism that pervaded the BPP, and Mary Brave Bird chose to write on how important Native culture has been in the shaping and saving of her own life.

While the women in the BPP assume a more dominant role in my study because more of them wrote their stories, the autobiographies of male members in AIM and other activist Native women fill any gaps created by the absence of female accounts. Consequently, Mary Brave Bird’s autobiographies are perhaps the most important sources from AIM and will be used extensively.

All of these writings by women involved in the Black Power and Red Power Movements reveal their love of and struggle for oppressed people. Whether it was AIM’s involvement on the Pine Ridge reservation for tribal sovereignty and the need to determine their own fate, or the Panther call for “revolutionary nationalism” that urged the Panthers to align themselves with other struggles to gain economic and political freedom, women from both organizations involved themselves to help impoverished communities. Their personal stories are testaments to the courage of these women who defied traditional gender roles and risked their lives in order to fight for liberation and justice.

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CHAPTER III

“THE REVOLUTION WILL BE LOST WITHOUT HER”

Both the BPP and AIM were started as a response to racial profiling and unwarranted racist attacks from police within poor communities of color. The struggle against police harassment quickly became a militant revolutionary movement. Even though men started both groups, women sought out active roles within these organizations as well. Native American and Black women who became members had numerous reasons for joining the movements. Coming from different backgrounds, many became involved because these movements offered an avenue to struggle against poverty and oppression. Like women everywhere, these activists suffered attacks on their bodies and self-image from the dominant white culture. This chapter examines what revolution offered women, while also looking at their triple discrimination of gender, race, and class.

The Black Panther Party was founded in 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. The two met while attending Oakland City College in California. Originally, the Party was called the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. Seale and Newton intended the BPP to be for Black men seeking to arm themselves against police repression. Their
idea was to create a party consisting of the Lumpenproletariat. Consequently, they focused on recruiting streetwise men who wanted to protect the Black community against what was viewed as an occupying police force. In his autobiography, Seale writes, “Huey wanted the brothers off the block- brothers who had been out there robbing banks, brothers who had been pimping, brothers who had been peddling dope, brothers who ain’t gonna take no shit, brothers who had been fighting pigs.” Newton also wrote about this need to recruit the brothers off the block, “All that summer we circulated in the Black communities of Richmond, Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco. Wherever brothers gathered, we talked with them about their right to arm.” The Party did its recruiting in pool halls and bars, places where men predominantly gathered.

However, their vision of a militaristic male party quickly changed. In 1967, the authorities arrested Huey Newton after a shootout with the police. The following year the Panthers’ Minister of Information, Eldridge Cleaver, fled to Algeria. Finally, in 1969, Bobby Seale and Chief of Staff David Hilliard were incarcerated. These departures created a leadership vacuum that opened up more opportunities for women to assume positions of power. Chairman Bobby Seale’s wife, Artie Seale, describes why Black women from poor communities were willing to continue the struggle in the face of so

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1 The term Lumpenproletariat was originally coined by Karl Marx to describe working class people who would never bring about revolutionary change.


3 Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 121.

4 Ibid., 134.

5 With Newton in jail, Cleaver led Party members on an attacks against the police. The subsequent shootout resulted in the death of 17-year-old Li’l Bobby Hutton and the arrest of Eldridge Cleaver. While out on parole Cleaver left the country to avoid trial.
much police suppression: “At first, when Bobby and Huey were just starting the organization, the women hung back. . . . But we began to find out the pigs don’t care that we were women. So we had to change our way of looking at ourselves.”6 As Angela Davis writes in her autobiography, “Liberation is a dialectical movement—the Black man cannot free himself as a Black man unless the Black woman can liberate herself from all this muck—and it works the other way around.”7

In 1967, Tarika Lewis became the first female member of the Panthers, in what would become a flood of women. Tarika was just a high school student when she joined. In the ensuing years female membership increased, creating a shift in the ideology of the Party. The BPP dropped the words “For Self Defense” from the name as the Party became more focused on implementing revolutionary aims in the form of the “Service to the People” Programs. Instead of forming police patrols the Party begun focusing on solving the economic and social problems in poor communities. They opened schools, ran medical programs, and created employment opportunities.

With the shift from a paramilitary organization to social activism more women became involved in the struggle. In her essay on women, Kathleen Neal Cleaver posed the following question: “How could a young black woman raised during the 1950s find some place to take collective action against the repressive social conditions she faces, and bring about revolutionary change?”8 The answer would be in joining the struggle alongside the brothers from the block. So many women entered the group that in

a 1969 survey Bobby Seale revealed that two-thirds of the BPP membership was women.9

Though women would join the BPP for different reasons, many of their stories share commonalities. Regina Jennings discusses her reasons for joining the Party:

I joined the Black Panther Party because I wanted to help smash racism in America. I joined the Black Panthers because it was the only organization that faced White America forth rightly without begging or carrying signs for equality and justice.10

Jennings grew up watching the Civil Rights Movement, seeing peaceful marchers assaulted by police dogs and attacked with fire hoses. Like the men that Newton and Seale were recruiting, Jennings joined the Party to fight back against such attacks.

Joan Bird echoes the same sentiments in her reasons for joining the BPP in New York.

The first time I thought about the Black Panther Party at all, I remember reading in the newspaper-Daily news, mass media paper, that Panthers at Brooklyn Criminal Court were viciously assaulted and attacked by off-duty members of the New York Police force. . . . I’d known my whole life about different policemen in the black community . . . arresting brothers and sisters on the street and actually beating them with clubs . . . this is the type of thing you see in the Black community.11

The experiences of living under racial discrimination in the United States radicalized Bird and the BPP offered her a very real opportunity to stand up against her oppressors and fight back.

Having the opportunity to fight back against a system of racism was only one reason for becoming involved in the struggle. Women, like men, had a diverse set of


reasons for wanting to get involved with the Panthers. Assata Shakur, born JoAnne Deborah Byron, writes in her autobiography, “I was impressed with the kinds of informal solutions they had cooked up to deal with the problems they faced, and I enrolled in the practical skills classes they gave.” Shakur’s reasons for wanting to get involved in the BPP were still to help her community, but she wanted her involvement to employ different methods. She saw the Service to the People Programs as a reason to get involved.

To serve their communities, members of the BPP began a series of programs aimed at the problems they witnessed in the Black community. These included free breakfasts for schoolchildren, free food giveaways, clothing and shoe giveaways, sickle-cell anemia research, and education programs for poor children among others. The increasing presence of women that influenced the BPP to shift from a paramilitary organization to a community service group. In To Die for the People Newton wrote,

When Bobby and I started the Black Panther Party, we wanted to build in the Black community the love, the sacredness, and the unity we needed so desperately. This is still our goal and we try to help the community by administering our many survival programs.

The mark that rank-and-file women left on the Party was still revolutionary, but revolutionary in the sense that it left a permanent impact on the community. Patricia Collins argues that Black women “use their special roles as mothers to forge powerful

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13 Matthews, “No One Ever Asks,” 277.

mechanisms of political actions.”15 The Service to the People programs allowed exactly what many Panther women wanted to accomplish—powerful political action.

It was these programs that motivated Panther Cheryl Simmons to join the BPP:

The Panthers were doing something, they were feeding people, they were talking about taking care of the seniors in the community. In some cases they were providing childcare. Free medical centers were in the making. These were significant accomplishments and I thought I’d just check these people out. Simmons ended up joining the Party and becoming involved in the service programs because she realized that they could help provide people with these essential services.

Similarly, Vanetta Molsen joined the BPP after she completed community college in Seattle. The Party gave her an opportunity to engage in community service. She worked selling the Party’s newspaper, The Black Panther, at the free breakfast programs and the free medical clinic. One of Molsen’s reasons for working in the BPP was to make “our people strong so they could survive.”16

Besides services to communities, the Black Panther Party also offered many women an opportunity to change their self-image. Patricia Collins focuses a whole chapter of her book on the need for Black women to have the power of self-definition. Images of Black women generated by White culture are chronically derogatory. For example, Collins references the image of Sarah Baartman and the Hottentot-Venus. The Venus was a Black woman with malformed genitalia and deviant sexual behavior. Other stereotypical images of Black women in American culture included the mammie, welfare

15 Collins, Black Feminist Thought, 4.

16 Paul Alkebulan, Survival Pending, 59.
mothers, mules, or sexually denigrated women. These images functioned to structure the self-images many of the women who joined the BPP grew up with and sought to dismantle.

Racist depictions of Black women so pervaded American society that even male BPP members in prison, once separated from the prevailing culture, were able to recognize them and use the revolution to change them. In 1961, George Jackson was arrested for armed robbery of a gas station and sentenced to from one year to life in prison. In prison, Jackson became a member of the BPP and became aware of the denigration of Black women. In a letter to his mother, Jackson writes,

On close examination, what you are saying is that black women standing naked and natural are ugly or less than beautiful… The only way for her to remotely resemble anything beautiful is to bleach and straighten her hair…there is only one standard of beauty the Western standard.

Jackson wrote many letters concerning gender and race, based on realizations he had while in the California prison system surrounded by men.

Stereotypical images of Black women have remained so strong that in 1993 Dr. Cornel West addressed the “potential sexual power over whites” that these distorted representations carried. He argues that Black women are portrayed as the “Jezebel (the seductive temptress), Sapphire (the evil manipulative bitch), or Aunt Jemima (the sexless,

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18 Ibid., 183.
long suffering nurturer).”  

