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NEGRITUDE 2.0: Re-Seizing the Time

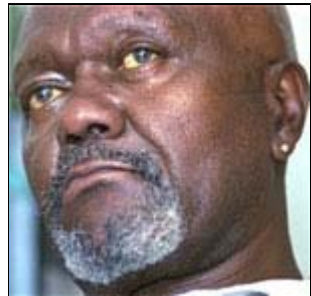
[15 January 2007]

by **Mark Reynolds**
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William Lee Brent isn't one of those names quickly associated with the furious tenor of '60s counter-culture. His face isn't fodder for dorm-room posters like Che Guevara's, his rhetoric isn't burned into the history books like Stokely Carmichael's. Many people probably didn't realize that Brent enjoyed any notoriety at all until they saw the news of his death, last November in Cuba, where he'd lived for 37 years after hijacking a plane.

For all the gains we've made in electoral politics and community leadership, there has yet to be a successor to the Black Panther Party as a nationally organized, politically oriented body speaking out and working on the vanguard in the name of black progress, directly confronting and challenging the powers-that-be.

Brent strolled onto TWA Flight 154, leaving San Francisco for New York City on 17 June 1969. Once the flight was airborne and out of California air space, he announced that he had a gun, he was hijacking the plane and commandeering it to Cuba. It landed there safely, all the passengers were unharmed, and Brent was promptly arrested by the Cuban authorities. But he was never handed back to the USA, and spent the rest of his life there.



Brent was out on bail at the time of the hijacking, facing charges after a gas station robbery left two cops wounded. He'd done a stretch in prison before, and vowed he'd never go back. He chose Cuba as a destination because he'd heard about the availability of political

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asylum there. But why would someone who helped stick up a gas station need political asylum?

Because Brent was a captain in the Black Panther Party, and a lot of Panthers beat a hasty retreat to Cuba and Algeria when they needed to escape the long arm of the law, that's why.

He told his story—from underaged Army grunt to bodyguard for Panther Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver to Cuban DJ, teacher and farm worker—in his autobiography *Long Time Gone: A Black Panther's True-Life Story of His Hijacking and Twenty-Five Years in Cuba* (w/Steve Wasserman; Crown, 1996). Brent's is just one of numerous first-person accounts over the years by ex-Panthers famous and, like Brent, anything but famous. Collectively, they help give the lie to both the falsehoods about the Panthers (they were nothing but gun-toting thugs with no respect for authority) and the starry-eyed romance (they were shining black princes come to wreak revolution on earth). They help us understand the Panther movement as multi-faceted, noble in intent if not always in execution, vulnerable to both external agitation and internal disorder.

As we enter the 40th anniversary year of the Panthers' audacious explosion into American life, politics and culture, there's been a spate of new books and works adding to our understanding of their times and impact; given the media's fascination with anniversaries, expect much more to come as the year unfolds. The temptation will surely exist for some to stroll back through those halcyon days of clenched fists and Afro picks, but as the growing trove of Panther stories indicates, it's clear that the legacy of the Black Panthers can't and shouldn't be reduced to symbols and slogans.



photo from Washington State Archives

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense took its name and symbol from a mid-60's organization in rural Alabama that was more about the ballot than the bullet. Some 3,000 miles away in the Bay Area, Huey Newton, David Hilliard and others rose up to defend the 'hood from police brutality and other injustices. They famously bum-rushed the California state capitol building, decked out in leather jackets, black berets and automatic weaponry, asserting their constitutional right to bear arms. News of their boldness spread, and in time there were Panther chapters everywhere, even overseas. For that, they earned the lasting indignation of J. Edgar Hoover,

who personally ordered his Federal Bureau of Investigation to infiltrate, destabilize and eliminate the Panthers, under the COINTELPRO initiative. Hoover detested the entire left wing of American politics, and cooked up COINTELPRO to bust up the Panthers, the Weather Underground, and anyone else he didn't like. Wiretaps, illegal searches and seizures, and anti-Panther propaganda were some of the more benign tactics used to stifle and crush dissent.



Over the next few years, there were countless police raids in which prominent Panthers were killed (Bobby Hutton in Oakland, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in Chicago) and key leaders arrested. But while they were agitating against a corrupt system of laws and justice, they were also serving the community—literally. Thousands of kids got free meals through the Panther breakfast program. They also held educational sessions to break down the science behind their politics. Bobby Seale's manifesto *Seize the Time* and Cleaver's prison memoir *Soul on Ice* (both from 1967) made the best-seller lists, helping build Panther support and membership. And without specifically planning it, they became symbols of a swaggering, unrepentant black style. Fully on board with the prevailing "black-is-beautiful" ethos, they had no intention of crossing over to anyone's standard of acceptable appearance. Their sharp-edged, hyper-focused look, their serious demeanor, and the passion with which they advocated their beliefs took hold in the popular imagination. White celebrities held dinner parties and fundraisers for them, and young black

kids wanted to look just like them (indeed, if not join the Panthers outright). The 1968 photo of a scowling Newton in a wicker chair, armed with a rifle and a spear, is one of the most lasting images in all of black American iconography.



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But Hoover's vendetta would eventually carry the day. By the mid-'70s the Panthers were essentially destroyed, from both within and without. Some ex-Panthers cleaned up and entered political life, others entered academia, still others floundered (most famously, Newton himself), and many went on with the business of raising families and building careers. Newton's wicker chair moment was alluded to on an Al Green album cover. In the end, they built no lasting institutions, they changed no laws, and you can ask Rodney King or Sean Bell or any number of other brothas if police treatment has improved over the years.

Yet they have maintained a hold on our imagination, right up to this moment. It still hurts that dozens of Panthers got shot down, but it's still a source of pride that they stood up in the first place. In the years after the prime victories of the Civil Rights Movement, life in the 'hood got hard, and there weren't too many Freedom Riders going down ghetto thoroughfares. Folks grew weary of turning the other cheek, and the Panthers gave voice to anger and frustration that the old guard movement folk couldn't (or wouldn't, or both). They spoke the language of the street, even when they were quoting Mao. The Panthers spoke truth to power, and they did it with that righteous sense of cool known back then as "soul". To the point, they looked The Man dead in the eye and refused to blink.

Literature and scholarship looking back at the Panthers slowly emerged in the late '70s and '80s, mostly throughout the political and academic communities. In the '90s, books like Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (Pantheon, 1993) took the discussion to the mass-market stage. In the last few months, there have been important new works about major Panther personalities, including Newton (most recently, Hilliard's *Huey: Spirit of the Panther*, Thunder's Mouth Press) and Cleaver (his widow Kathleen edited the 2006 anthology *Target Zero, Eldridge Cleaver: A Life in Writing*, Palgrave Macmillan). We've also seen *Will You Die With Me? My Life and the Black Panther Party* (Atria, 2006), an autobiography by Flores A. Forbes, whose Panther days were spent a few levels down from the top. Each of the life stories shed light and depth on their sections of the overall picture, but as charged as they are with memories of turf battles and ego clashes, none of them can quite lay claim to being a basic Panther history text for our time (nor can Mario Van Peebles' 1994 film *Panther* which does about as much justice to the Panther legacy as a Hollywood entertainment product realistically can).

Of the recent additions to the Panther-related canon, Peniel E. Joseph's *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (Henry Holt and Company, 2006) serves as the most useful place to start. Joseph, a professor at SUNY-Stony Brook, catalogues the events of the entire period, including its antecedents in previous movements. In Joseph's telling, "black power" was an idea well before "Black Power!" became a rallying cry. *Midnight Hour* doesn't have the exhaustive, epic sweep of the *Eyes on the Prize* franchise, but it's a well-researched, accessible history that ties together the civil rights movement, the Black Power years, and the modern era of black politics.