West describes how these images invoke the distortion of certain features—lips, hair, hips—to distinguish Black women from the “White norm of beauty.” The rejection of these images empowered many women who joined the BPP.

In her autobiography, Elaine Brown focuses the first few chapters on her own coming of age and grappling with her Black femaleness. During her early life, Brown attempted to escape her mother and escape being Black. She started becoming aware of the Black liberation movement from a White man she was dating. They began having conversations about the struggle that was taking place and about communism, neither of which were familiar to her. She titles a chapter in her autobiography, “Getting Black,” referencing her coming to terms with and embracing her Blackness and her Black community. She got involved with the Black Nationalist movement and attended the meetings of the United Slaves (US), Maulana Karenga’s organization in Southern California. However, Brown discovered that sexism pervaded the US organization. When the Los Angeles Chapter of the BPP came to talk at an US meeting, Brown found them exciting. She remembers “Unlike the rest, they had drawn their guns. They walked the streets of Oakland openly armed, to challenge any police who were assaulting blacks.”

Brown got involved in the movement just as she was rediscovering what it meant to be a Black woman. Dr. Collins writes about the importance of this rediscovery. She argues that, “self-definition speaks to the power dynamics involved in rejecting

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21 Ibid., 120.

externally defined, controlling images of Black womanhood.” As she became involved in the struggle for freedom, Brown was able to free herself from an image based on negative images of poor Black women that she had grown up with. The Black Panthers allowed her to confront the power structure that created these stereotypes and that caused her to reject her own mother and her entire culture.

Akua Njeri also discusses these images and mindset that were prevalent in her youth. Njeri notes, “In the 50s when I was growing up on the west side of Chicago black-skin and nappy hair were negative. If you were fair complexioned and had long (what we called “good”) hair, you were accepted.” Njeri cites this rejection of the Black body as her reason for becoming politically active.

In many ways, others found validation of themselves as Black women by participating in the revolution. Afeni Shakur wrote about being involved with gangs and constantly getting into fights while growing up. Just like Brown, Shakur became aware of the Black liberation struggle from a boyfriend. They had been up all night smoking reefer and snorting cocaine when her boyfriend introduced her to Malcolm X and the Black Muslims. She goes on to write that, “The dude was saying that it’s a whole thing that you have to learn, that black is the best color on the planet Earth. It was really a good feeling for someone who has gone through all of that.” The “all of that” she refers to is the same negative stereotypes and images that Elaine Brown and all Black women in the U.S. have been forced to endure.

23 Collins, Black Feminist Thought, 126.


25 Balagoon, Look for Me, 238.
Shakur finally decided to join the BPP in 1967 after she saw Bobby Seale speak. In *Look for me in the Whirlwind*, she writes “I didn’t know anything about the Black Panther Party; I knew I had more respect for them than I had for all the organizations in the world. I knew they had heart.” Finding an organization that was willing to confront the issues Shakur found important motivated her to stop her drug use and become involved in the struggle for Black liberation. For the first time in her life, she joined forces with groups of people who were rejecting popular negative images of Black women thereby allowing her the power of self-determination.

The revolution also spoke to educated women who sought to destroy racial violence. Angela Davis was born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama, where racial violence was inescapable. When she graduated from high school, Davis chose to go to Brandeis University in Massachusetts to study. She continued studying and earned her doctorate degree in Germany at the University of Frankfurt. During her time abroad Davis became aware of the Black liberation struggle at home:

Watts was exploding; furiously burning. And out of the ashes of watts, Phoenix-like, a new Black militancy was being born…While I was hidden away in West Germany the Black Liberation Movement was undergoing decisive metamorphoses. . . . The slogan “Black Power” sprang out of a march in Mississippi. . . . Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, li’l Bobby Hutton-these were some of the names that reached me. The more the struggle at home accelerated, the more frustrated I became at being forced to experience it vicariously.

After her graduate advisors allowed Davis to finish her dissertation in the United States at the University of California, San Diego, she started working for the Southern California chapter of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee

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27 Davis, *Angela Davis*, 144.
This led to her involvement with the Panthers. Because of the imprisonment and loss of male leaders that the Panthers experienced from 1968-1969, SNCC and the BPP merged. The Panthers needed the help of SNCC organizers such as Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown. In 1969, SNCC changed its name to The Student National Coordinating Committee thereby signaling an end to non-violence. Throughout this time Davis worked in the office that SNCC and the BPP shared.

While in San Diego, Davis started writing to prisoner George Jackson. In August, 1970, Jackson’s 17-year-old brother, Jonathan Jackson, stormed into the Marin County Courthouse and freed prisoners James McClain, Ruchell Magee, and William Christmas using armed force. They took the Judge Harold Haley and District Attorney Gary Thomas along with three jurors, hostage. They demanded the release of Jackson and the rest of the Soledad Brothers. During their escape attempt, the police opened fire killing Jackson, Haley, McClain, and Christmas. One of the weapons used during this incident was registered to Angela Davis. She was arrested and accused of buying the weapons, robbery, murder, and conspiracy.

The “Free Angela” campaign became one of the Panthers’ rallying points. In To Die for the People, Huey Newton noted that “Angela Davis has exemplified the highest expression of concern for the people. We should show our appreciation of this by coming to her aid in this hour of need.” Even though Davis was never an actual member of the Panthers, their campaign and support reveal the strong relationship she had with the Party.

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28 SNCC was one of the early organizations in the Southern Civil Rights Movement. They became famous for their voting drives and peaceful protests.

29 Newton, To Die For, 233.
Much like the BPP, the American Indian Movement was formed by inner city youth. Clyde Bellecourt, Eddie Benton, Dennis Banks, and Mary Jane Wilson, Chippewa Indians from Minneapolis, Minnesota started AIM in 1968. They had the same intentions as the BPP. As Dennis Banks writes in his autobiography, “Our first priority was to deal with police brutality. . . . We patterned it after the patrol created by the Black Panthers in Oakland.” Minneapolis police waited outside bars frequented by Native Americans and at closing time the police harassed or brutalized them. AIM sought to put an end to this violence. Even the AIM uniforms were modeled after the Panthers’ uniforms, but rather than black berets and jackets AIM members wore red berets and jackets while on patrol.

In her first book, Mary Brave Bird recounts the founding of AIM. Brave Bird’s autobiography describes the formation and origins of AIM. In *Lakota Woman* she writes, “We took some of our rhetoric from the blacks, who had started their movement before we did. Like them we were minorities, poor, and discriminated against.” Even though the members of AIM had different tasks ahead of them, they realized that the tactics and rhetoric used by groups like SNCC and the BPP would benefit their movement, too.

Radical approaches were required to confront the poverty that existed in Native American communities. In a 1970 speech on Indian Affairs, U.S. President

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31 Her first autobiography, *Lakota Woman*, was published under her then married name, Crow Dog. At the time she was married to AIM’s medicine man Leonard Crow Dog. However, for this research I will refer to her under her chosen name, Brave Bird.

Richard Nixon highlighted the unequal socioeconomic conditions in their communities, “on virtually every scale of measurement—employment, income, education, health—the condition of the Indian people ranks at the bottom.”\(^{33}\) Nixon’s speech did not include the women on the reservation who, as Lorelei Decora Means, an Oglala Sioux woman and cousin of AIM member Russell Means, writes,

> On reservations, Indian women and children bore the greatest burden or poor nutrition, inadequate health care, and forced or deceptive sterilization programs; native women and children also faced higher level of domestic violence resulting from poverty, joblessness, substance abuse, and helplessness.\(^{34}\)

What Nixon did not seem to consider was that it was women on the reservation who ranked at the bottom. They suffered the most from the consequences of the government’s policies toward the Native Americans. Participating in revolution offered the women of AIM the means to confront these problems.

It was not just Native Americans in the United States who were suffering, AIM also had members from Canada. One woman, Anna Mae Aquash, lived most of her life in poverty in Canada. Aquash grew up on the Mi’kmaq reserve in Nova Scotia with her mother, Mary Ellen Pictou, and two sisters. The family lived on welfare in a house with no electricity, no running water, and no central heating system.\(^{35}\)

Anna Mae sought a way to address the unequal education in indigenous communities. She found this in AIM. She first met co-founder Russell Means and other members of AIM on Thanksgiving Day in 1970, at an event called *Mayflower II*. At the


\(^{34}\) Ibid., 51.

event, groups of Native Americans protested against the commemoration of the arrival of Europeans in North America. Johanna Brand cites this event as the demonstration that connected East Coast and Canadian indigenous people to AIM. In 1972, Aquash joined AIM in the Trail of Broken Treaties caravan.\(^{36}\) This led to the occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs office in Washington and ended with the Occupation of Wounded Knee. In 1975 Anna Mae told Roslyn Jumping Bull her reasons for becoming involved in AIM when she said, “I left everything because I wanted to show you I love you people and want to help you.” \(^{37}\) Ultimately, Anna Mae left her family, her country, and everything she had to fight for the equality of Native Americans.

Unlike Aquash, Wilma Mankiller never became a member of AIM, but their activism caught her attention and motivated her to become involved in the struggle for equality. The Mankiller family had been relocated to San Francisco as a result of the government’s relocations policy in the 1950s. Russell Means articulated the feelings of Mankiller and many Native Americans toward these relocation programs:

> The Eisenhower administration had come up with yet another plan to depopulate Indian reservations. The idea was to integrate Indians into urban ghettos so that in a few generations we would intermarry and disappear into the underclass. Then the government could take the rest of our land and there would be no one left to object. \(^{38}\)

\(^{36}\) The Trail of Broken Treaties caravan was a cross country protest led by AIM and other Native American activists to address the inequalities experienced by indigenous peoples.