An entirely different animal, also just out, was literally 40 years in the making. Back in the days before desktop publishing and citizen journalists with blogs and camera phones, alternative media activists had to use the same tools as the big boys to make communications products, and then figure out how to get them circulated. In 1967 a collective of filmmakers took to the streets to document the progressive movement at home and abroad. The group called itself, presumably with but a dash of irony, [Newsreel](#). They produced several short films in the late '60s, and showed them at community meetings and organizing sessions; theatrical distribution was not remotely part of the equation.

Newsreel chapters in California produced three shorts about the Panthers, *Off the Pig*, *Mayday*, and *Repression*. Their visual style is basic, perfunctory cinema verite: they got to the spot where it was going down, started shooting, and let the action unfold. They shot Panther leaders explaining their points of view, telling what happened at particular showdowns. Production values are nil; they don't even have on-screen graphics to identify the speakers. But the bird's-eye view of real-time confrontations between Panthers and police, and behind-the-wall scenes of Panthers preparing to serve the cause, maintain their immediacy and power, if for no other reason than because so little other footage from the era is in any sort of circulation.

Newsreel member Roz Payne held on to the group's ideals, and the urge to get the facts down on celluloid. Over the years she continued to help Panthers who were caught up in the criminal justice system, and in the process acquired thousands of documents spelling out how the FBI railroaded Panthers into jail on the basis of trumped-up charges and paid-off "informants" (many of those convictions were overturned, but only due to the dogged

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persistence of Payne and other supporters). When digital video became a mass medium, she picked up the camera again and started filming oral histories of Panther lawyers, retired FBI agents who agreed to come clean about their work, fellow Newsreel members, and various Panther gatherings.

The end result is *What We Want, What We Believe: The Black Panther Party Library* (AK Press), a subtitle far loftier than the contents may merit. The four DVDs of interviews, gatherings, and archival material don't add up to anything that can be considered definitive, especially when there's only one interview with an ex-Panther (Field Marshall Donald Cox, telling his story over hand-rolled cigarettes and baked apple crisp in his home in France). Newcomers to the Panther story will still need a basic timeline of events, and the interviews themselves are visual snoozers; one-camera setups with light editing. But the aforementioned shorts make the package well worth holding for history's sake. And the other stories contained here are fascinating; Payne is most likely the first to interview the FBI agent who oversaw Panther surveillance in San Francisco, who didn't think the Panthers were as big a threat as they seemed to his brass back east. As with the various bios and memoirs, *What We Want* has much to say from its perspective, even as a big-picture view of the Panthers' impact goes wanting. But if anyone has the funding, patience, and nerve to tackle that big-picture project head-on, there's plenty of useful stuff here.



Some still curse the Black Panthers as nonsensical hooligans, whose insistence on confrontation and weaponry short-circuited opportunities to extend the gains of the civil rights era. But their influence remains, and not just in the various groups and factions that have laid claim to the name over time. Consider, for example, that there's an untold legion of young adults whose parents were Panthers (Tupac Shakur was in mother Afeni's belly while she was defending herself in 1971 during the Panther 21 trial in New York); how did that experience in the family background shape them? Also still with us is the void of organized community activism left behind after their demise; we have no idea what might have happened had their ideas approached full fruition, but it's sadly obvious that a free breakfast program for poor kids and families would be a hit again today.

For all the gains we've made in electoral politics and community leadership, there has yet to be a successor to the Black Panther Party as a nationally organized, politically oriented body speaking out and working on the vanguard in the name of black progress, directly confronting and challenging the powers-that-be. Whether such an outfit could be effective now is a parlor game for poli sci wonks, history buffs, and veterans from movements gone by. Whether such an outfit would be welcomed by lots of brothas and sistas in the street, I think the answer would be "Hell yeah!"



Mark Reynolds has written extensively about African-American culture and celebrity since the late '80s. He began his print journalism career with the weekly *Cleveland Edition*, and was a longtime contributor to its successor, *Cleveland Free Times*. He has also written for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and various publications in Cleveland and Philadelphia. His national credits include reviews and features for the college-distributed entertainment magazine *Hear/Say*, and reporting on the travel industry for the trade magazine *Black Meetings & Tourism*. His media criticism was honored in 2004 by the Society of Professional Journalists,

Ohio chapter.

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