\(^{37}\) Brand, \textit{Life and Death}, 122.

Having experienced these forced relocations, Mankiller became involved in the Civil Rights Movement in 1968. She describes her entrance into the struggle in her autobiography:

In those early months of 1968, new battle strategies also were being drawn by small bands of daring women liberationists who congregated in cities around the nation. In San Francisco, I eventually discovered that many of those women were wives, mothers, students, bright dropouts, and others who met to discuss their sexuality, employment opportunities, and male tyranny.39

As a single mother who had not finished college, Mankiller was drawn toward female activists who were willing to fight with her for issues that affected Native women such as misogyny and unemployment.

The first radical Native act that caught Mankiller’s attention was on November 20, 1969, when a group of Native Americans calling themselves Indians of All Tribes (IAT) took over the deserted federal prison on Alcatraz Island off the coast of San Francisco, California. The government abandoned the island in 1963. IAT occupied the Island using the Fort Laramie Treaty, which granted the tribes “surplus federal land.”40 The students and demonstrators felt that Alcatraz met the proper qualifications for Native Americans to reclaim.

During the occupation, many in Mankiller’s family took part to show support for IAT’s actions: Wilma’s brother Richard was the first, followed by her sister Vanessa, her brother James, and finally her sister Linda who stayed the longest.41 Wilma, as a


41 Mankiller and Wallis, Mankiller, 193.
single mother, stayed in San Francisco and did fundraising for the occupation at the American Indian center in San Francisco. When writing about her call to activism, Mankiller states, “The first activist group I truly identified with was the Black Panther Party.”42 By this time the Panthers had focused their energies on the Service to the People programs. During the occupation Alcatraz occupiers mirrored the BPP’s actions by setting up an alternative school and healthcare services to meet their demands. Unable to be on the island, Mankiller worked in the Center raising funds for the future of the occupation.

Bodies

On July 15, 1972 The Black Panther ran the following headline: “They Told Me I had to be Sterilized or Die.”43 The article contains the story of Panther Lula “Smokey” Hudson. Hudson had been improperly diagnosed by doctors who wanted to give her a complete hysterectomy. Upon getting a second opinion, she discovered that the surgery was not necessary. Hudson told the Panther reporter, “They [the doctors] don’t mind testing their theories on Black and oppressed people.”44 Hudson was only one of many women who joined the BPP and AIM having grown up with their bodies under attacks. The organizations offered women avenues to confront the dominant society that inflicted these attacks upon their person.

The women from these groups have added to our understanding of the body as a site of history. In her essay on the body as a primary cite of historical action, Kathleen

42 Mankiller and Wallis, Mankiller, 154.

43 “They Told Me I Had to Be Sterilized or Die,” The Black Panther (Oakland), July 15, 1972.

44 Ibid., 4.
Canning writes that “body remains a largely unexplicated and undertheorised 
concept.” Many of the women’s personal narratives have focused on violent acts 
committed against themselves and their friends. Hudson’s attempted forced sterilization 
of Hudson is just one instance of a story too often repeated among women in poor 
communities. Many of the stories involve personnel within institutions such as medical 
practitioners and law enforcement. The women demonstrate how violent acts towards 
their body further propelled them toward revolutionary actions.

To understand why women sacrificed their personal safety and the safety of 
their families during the Wounded Knee Occupation, one must first understand the 
historical significance that the creek holds for Native people. Wounded Knee is the site of 
a Indian massacre that occurred in 1890 where the United States Army sought to disarm 
the Lakota people. During the removal of the Lakota people’s guns, the Army opened fire 
on the tribe, murdering over 300 Lakota people, mostly women and children. The victims 
were either buried in mass unmarked graves or left out in the open to freeze. A Lakota 
Holy Man, Black Elk, was a young boy when the massacre happened. He remembers,

I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now from this high 
hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped 
and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still 
young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was 
brained in the blizzard. A people’s dream died there. It was a beautiful dream. And I, 
to whom so great a vision was given in my youth—you see me now a pitiful old 
man who has done nothing, for the nation’s hoop is broken and scattered. There is 
no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.46

45 Kathleen Canning, “The Body as Method? Reflections on the Place of the Body in Gender 
History,” *Gender & History* 11, no. 3 (November 1999): 499.

46 Troy R. Johnson, *Red Power: The Native American Civil Rights Movement* (New York: 
Chelsea House, 2007), 17.
This historical significance led Gladys Bisonette, a Oglala Lakota elder, to proclaim to AIM, “Go ahead and make your stand at Wounded Knee. If you men don’t do it, you can stay here and talk for all eternity and we women will do it.” In 1973, the Oglala leadership on the Pine Ridge Reservation called on AIM to help them deliberate with the Tribal Government. The tribal chair, Dick Wilson, had won another questionable election and the tribe wanted him impeached. As negotiations broke down, AIM decided to take a stand. On February 27, 1973, members of AIM and residents of the Pine Ridge Reservation took over Wounded Knee. Immediately the FBI, State Marshalls, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) police arrived. Despite this show of force by the United States government and local law enforcement, the small band of Native Americans occupied Wounded Knee for 71 days. As Winona LaDuke writes, “The second Wounded Knee, in many ways, began to rebuild the sacred hoop.”

While AIM was fighting the strength of the U.S. government, Mary Brave Bird chose to give birth to her first child amid the exchange of gunfire at Wounded Knee because she did not trust BIA hospitals after her sister Barbera had been sterilized against her will in the BIA hospital at Rosebud. Brave Bird decided that a makeshift hospital under siege was safer for her and her first-born child rather than the possibility of facing a racist government policy that removed the right of poor women to have children.

Historically, the government’s forced sterilization of Black and Native American women had been so prevalent that Angela Davis devoted an entire chapter to it:


in her book titled, *Women, Race, & Class*. The American Eugenics Society was established in 1922 and, as Davis writes “by 1932 the Eugenics Society could boast that at least twenty-six states had passed compulsory sterilization laws.” These laws were largely aimed at Native American and Black women. In 1973, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) attorney, Brenda Feigen Fasteau, reported that, “As far as I can determine, the statistics reveal that since 1964 approximately 65% of the women sterilized in North Carolina were Black.” Mary Brave Bird was unaware of these statistics, but Choctaw physician Dr. Connie Uri testified in a Senate committee hearing that “by 1976 some 24 percent of all Indian women of childbearing age had been sterilized.” Perhaps Brave Bird and her body truly were safer giving birth in the middle of a gun battle.

These experiences motivated Brave Bird to join the fight against forced sterilization throughout the 1970s. In her second autobiography, *Ohitika Woman*, Brave Bird posits the feelings of White society toward Native Americans:

> Those damn Indians, breeding like rabbits, living in substandard conditions, existing on welfare, are being a burden on the American taxpayer. And most of them are not even legally married. Let’s prevent those squaws from having more papooses.

The entire occupation of Wounded Knee began from the violation of Native American bodies. A year before AIM took over Wounded Knee, Raymond Yellow Thunder was discovered dead in his truck. On the night of his death, Yellow Thunder had

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51 Ibid., 217.

52 Ibid., 218

been out drinking. While under the influence, four White men attacked Yellow Thunder stripping him of his pants and putting him in the trunk of their car. The men took him to an American Legion Club and forced him to dance for the patrons there. Eight days later he was found dead. An autopsy later revealed that he died of subdural hematoma brought on by the beatings. The murder is only one from a long list of atrocities perpetrated against the Oglala people. As Russell Means notes in his autobiography, “As cops in many of those border towns still do, Gordon police officers often forced young Indian girls into their cars, took them to the countryside, and raped them.”54 These rapes and attacks committed against the bodies of the Lakota people drove them to seek outside assistance from AIM, especially since their tribal leader, Dick Wilson, did very little to help his people.

Just as Mary Brave Bird was affected by the sterilization of her sister, Black women shared many of the same stories about friends and family that suffered from medical crimes committed against their bodies. Writing from prison Afeni Shakur shared the story of her friend Sandra who was supposed to have a complete hysterectomy. What the doctors never told her was that during the operation they removed nothing except one tube. Sandra later died from complication with a pregnancy.55 This story remained in Shakur’s memory throughout her life and was something that showed her the racism exhibited toward women in Black communities. Her death was not the only one caused by the government’s eugenics program

54 Means and Wolf, Where White Men Fear, 196.
55 Balagoon, Look For Me, 84.
The forced sterilization policy shaped the thinking of many Native women. As Mary Brave Bird writes,

> We think that abortion is alright for everybody else, but not for us. . . . For centuries we have been the victims of physical and cultural genocide. . . . So there is within the subconscious urge to reproduce, to make sure that we are not a “vanishing race.”

This urge to reproduce led Brave Bird to have five children in her lifetime. Even when she was experiencing hard times and could not afford to feed her children she did not seek abortions. These forced sterilization policies not only shaped the history of Native American women, but as indicated by Brave Bird continue to impact the present and the future of the Nations.

Police officers in the United States were not above carrying out atrocities on Black women either. Following the arrest of the Panther New Haven 8, an article in The Black Panther reported “three of the women are pregnant. Two will give birth before the end of 1969. . . . They are denied proper food, exercise, and medical care.” The police knew that they could treat the bodies of women—especially pregnant women—differently to make them suffer in a unique way. The female body served as a special canvas of torture.

One such example is the case of Shellie Bursey and Brenda Presley both reporters for The Black Panther. They were arrested in 1970 for refusing to answer questions concerning the operation of the newspaper. During their arrest, the women suffered violations on their persons. While in jail, Bursey was denied the use of tampons

56 Brave Bird and Erdoes, Ohitika Woman, 58.

and her right to underwear was taken away. The denial of underwear and tampons is another sign that the police force in San Francisco reserved special methods of torture for women, especially poor women of color.

In 1969, Akua Njeri lost her husband Fred Hampton during a raid by the Chicago Police. Earlier that night by FBI informant drugged Hampton. He was shot twice in the head while in his bed. Authorities arrested Njeri along with the other Panther members who survived the raid. While being escorted to the police station, Njeri was violated by a police officer: “The pig jammed a revolver to my stomach and said, ‘Better not try to escape.’ At that point I could barely walk, let alone run, especially surrounded as were with police everywhere.” Njeri was eight months pregnant with her son, Fred Hampton, Jr. The officer knew that there was no chance of Njeri running, but used her body to his advantage.

In her autobiography, Angela Davis writes of the humiliating body searches that she experienced during her time incarcerated “From the women already waiting there, I learned that we were about to be searched internally. Each time prisoners left the jail for a court appearance, and upon their return, they had to submit to a vaginal and rectal examination.” Both Black and Native women were subject to vaginal searches. Davis makes the point that if the prison and guard uniforms were removed, these “searches” would be nothing more than sexual violations. As Davis states in the same interview, “In the case of vaginal and rectal searches, routinely performed on women

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59 Njeri, My Life, 39.

60 Davis, Angela Davis, 22.
prisoners in the U.S., this continuum of sexual violence is even more obvious.”\(^{61}\) In conducting these searches on poor women, and removing their feminine hygiene products, the informal harassment by police officers waged a war on the bodies of the women, to which Dr. Angela Davis found herself subjected.

Even an educated accomplished woman like Dr. Angela Davis was reduced to a single element of her body: her haircut. Davis writes about her feelings toward this image in a 1994 article “it is both humiliating and humbling to discover that a single generation after the events that constructed me as a public personality, I am remembered as a hairdo.”\(^{62}\) For all her work exposing the racism and sexism in the prison system Angela Davis is remembered for her “natural.”

In response to the attacks on women’s persons, AIM founder Dennis Banks began the Longest Walk in February 1978. Accompanied by other Native people, Banks walked from Alcatraz Island to Washington D.C. in order to draw attention toward the injustice of forced sterilization and underscore the fact that between 1972 and 1976 forty two percent of Indian women had been sterilized.\(^{63}\) Just a few years later Women of All Red Nations (WARN) discovered that private companies drilling for uranium on the Pine Ridge reservation polluted the water and left it radioactive. Lakota leader Madonna Gilbert found that on Pine Ridge there were 101 miscarriages for every 1000 births,


\(^{62}\) Davis and James, *Angela Y. Davis Reader*, 273.

seven times higher than the national average.\textsuperscript{64} WARN also discovered that the cancer rates among the population were four times higher than the national average. It was AIM and WARN—the revolution—that allowed Native women to voice their reproductive rights and address the attacks upon their bodies.

Not even in death could the women escape violations of their bodies. On February 24, 1976, a rancher found the body of a young Native woman just a few miles north of the Pine Ridge reservation.\textsuperscript{65} The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the FBI performed an autopsy on the body. The FBI removed both of her hands and sent them to their laboratory in Washington. They found no signs of murder and proclaimed that the woman had wandered off the Pine Ridge reservation and died of exposure. One of the BIA police stated during the investigation, “Well, I guess there must not have been rape involved, her pants are still on.”\textsuperscript{66} Despite the obvious violations of her body with the removal of her hands and the lack of a rape investigation, the body was buried on March 2 as a Jane Doe.

The next day, the fingerprints came back identifying Jane Doe as Anna Mae Aquash. Anna Mae’s family and friends in AIM did not believe that she had died of exposure, and on March 11 had the body of Anna Mae exhumed. This time, Dr. Garry Peterson from the Wounded Knee Legal Defense/Offense Committee performed the

\textsuperscript{64} Brave Bird and Erdoes, \textit{Ohitika Woman}, 229.


\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 4.
autopsy. Her hands were returned to Peterson, who sewed them back on. Peterson also discovered that the hands never should have been removed, as Hendricks writes “…any FBI or BIA officer-should have been able to print the fingers.” Further, almost immediately Dr. Peterson found a .38 caliber bullet in Anna Mae’s forehead and blood in her hair from where the bullet entered. There is little doubt that the first autopsy and the murder initially were not taken seriously.

Anna Mae’s case remained open until 2003 when two members of AIM were indicted for the murder. This case is one of the most grotesque examples of the government violating a woman’s body with the removal of Aquash’s hands, the lack of investigation for rape, and burial before identification. From prison, Leonard Peltier, a member AIM and recognized Anishinabe-Lakota, underlines the unspeakable violation represented by the removal of Aquash’s hands “… was a desecration deliberate and calculated, an assault on our deepest most intimate spiritual beliefs, intended to intimidate us at the very core of our being.” If Anna Mae had not experienced enough discrimination during her life as a poor indigenous woman, she received more than her share in death.

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67 The Wounded Knee Legal Defense/Offense Committee was a group of seventeen lawyers established during the Occupation of Wounded Knee to provide Legal Defenses for the occupants charged for Wounded Knee.

68 Hendricks, The Unquiet Grave, 6.

69 Ibid., 14.

The *Doxa*

The dominant cultural images of Black and Native women’s bodies as being less than their White counterparts carried over into these two and freedom struggles. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu explains the theory of the Gender *Doxa*:

*Doxa* is a particular point of view, the point of view of the dominant, which presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view—the point of view of those who dominate by dominating the state and who have constituted their point of view as universal by constituting the state.71

The negative images and violent acts committed on the body of women became universal. These same images and acts were imposed upon the consciousness of members in the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement.

Eldridge Cleaver gives a striking example of how the misogynistic treatment of Black women became normalized in *Soul on Ice*, “I became a rapist. To refine my technique and *modus operandi* I started out by practicing on black girls.”72 Cleaver had grown up with so little respect for Black women that he viewed their bodies as objects for him to practice on. Before he could rape a White woman he would perfect his “technique” on someone that he viewed as less than human, a belief implanted in his mind by the dominate White culture.

To understand the first part of the revolution question, what does revolution offer women, the patriarchy and the views of male counterparts must be evaluated. Why would women participate in a struggle where they experienced discrimination?

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Assata Shakur accentuated the effects of males from poor communities upon women. In a 1978 letter from prison when she writes about the women she served with on Rikers Island, “many of the women (over 95%) are black and Puerto Rican. Many were abused children. Most have been abused by men and all have been abused by “the system.” Thus many of the women who found their bodies violated by police and prison guards were first violated by men within their own community, men just like Cleaver who were socialized to view Black and Native women inferior.

Even for Native American women, rape within their own communities had become a problem. Lee Maracle, an Indigenous Canadian writer who participated in the Red Power Movement, writes that

> reality is transitory and in flux. At the time I asked this, I was still burning with rage at the memory of White youth terrorizing our reserves and the many attempted rapes White men wrought on my person. Today, our children and particularly our daughters take the same violence and rape, but the faces have changed. Today it is our own men who perpetrate this violence in our world. The belief from the outside world about our value has invaded us, but it is not the truth.

Maracle realizes that the Doxa exists and that the values of the dominant group have invaded her own community, destroying and violating the people—especially the women.

The bodies of women had been a space for males in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left to violate even before the Panthers and AIM appeared. Writing in her book, *Personal Politics*, activist Sara Evans observes, “men frequently demanded that women accept sex with anyone, any time, or admit that they were

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73 Shakur, *Assata: In Her Own Words*, 55.

‘uptight’ and ‘unliberated.’” Even within a liberation struggle where the organization was trying to free themselves from their oppressor, the bodies of women were being attacked and oppressed.

In *To Die for the People*, Huey P. Newton tried to deter violent actions against the female members of the BPP as evidenced by the statement, “we want to hit the woman or shut her up because we are afraid that she might castrate us, or take the nuts that we might not have to start with.” Even Newton who had been socialized in this environment committed attacks on the body of women in the BPP. In her autobiography, Elaine Brown accounts how she almost left the Panthers when Newton lashed out and struck her. She described the event as “common place within our dangerous ranks.” This episode reveals that even women within the highest structure of the Party were still subject to the attacks.

In her autobiography, Angela Davis also tried to explain this phenomenon:

They saw—and some continue to see Black manhood as something separate from Black womanhood. These men view Black women as a threat to their attainment of manhood—especially those Black women who take initiative and work to become leaders in their own right.

Characterizing the same loss of masculinity that Newton attempted to theorize, Davis gets to the core of the problem: the gendered spheres and forms of oppression were

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76 Newton, *To Die For*, 153.


78 Davis, *Angela Davis*, 161.
viewed differently. Similar to many historic freedom struggles, the men within the Black Panthers would not confront the fact that they themselves could become the oppressor.

Many women appealed to the male leadership for support. Paul Alkebulan published a memo from a female Panther to Newton in which the Panther describes the conduct of another male member: “The abuse and misuse of women by the males in the Party has almost discouraged me. Within past months a comrade slopped into bed with and began to disrobe me and have sex, to which I firmly objected and he did finally give up.”79 It is never mentioned if this memo made it to Newton, but the matter was never investigated.

Regina Jennings shares a similar story about being mistreated by her boss because she refused to have sex with him. She reported the matter to the Central Committee for investigation, but Jennings claims that the all-male committee sided with her captain. Jennings goes on to explain that the committee found her attitude “bourgeois” and “counterrevolutionary.”80 This is the same scenario that Evans describes with “uptight” and “unliberated” in which the terms are substituted with “bourgeois” and “counterrevolutionary.” Men in the Panthers internalized sexual discrimination even as they were fighting for an end to racial discrimination.

The same types of abuses toward women occurred in AIM, and as Mary Brave Birds writes they were nothing new to Native women: “Woman beating is part of everyday life on the reservation. The White man oppresses the half-blood, the half-blood oppresses the full-blood, and everybody takes out their anger, despair, and feeling of

79 Alkebulan, Survival Pending, 111.
helplessness on the women.”81 Women in AIM grew up in this atmosphere. Their bodies were targets of violent attacks from men in their own community. Clearly women from both organizations, endured physical abuse and threats. Mary Brave Bird shared the following story: “At a party that, as usual, included some hard drinking, a man for no reason beat me within an inch of my life. He was blind drunk and in a state of wild rage, which he took out on whoever was most vulnerable and female.”82

In her autobiography, Elaine Brown shares a story similar to Brave Birds’. She had met a fellow Panther at a party who became jealous over her interactions with Huey Newton. Brown describes the beating:

‘He’ was a brother who had recently gotten out of prison. To celebrate his release we held a small party in Oakland, and I had danced with him a few times. Some former L.A girl friend of Steve’s now relocated in Oakland, had built up Steve’s macho ego and jealousy with a lie meant to return herself to his favor. I learned all that in between blows.83

Both of these women met men at parties and ended the night being beaten. Both of the beatings were delivered by men who had their masculinity on the line. In the case of Mary Brave Bird, it was alcohol induced by a man who needed to take out his anger on someone female and vulnerable. From Elaine Brown’s standpoint, the man was feeling jealous that “his woman” might have talked to another man. Both of these attacks were inflicted upon women in positions of leadership, one can only imagine the experiences of rank-and-file women.

81 Brave Bird and Erdoes, Ohitika Woman, 4.
82 Ibid., 133.
83 Brown, Taste of Power, 308.
Sometimes though, being in a position of leadership carried its own forms of discrimination. Misogyny in both organizations was often pervasive and subtle. In 1974, Huey P. Newton was accused of shooting a 17 year old prostitute. In response, Newton went into self-imposed exile in Cuba, leaving Elaine Brown in charge of the BPP. Brown expressed the following of being a female in charge of the Party:

A woman in the Black Power movement was considered, at best, irrelevant. A woman asserting herself was a pariah. A woman attempting the role of leadership was, to my proud black Brothers, making an alliance with the “counter-revolutionary, man-hating, lesbian feminist White bitches.” It was a violation of some Black Power principle that was left undefined. If a black woman assumed a role of leadership, she was said to be eroding black manhood, to be hindering the progress of the black race. She was an enemy of black people.84

In much the same way Wilma Mankiller faced similar sexual discrimination when she ran for Deputy Chief of the Cherokee Nation. Mankiller writes about the election, “I was challenged mostly because of one fact—I am a female. The election became an issue of gender.”85 Both women had to confront violent threats from men who could not accept a female leader.

Despite trying to break free from the dominant White culture, the BPP and AIM ended up absorbing the dominant cultures’ patriarchal views. Many of the men had assumed that the system of patriarchy was universal, and it resulted in the further marginalization of women in these groups.

The Panthers adopted a policy of martial femininity to use women’s bodies against the enemies. Elaine Brown shares the story of another female Panther, Ericka Huggins, who told her “as women we might have to have a sexual encounter with ‘the

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84 Brown, *Taste of Power*, 357.

enemy’ at night and slit his throat in the morning.”\textsuperscript{86} This was a tactic the Panthers borrowed from the South Vietnamese soldiers. It was another way that the Party used women’s bodies for their own benefit. The Panthers espoused a policy that could have required women to put their bodies on the line for the revolution in ways that men were not expected to.

Even after all the years that Black women had suffered from government regulating and violating their bodies, the BPP under Newton also attempted to put forth policies on procreation. In 1972, the Party had a eugenics policy that encouraged women to have children “for the revolution.” Couple submitted a request to the Party to see if the birth of their child “was compatible with the party’s political and material needs.”\textsuperscript{87} This review process involved a joint decision by men and women in the Party. However, by 1974 Huey Newton overrode the decision and ordered all Panther women on birth control.\textsuperscript{88} Newton’s actions advance the argument that the men in the BPP were subject to the Gender Doxa and the normalization of controlling female member’s bodies. Whether it was birth control policies, sexual abuse, beatings, or threats the bodies of women in both of these organizations were subject to the will of men; men who were socialized in a patriarchal society and wanted control of the women in their struggle.

\textsuperscript{86} Brown, \textit{Taste of Power}, 136.

\textsuperscript{87} Alkebulan, \textit{Survival Pending}, 112.

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid, 111.
Conclusion

Elaine Brown writes that “Panther women were hard, in a way—soldiers, comrades, not pretty little things.” Indeed, women in both the American Indian Movement and the Black Panther Party had to be tough. They were not only participating in a revolutionary struggle, but they had to lead a movement within a movement. Many women felt like Kathleen Neal Cleaver:

In 1970, the Black Panther Party took a formal position on the liberation of women. Did the U.S. Congress make any statement on the liberation of women? Did the Oakland enable the Equal Rights Amendment to become part of the Constitution? Did the Oakland police issue a position against gender discrimination? It is in this context that gender relations—a term that we didn’t have back then—in the Black Panther Party should be examined.

It is in this context that both groups should be examined. Native American women were subject to the discriminatory actions of the dominant White group. Examining these gender roles from the Doxa one can see that even the discrimination in these two groups was the creation of the dominant culture acted out by the dominated.

This section in not intended to leave the reader with a negative view of the men in the BPP or AIM. They were products of their environment and culture, and of course, not all men in these movements abused women. Afeni Shakur writes, “When I met Sekou and Lumumba it was the first time in my life that I ever met men who didn’t abuse women.” Shakur was twenty years old at the time she joined the Party. These are only two men, but there were other men as well who realized the triple oppression of women in both movements.

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89 Brown, Taste of Power, 260.
91 Balagoon, Look For Me, 292.
Women like Cleaver and Shakur found more opportunities to end their oppression by taking part in the revolution. The BPP and AIM provided women with an outlet to confront the forced sterilization programs, the racism inflicted up on them, and the poverty they witnessed on a daily basis. Participation allowed women to confront the men in these groups while simultaneously revealing that the revolution needed women.

Eldridge Cleaver concluded his book *Soul on Ice* with an apology to Black women. He ends the book by writing that he has returned from the dead. He abandoned the images and stereotypes implanted in his mind and was ready to accept the Black woman as a queen. In the end, he looks to the Black woman for answers to tell him if they have survived their oppression. In writing this apology Cleaver did more than the U.S. government or police ever did in response to their violations of women.

The men who assisted Afeni Shakur and even the writings of Newton and Cleaver reveal that the movement did recognize the need to confront other struggles. In a 1970 address Huey Newton said, “… we say that we recognize the women’s right to be free.” In issuing these statements Newton and the Party provided women with the means to fight back against not only the dominant culture, but also sexist oppression the Party itself inflicted upon the women.

Linda Greene writes the following “The revolution will be lost without her... She is militant, revolutionary, committed, strong, and warm, loving, and kind.” This quote is derived straight from the pages of the BPP’s newspaper. Despite all the abuse,

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92 Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul On Ice*, 236

93 Newton, *To Die For*, 154.

the revolution offered female members the opportunity to express themselves in a revolutionary manner. In both groups, women took important roles that changed gender and furthered the revolutionary cause.
A revolution is more than just an armed struggle; it must be defined by the objectives it desires to achieve and how those changes are implemented. In a 1972 interview from prison, Angela Davis said:

If you are going to talk about a revolutionary struggle, you must have people physically able to organize and physically able to do all that is done… The real context of any kind of revolutionary thrust lies in the principles and goals that you are striving for.¹

Both the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movements outlined revolutionary goals such as education, nutrition, and free health care, but it was the women of these groups who were instrumental in putting these ideals into practice. Despite the triple oppression that women in AIM and the BPP encountered, they were able to provide their communities with the resources and institutions, to give the revolution its life, blood, and oxygen.

Female leadership in the BPP and AIM was a change from the traditional roles women were relegated to in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left. In A Kind of Memo, Mary King and Casey Hayden assert the New Left was “a caste system

¹ The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975, dir. Göran H. Olsson (Sundance Selects, 2011), DVD.
that uses and exploits women.”

Women who joined the BPP and AIM changed these subordinated roles for women while providing for their community.

In three of the points from the Ten Point Program, the BPP outlined their demands. Stating in number five, “We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent society. We want education that teaches us true history and our role in present-day society.” In demand number six the Panthers called for health care saying, “We want completely free health care for all Black and oppressed people.” Finally, in point ten the Party declared, “We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, peace, and people’s community control of modern technology.”

Likewise, in 1972 AIM published their twenty-point Indian Manifesto calling for Native American communities to “Reclaim and affirm health, housing, employment, economic development, and education for all Indian people.”

During the Panthers’ Service to the People programs women ran and maintained the education, health, and sustenance programs. In AIM women headed the programs that responded to the people’s needs during the occupations of Alcatraz and Wounded Knee.

Angela Davis writes that it was “Their community activities—educational work, services such as free breakfast and free medical programs—which had legitimized

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them in the black community.”\(^5\) It was the roles that Patricia Hill Collins refers to as mothers and other mothers that substantiated these two groups in their communities. Collins argues that in poor communities of color the women have placed communal needs ahead of their own, because of the loss of men due to imprisonment, the presence of inadequate educational facilities, and the lack of health care.\(^6\) It was, and remains, the roles of social mothering that have provided activism and change within these historically oppressed communities.

Examining roles of social motherhood in the BPP and AIM, this chapter is split into three sections: education, health, and nutrition. The role of women throughout the community service programs that AIM and the BPP operated are analyzed and woven together. Julie D. Shayne asserts that women have been able to use “…benign feminine archetype in the advancement of a revolutionary agenda.”\(^7\) Using these benign feminine archetypes, women in the Black Panthers’ and the American Indian Movement offered to revolution their time and energy to answer the needs of their communities.

**Education**

Many of the female members in these organizations grew up in a racist school system that normalized and institutionalized the negative images they had of themselves. Not until she went to community college did Assata Shakur learn of a positive history of African Americans. She writes:

\(^5\) Davis and Joy, *Angela Y. Davis Reader*, 43

\(^6\) Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 188.

\(^7\) Shayne, *Revolution Question*, 115.
Until then my only knowledge of Africans in Amerika was about George Washington Carver making experiments with peanuts and about the Underground Railroad. . . . I had grown up believing the slaves hadn’t fought back. I remember feeling ashamed when they talked about slavery in school.8

Not just the women, but the men also had grown up in this school system that denied them access to their true history. It was an education that demeaned and ignored the contributions of African Americans. Shakur was not alone in feeling ashamed of her history and her race.

Members of AIM also experienced racist conditions during their schooling. In her biography of Anna Mae Aquash, Johanna Brand writes “Indian children were never particularly welcome in schools and off the reserves. . . . The school yard taunts and racial slurs against lazy drunk Indians were a shocking forewarning of the life awaiting them.”9 The Native Americans living on reservations remained “the poorest of the poor. Social, economic, health, housing, and educational problems still beset every reservation.”10 Members of AIM went to schools where they grew up feeling disenfranchised, demeaned, and inferior. Fellow classmates called them racist names and treated them differently.

In response to this institutionalized racism, both groups opened their own educational programs. As Assata Shakur argues,

Nobody is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true heroes, if they know that that knowledge will help set you free. Schools in Amerika are interested in

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9 Brand, *Life and Death*, 52

brainwashing people with Amerikanism, giving them a little bit of education, and training them in skills needed to fill positions the capitalist system requires.\textsuperscript{11}

Realizing the need for proper education the Panthers made pedagogy a priority for children and adult members of the Party. In a speech at Boston College, Huey Newton said of the Survival Programs: “It is a program that works very much like the first-aid kit that is used when a plane falls and you find yourself in the middle of the sea on a rubber raft. You need a few things to last until you get to shore.”\textsuperscript{12}

To provide this first-aid kit to Black communities, the Panthers started the Intercommunal Youth Institute and the Community Learning Center. The purpose of the Community Learning Center was to provide “educational, cultural, and social activities.”\textsuperscript{13} Classes consisted of music, dance, and the Panthers’ adult education classes.\textsuperscript{14} Many of these classes were aimed at political education for adult members to gain general education development degrees (GED). During the 1960s and 1970s, a group of Swedish journalists came to the United States and filmed the Black Power movement. This footage has been released as a documentary called \textit{The Black Power Mixtape}. In the film, the Swedish journalists acknowledge that “the teachers are predominately female.”\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, the scene depicts a female Panther educating fellow

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\textsuperscript{11} Shakur, \textit{Assata: An Autobiography}, 181.

\textsuperscript{12} Newton, \textit{To Die For}, 21.

\textsuperscript{13} Hilliard, \textit{Black Panther Party}, 10.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{The Black Power Mixtape}.
\end{flushright}
members. From 1971 to the demise of the BPP, Ericka Huggins worked as the director of the BPP’s education programs.\textsuperscript{16}

While Huey Newton was in exile and Elaine Brown ran the Party, the BPP started the Oakland Community School. The school provided three meals a day for poor students, preventive health care, buses to and from school, and free tuition. The school won an award from California Governor Jerry Brown for achieving the “highest level of elementary education in the state.”\textsuperscript{17} During her tenure, Elaine Brown placed women in positions of power: Ericka Hugging remained administrator to the school, Phyllis Jackson became coordinator of Party campaign workers, Joan Kelly administrator of nonmilitary apparatus, and appointed Norma Armour as Coordinator of Finance.\textsuperscript{18}

The Panthers’ dream of a proper education for poor children was realized under the guidance of women. Despite all the work that Brown and the women accomplished, the award from Gov. Brown was given to Huey P. Newton.\textsuperscript{19}

In reference to the school, Angela D. Leblanc Ernest noted in her essay when she wrote about the Oakland Community School that,

\begin{quote}
The Party sought to establish a progressive educational program that poor and oppressed people could use as a model . . . to save Black and poor children from the miseducation of the city’s public school. . . . Women directed the school from its inception until 1981.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

\begin{itemize}
\item[16] Alkebulan, \textit{Survival Pending}, 35.
\item[17] Ibid.
\item[19] Ibid., 439.
\item[20] LeBlanc-Ernest, “Most Qualified Person,” 317.
\end{itemize}
Even though the Party wanted to provide educational opportunities for the people, Leblanc informs her readers that during the entire existence of the school, women provided the service.

To run their educational programs the BPP relied on members with experience. Women such as Joan Bird came to the Party with a background working in child care. In *Look for me in the Whirlwind*, Bird describes that she got her first job in 1966 as a counselor in a day care center. Bird writes, “It gave me an opportunity to work with children, I really enjoyed doing that very much. I was counseling girls from the age of—I’ll say around five to maybe seven years old.” Bird worked in many of the programs that the Panthers instituted. Women with previous experience proved essential, as the BPP ran on volunteerism.

Like Joan Bird, Shakur already had the experience of educating children before joining the Panthers. Shakur worked at the education programs in New York; she also came to the Party with prior experience. While attending Manhattan Community College, Shakur and other students formed the Golden Drums Society. One of her projects with the Golden Drums was as a student-teacher. She worked in public education aiding students who were falling behind in math and reading. She also taught Black history, physical education, dancing and drumming, and arts and crafts.22

Elaine Brown was one of the most important women in the history of the school. Brown started as an English teacher and describes why she wanted to participate in the program: “My class is considered special, because the ten-and eleven-year olds in

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21 Balagoon, *Look For Me*, 175.

it were classified by the system as undesirable. I took it on because I wanted to personally prove that these children could learn to read and write.” Brown came to terms with her own identity later in life and was aided by the Panthers. She chose to help “undesirables” get through the system and avoid the pitfalls she had fallen into early in life.

In her autobiography, Brown described many of the children who attended her classes:

We’ve got a six-year old girl whose entire right leg is marred by third-degree burns. She said her ‘uncle’ had dropped a pan of hot grease onto her leg-her whole leg? There’s a nine year old boy who’d been shooting heroin into his mother’s veins before school every morning. Three kids from one family came to us with no shoes-only thongs-and when we went to their house, we couldn’t find a single toothbrush. One of my student’s back was imprinted with permanent welts from being beaten so much, which we discovered when we took her to the children’s hospital for a checkup. A mother brought her two children to school one morning pleading for us to keep her kids because her crazy-ass husband was after all of them with his Vietnam-salvaged M-16. . . .

We have new buses to get them safely through the snake pits of their neighborhoods. They get breakfast, lunch, and dinner at school. We buy their books and school supplies. We take them for medical and dental checkups. The school is so much a part of their lives now that most of them are there even on weekends-to play and eat. Some kids are even spending the night with our Panther kids-in the dorms we’re renovating. Also, we’re buying new clothes for a lot of them. Joan and Norma set up a bunch of bullshit accounts at various department stores, under just as many names. 24

This passage is quoted at length to illustrate the challenges and the successes of women in the Panthers. Despite all of their difficulties working with these children, women such as Brown were able to provide the education and sustenance needed to save lives.

23 Brown, Taste of Power, 392.

24 Ibid.
Like the Panthers, many of the members of AIM went to school experiencing vast amounts of discrimination. The U.S. educational system stripped them of their religion, culture, and denied them a place in American history. This is why Indian reservations today experience one of the highest school dropout rates in American society. It is also why education became a priority for the members of AIM.

In response to these conditions, Ladonna Harris started the Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity in the 1960’s. The group determined that Native Americans had large dropout rates due to racist White teachers who referred to the Native children as squaws and other derogatory names. Harris writes that students “learned that the Indian culture had no value, and that because they were part of that culture, they had no value.”25 The group’s research supported what the women of AIM already knew, that their children deserved better from their educational process.

Like the women of the BPP, women of AIM made education a priority. They also came with prior experience. One of these women, Anna Mae Aquash, a mother of two, wanted to work with the children who dropped out of school. Some of this might have come from her experiences with racism while attending school. She put this passion to work at Teaching and Research in Bicultural Education (TRIBE).26 “TRIBE taught their students academic subjects that were important to Native American culture such as Native arts, crafts, music, and dancing.

25 LaDonna Harris and H. Henrietta Stockel, LaDonna Harris: A Comanche Life (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 59.

26 Brand, Life and Death, 59.
When Aquash moved to Boston she continued working with children. She worked at a day care center in a predominately Black neighborhood with preschoolers.27 Like Joan Bird, Aquash brought this experience to AIM.

After joining AIM, Aquash used her talents and worked at the Red Schoolhouse in Saint Paul, Minnesota teaching students how to conduct research and use libraries.28 The Red Schoolhouse was one of AIM’s survival schools. Serving children from kindergarten through twelfth grade, it aimed to slow the high drop-out rate of urban Indians. The school also sought to introduce many of the urban youth to a positive view of themselves and their culture.

During the various occupations, education remained a priority for the children of AIM members. While occupying Alcatraz Island, Indians of All Tribes put in their regulations Article 16, which stated: “All children must attend school during the week.”29 Indians of All Tribes supported the founding of the Big Rock School on Alcatraz to fulfill Article 16. A Blackfoot Indian woman, Dr. Dorothy Lone Wolf Miller, started Big Rock School with an educational grant. She also started the Island’s health center.30 The non-Indian curriculum at the school consisted of subjects for grades 1-6, a Head Start program, reading, writing, math, geography, health education, and science. The Indian

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27 Brand, *Life and Death*, 60.
curriculum was based around Native arts, crafts, and cultural heritage. A Mohawk Indian, Peter Blue Cloud, said of the school “Older women and girls taught by showing these ancient crafts.”

As Donna H. Langston writes, “The work of women was essential in the daily running of the island, including running the community kitchen, school, and health center.” The women who ran and operated the school left such an impact that even today the philosophy and material used in the Big Rock School is in use at the American Indian Charter School in Oakland, California.

Wilma Mankiller, who stayed on the mainland during the occupation, became director of the Native American Youth Center in Oakland. She put together a group of volunteers who painted the building and structured the curriculum and cultural programs. Of her work she said, “I had no idea what I was doing when I became involved at the youth center, but I learned quickly on the job.” Even with no experience Mankiller used her love and passion to work with children. Herself a mother, Mankiller wanted Native American children to have a chance at success.

Giving children a chance at success was no easy task in light of the obstacles the children faced. As Cecelia Fire Thunderbird, an Indian Child Welfare Advocate, notes that working with children is, “a very painful place to be. I cry a lot, I get mad a lot, I scream a lot. But once I get over crying and screaming, I put the thing that the Great

31 Langston, “American Indian Women’s Activism,” 193.
32 Ibid, 119.
33 Josephy, Red Power, 193.
34 Mankiller and Wallis, Mankiller, 202.
Spirit gave me called a brain to work." Aquash, Miller, Mankiller, and every other woman in the BPP and AIM who worked with impoverished youth experienced this same frustration. However, due to their resilience and passion they continued working. While these were not new positions for women to assume by using their traditional roles, women gave the revolution education and the means to confront their oppression.

Health Programs

The women of AIM not only provided education services during the occupations, but Aquash and others backpacked in much needed medical supplies as well. At Wounded Knee, Alcatraz, and in the Panthers Survival Programs women provided health services. If it were not for the efforts of the women who ran these programs and kept the members healthy, the Movements would have fallen apart more quickly.

During the occupation of Alcatraz women made sure that members had their health needs met. Grace Thorpe, a Sac and Fox Indian from Oklahoma, daughter of Olympian Jim Thorpe, provided Indians of All Tribes with a “generator, water barge, and an ambulance service in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Colville Indian Stella Leach, a spokesperson who represented Indians of All Tribes during Alcatraz, volunteered her skills to provide for the people when they required them. A registered nurse who worked at a clinic in Oakland, Leach was a spokesperson and ran the Island’s health center. She

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37 Ibid., 121
agrees that the occupation would not have lasted thirteen months without the support that women provided.

Russell Means writes about the women of the Wounded Knee Occupation that “their contributions were usually behind the scenes, functioning as an informal network of advisers and keeping everyone informed and motivated.”\textsuperscript{38} Means estimates that AIM had around 350 occupants and at least 200 of those were women, many of whom worked as nurses running the hospital.

Patients were taken to a makeshift hospital that was operated by Madonna Gilbert and Lorelei DeCora, both Lakota Sioux Indians.\textsuperscript{39} Gilbert and DeCora not only worked in the hospital, but they also retrieved their own patients. Dennis Banks recounts one of the lifesaving adventures these two women went on:

For over an hour, our medics could not even get to Frank (Clearwater, who had been shot in the head) because of the heavy fire the Feds poured in on us. Finally, two brave women medics, Lorelei DeCora and Madonna Gilbert, ran through the curtain of bullets, entered the church, put Frank on a stretcher, and carried him to the hospital. . . . The medics wore helmets and armbands with red crosses and they waved a White flag on a broom stick. Even so, they were continuously shot at by Fed snipers. . . . It was a miracle they were not all gunned down.\textsuperscript{40}

One of the best descriptions of these heroic actions came from Mary Brave Bird:

Women went down to the store to take inventory of the groceries and tinned goods. . . . A White man’s home, the only house with heat and tap water became the hospital and women were running it. . . . At one time a White volunteer nurse berated us for doing the slave work while men got all the glory. We were berating the cause of womankind, was the way she put it. We told her that her kind of

\textsuperscript{38} Means and Wolf, \textit{Where White Men Fear}, 265.

\textsuperscript{39} Hendricks, \textit{The Unquiet Grave}, 347

\textsuperscript{40} Banks and Erdoes, \textit{Ojibwa Warrior}, 200.
women’s lib was a White, middle class thing, and that at this critical stage we had other priorities.41

The women were motivated not by the Women’s Liberation Movement, but by the struggle against racism and how best to help the cause of Native Americans.

Chapters of the Panthers also instituted many programs to respond to health needs of people in poor communities. The BPP started the People’s Free Medical Research Health Clinic, The Sickle Cell Anemia Research Foundation, and the Chapter in Winston Salem, North Carolina started the People’s Free Ambulance Service. As Bobby Seale discovered, the BPP was 68 percent women. This means that the majority of volunteers running the programs had to be women. The Free Medical Clinic required ten volunteers at all times: three doctors, three nurses, two lab techs, and a receptionist.42

According to Elaine Brown:

There were hundreds of people, black people and Latino people and Asian people and White people, who participated in or benefited from our free-food programs, our free medical clinics and legal aid programs, our prison programs, our school and education programs, our service programs for seniors and teens and abused children and battered women and homeless people.43

Clearly, the Service to the People Programs were effective “life rafts” providing help for people of all colors.

Many of the women volunteered in more than one program. Assata Shakur, who volunteered in the education programs, also worked in different medical programs, as well as the free tuberculosis and sickle cell anemia programs the Panthers sponsored. She writes that “Periodically, we set up a table on the street corner and gave free TB tests


or hand out information on sickle cell anemia.” 44 As the BPP grew and received more funds they were able to afford better facilities. Shakur goes on to write that “The Panther Party had bought a brownstone on 127th Street, and as soon as it was renovated we planned to open a free clinic there.” 45 This would become a successful Clinic where people came to get services. Even if the BPP could only provide important health information, it was a service that the community needed.

Another female Panther member who worked in the medical programs was Joan Bird. She writes “What I did, what I got into was the head the medical cadre program and was the medical officer for one area.” 46 Not happy just being a volunteer, Bird put herself in a leadership position to meet the demands of the people. Much of what she did still relied on education. According to Bird, the goals of the medical programs were for “organizing the people in the community and educating them to the diseases that exist...to set up free health clinics where the Black Panther Party exists.” 47

These are only a few examples and stories where women took control and responded to the needs of entire communities. There are many more that continue in the same fashion. What is important to realize is how beneficial and necessary the women and the programs they operated were. By using feminine archetypes, such as nurses, the women advanced the cause of revolution. The women also provided health in another way, by making sure the community was well fed.

45 Ibid.
46 Balagoon, Look For Me, 309.
47 Ibid.
Sustenance

In *Fighting Words*, Dr. Collins writes that “Black children are at risk for higher infant mortality, poor nutrition, inferior housing, environmental pollutants, AIDS, and a host of other social problems.”48 These conditions created the basis for the Panthers Survival Programs. The BPP’s most important program was their “Free Breakfast for School Children Program.” Recognizing the need for a healthy diet to perform well in school, the Panthers wanted to meet the dietary needs of children in poor communities.

In *the Black Power Mixtapes*, the filmmakers recorded scenes from inside one of the Party’s Free Breakasts. The film shows children enjoying a full and healthy meal being served entirely by women.49 In the Chicago chapter alone Akua Njeri claims that the Panthers were feeding three thousand children a week.50 That is three thousand school children who previously had gone to school hungry every day. Thanks to the BPP the children received the nourishment to stay focused and become educated.

The Free Breakfast program was one of the easiest programs that the BPP set up. The program required only a hall, usually a church donated the space, and the food which was donated by local grocery stores. A typical breakfast from the BPP consisted of eggs, grits, bacon, toast with jelly, and juice or milk.51 Volunteers—usually women—showed up in the morning to prepare and serve the meals. David Hilliard notes that the program required ten volunteers: two people to aid children crossing the street, one

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49 *The Black Power Mixtape*.


person signing people in, one volunteer taking coats and hats, four service and table attendants, and two cooks.52

These volunteers were not always women from the Party. As Tracye Matthews writes “The Party also recruited non-Panther ‘welfare mothers, grandmothers, and guardians in the Black community’ to help staff breakfast programs.”53 All the women from Panther communities knew that the children deserved and required breakfast before school. They saw the importance behind what the Panthers were doing so they came out to help.

Elaine Brown started the Los Angeles chapter’s Free Breakfast Program.54 Brown knew of the Oakland Free Breakfast program and saw a great opportunity to aid her own community. Brown spoke to the head of University of California Los Angeles’ (UCLA) Weyborn Hall Food Service and received all their extra food, as well as collecting canned food donations.

Assata Shakur made her rounds in almost all of the Harlem chapters’ programs and the Free Breakfast program was no different. Shakur writes, “Working on the breakfast program turned out to be a delight. The work was so fulfilling the Harlem branch had breakfast programs in three different churches, and I rotated among all three.”55 Shakur gave of her time in order to make impoverished children healthy. She

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found pleasure in offering her time and knowledge to the struggle by working in the Panthers’ programs to strengthen the revolutionary aims of the BPP.

The Free Breakfast program was not the only food-aid program that the Panthers operated. They also offered a Free Food program in which members, usually women, handed out bags of donated groceries to poor people. However, the Free Breakfast program created much of the Panthers’ service program legacy. According to David Hilliard “The consciousness of the children will be raised in that they will see someone outside of their own family working in their interest and motivated by love and concern.”56 This consciousness, love and concern, came from Panther women.

Women from AIM also realized that people needed healthy diets to sustain the movement. Anna Mae may have backpacked into Wounded Knee with medical supplies, but many other women backpacked in with food supplies. Troy R. Johnson notes “Indian Women became the conduit through which food and ammunition were smuggled into the Knee. One woman, Decora Boyer, six months pregnant at the time, crawled across the surrounding fields at night carrying food and ammunition.”57 Despite the fact that women had an easier time getting through the checkpoints, Boyers risked her body and her future child for the needs of people.

The best description of the trials that the backpackers faced comes from Dennis Banks:

Bringing in food meant a long walk at night, usually ten to fifteen miles through country teeming with government snipers using infrared night scopes and trained attacks dogs. The land was often swept by machine-gun fire and streams of tracer

56 Hilliard, Black Panther Party, 34.

57 Johnson, Red Power, 73.
bullets…Our backpacks usually weighed forty to fifty pounds loaded. Backpacking was exhausting and dangerous.58

These were conditions under which women like Boyer and Aquash set out for Wounded Knee. With bullets and attack dogs following her, a pregnant Boyer fed the occupants of the Knee. Members of AIM knew all too well the effects of unhealthy eating. After the Wounded Knee occupation ended some members of AIM stayed on the Pine Ridge reservation and started Panther-inspired programs. They started community gardens, helped fix broken down cars, began sewing circles, and even delivered meals. One of Anna Mae’s final contributions to her people was providing the residents of Pine Ridge with “fresher, healthier nourishment”59 than the United States government supplied

Many Native Americans living on reservations have been forced to rely on government assistance. Mary Brave Bird decried the effects of this assistance “You get some good stuff rice, flour, and cereal, but there’s much too much cheese and butter. Many middle-aged or even young people are obese.”60 Due to a lack of jobs and no local grocery stores, Brave Bird’s friends and family were dependent on this unhealthy food.

According to Winona LaDuke these programs still exist. Because of poor physical health and a growing diabetes epidemic in many Native American communities, LaDuke argues, “Native Communities are attempting to rebuild traditional agriculture

58 Banks and Erdoes, *Ojibwa Warrior*, 188.
59 Hendricks, *The Unquiet Grave*, 204.
60 Brave Bird and Erdoes, *Ohitika Woman*, 151.
while working to diminish the poor nutritional quality of their own food subsidy programs, as well of the federal and state governments. 61

Some men certainly volunteered with certain programs and without a doubt some also helped backpack supplies into Wounded Knee. Nevertheless, research shows that women continually met the demands of children and struggling people in impoverished communities, because as mothers and community members they more keenly recognized what was needed. Women offer to the revolutionary struggles and their communities life, blood, and oxygen.

61 LaDuke, Recovering the Sacred, 192.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

A Nation Is Not Lost As Long As the Hearts of Its Women Are Not on the Ground

In her essay *Women, Power, Revolution* Kathleen Neal Cleaver writes that it is important to place the women who fought oppression as Black Panthers within the larger context of freedom fighters like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Ida Wells Barnett who took on an entirely oppressive world and insisted that their race, their gender, and their humanity be respected at the same time.1

The women of AIM and the BPP deserve their place within the larger historical narrative. The alternative institutions they operated while confronting the different forms of discrimination and oppression adds to the accomplishments of the Women’s Rights and the Civil Rights Movement.

The women in these movements did not simply take on nurturing roles, many also fought alongside the men. Mary Brave Bird writes “our women played a major part at Wounded Knee. We had two or three pistol-packing mamas swaggering around with six shooters, dangling at their hips.”2 The Panthers also had women that participated in fire fights. However, it was in assuming traditional roles of social motherhood that women provided an alternative to the existing power structure and should serve as a compass for people seeking change today. Instead of ignoring these institutions and

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programs that women provided they should be the first accomplishments of the movements. Women should not feel that these were just supporting roles, the women were revolutionaries and their actions and contributions to the programs were acts of revolution.

The female members of the BPP and AIM were subject to the same arrests and harassment as men. One just needs to recall that Assata Shakur was involved in a shootout with the New Jersey State Troopers before her arrest, or that Afeni Shakur and Joan Bird were both arrested on false charges with the Panthers.

Perhaps the best example of how effective the work of women was to each community comes from a speech by Jewel Barker, the mother of Panther Ann Campbell, who said,

Don’t let anybody tell you that you have failed. Don’t sneak in corners and hide when your children cry “All Power to the People.” Don’t sneak in corners and hide when they ask you to help build a Medical Center that will accommodate all poor people. Support them in their struggle.

If Joan Scott’s analysis that children learn gender through observing how society represents gender roles to them is correct, then the actions of the women who joined the Panthers and AIM shattered many of the traditional perceptions. In *The Black Panther*, journalist Cappy Pinderhughes observed that during a rally to free the Panther New Haven 13 it was “welfare mothers, followed by Black Panther women and women’s

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4 Scott, *Gender*, 163.
liberation groups, with the men in the rear.” In this instance, women assumed the leadership positions and led the community in a march to free political prisoners.

Likewise, for the American Indian Movement at Wounded Knee women took the lead in many aspects. The women came because “they found at Wounded Knee solidarity, danger, and an exhilarating sense of freedom among other things.” Brave Bird was among many of the women who gave birth at Wounded Knee. So many of the occupants gave birth that AIM started calling these new born babies “Wounded Knee babies.”

Recognizing the importance of social motherhood George Jackson asserted “the Black woman has in the past few hundred years been the only force holding us together and holding us up.” Indeed, with their actions women from both of the BPP and AIM held their people together. They were fighters, politicians, social workers, and mothers. They were all these things while suffering from the triple oppression of race, gender, and class.

Their gender oppression was doubled from the dominant community and from within their own movements. Lee Maracle writes that “Racism and sexism are cultural beliefs that invade all aspects of our perception of ourselves…They create a reality for Native men and women.” However, the women were able to overcome these perceptions

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7 Ibid.


and be positive role models who deserve their proper place in the history of the United States.

Mary Brave Bird quotes an old Cheyenne saying in *Lakota Women*, which says that, “A nation is not lost as long as the hearts of its women are not on the grounds.”\(^{10}\) The actions of the women within the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement clearly demonstrate that their hearts are not on the ground, but firmly in their chest. Many of the women continue to offer their time and energy seeking fundamental change. Afeni Shakur started the Tupac Amaro Shakur Foundation, which opens art programs for young people. She named the organization after her son, Tupac Shakur, who was shot and killed in 1996. Elaine Brown continues her political activism and ran for the Green Party’s presidential nomination in 2008. Angela Davis continues being a prison rights activist and professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Even Assata Shakur continues her resistance to racism through her writing, despite being in exile in Cuba.

Mary Brave Bird resides on the Pine Ridge Reservation and continues fighting for the political and economic struggle of Native American rights. After her work as a nurse during the Wounded Knee Occupation, Lorelei Decora Means went back to school and received her bachelor’s degree in nursing. Means opened the Porcupine Clinic and works at the Rosebud Hospital in South Dakota. She continues to bring attention to the diabetes epidemic Native American communities suffer from today. Women of All Red Nations (WARN) started in 1974 and continue to fight environmental hazards that affect Indigenous women and children.

\(^{10}\) Brave-Bird and Erdoes, *Lakota Women*, 137.
The same unequal access to resources and racism that the BPP and AIM confronted remain embedded within the culture of the United States today. While many of the women from these movements remain active in the struggle, their firmness in the face of such adversity serves as an inspiration to all people. The women have been able to take their race, gender, and class oppression and become examples for freedom fighters and revolutionaries. Their strength and accomplishments add depth to the history of freedom movements.
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