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Kathleen Cleaver: High Priestess of the People's Struggle Keeping It Real

By Larry Pinkney

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board

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Black Panther Party History Month

"When the African people say, in their plain language, that 'no matter how hot the water from the well, it will not cook your rice,' they express with staggering simplicity a basic principle not only of physics but also of political science."

-Amilcar Cabral

The Black Panther Party [BPP], from its very beginning in the struggle against racial and economic oppression, believed in the "basic principle not only of physics but also of political science." The BPP may now be *physically* gone, but it is by no means forgotten; for its legacy lives on to this day even as the struggle for economic and social justice *continues unabated*.

To be sure, there would have been no viable Black Panther Party without the leadership, brilliance, and tenacity of the women who were an integral part of the Black Panther Party. Immediately the names of Assata Shakur, Tarika Lewis, Afeni Shakur, and Ericka Huggins, *to name but a very few*, come readily to mind. These "sister" /

women Black Panthers were, in their own extraordinarily important ways, *the backbone and female political giants of the Black Panther Party*. If indeed any one Black Panther Party sister embodied the genius, strength, leadership, tenaciousness, and revolutionary beauty of the women of the Black Panther Party collectively, she must assuredly be Kathleen Cleaver.

The Black Panther Party was founded by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in *October* of 1966, in Oakland, California. Thus, the month of *October* is *Black Panther Party History Month*, but I reiterate that without the invaluable *rank and file, and national leadership of women*, there would have been *no viable Black Panther Party*.

Kathleen Cleaver was not only the revolutionary balance to her then spouse, the dynamic, fiery, and prolific Black Panther Party Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver, she was *also* in fact the visual revolutionary inspiration and actuator *for and to* the *entire Black Panther Party - women and men alike*. Sister Kathleen, as a member of the national governing body of the Black Panther Party known as the Central Committee, and as Communications Secretary of the Black Panther Party nationally, provided on a national level what rank and file *women Black Panther Party [BPP] members in chapters across the nation* were doing on a regular and daily basis - ; she provided the implacable *vision*, and simultaneously a glimpse, of what the egalitarian unity and political struggle by Black women and men together *might actually bring about and be*.

Whereas it was the "brothers" who may initially have brought together some pieces to form the Black Panther Party [BPP], it was *beyond all question*, the BPP "sisters" who *honed, refined, and actually made those pieces coherently work together*.

In this the 21st century, it has been correctly written that Kathleen Cleaver is "a major voice in the Black Liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s, [and] *continues* [presently] to speak out against racism, sexism, and economic inequality." However, perhaps just as importantly, Kathleen Cleaver has always possessed and *still possesses* today that critically crucial and delicate balance of knowing when to *immediately* cut to the political chase, and likewise when to bide her time, and with stunning and *straight-forward intellectual alacrity* proceed to educate, expose, and if necessary, intelligently obliterate any who dare challenge *the legitimacy of the struggle* in which she and her former comrades in the Black Panther Party gave [and many continue to give] so very much mentally, emotionally, and physically. This is the essence of Kathleen Cleaver: audacity, intellect, integrity, and no nonsense. This also continues to be the essence of *the legacy* of the Black Panther Party as a whole.

The Ten-Point Program of the Black Panther Party succinctly and clearly laid out the objectives and beliefs of the Party. Moreover, despite the ultimate *physical* decimation of the Black Panther Party by the end of the 20th century, the BPP Ten-Point Program *remains* as one of the best examples ever of a precise and forthright political platform that persons can easily understand and relate to *right up to the present*.

In addition to the Ten-Point Program, free breakfast, free medical, free busing, free ambulance, free shoes, and free school programs *were but a few* of the programs instituted by the Black Panther Party in service to Black communities throughout the United States. The activism of the Black Panther Party translated into *tangibly* serving the people "body and soul."

Thus, it should come as no surprise that Kathleen Cleaver is *today* an author, a law professor, and a resolute political activist. Among other books to which Kathleen Cleaver has made major contributions; she has co-edited the book titled, [*Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and Their Legacy*](#). It needs to be read by any and all serious students of the Black Panther Party and/or of people's political struggle in general.

Today the *genius* of sister Kathleen Cleaver, as well as of other former Black Panther Party members including (Black Panther Party Legacy & Alumni curator and historian) Billy X Jennings, exiled sister Assata Shakur, Elbert "Big Man" Howard, artist extraordinaire Emory Douglas, and teacher / educator Ericka Huggins is with us *still*. Moreover, the *determination and vision* of former long time political prisoners Robert Hillary King (aka Robert King Wilkerson) and Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt are also with us *still*.

The revolutionary spirit of the many martyrs of the Black Panther Party, including Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter, John Huggins, Fred Hampton, Mark Clark, Bobby Hutton, Welton Armstead and so *very many other* women and men of the BPP continues to live on. The Black Panther Party's ***casualties of the vicious U.S. federal, state and local war against it***, including (but not limited to) Huey P. Newton and Eldridge Cleaver, are reminders of the enormous *emotional and psychological* price and carnage that have been, and continue to be, put upon any who dare stand up against the avaricious and vampiric oppressors of humankind; and should be understood in this context. The *physical, emotional, amoral viciousness and fall out* of the war against the Black Panther Party can, to some extent, be summarized in the despicable and illegal / unconstitutional U.S. Government program (known as COINTELPRO) to "frame, discredit, disrupt, imprison and murder" BPP activists. *Real change* is *never* brought about *without severe and real* human prices to be paid. There is simply no such thing as a genuine *painless* revolution.

Kathleen Cleaver has also been, and remains, active in legally supporting many political prisoners from the Black Panther Party, many of whom *remain imprisoned today*, after *decades* of wrongful incarceration. She has not forgotten the lessons of exile which she herself personally experienced. *She has not forgotten* the struggle.

There is a relatively recent television program on the Black Panther Party, which includes sister Kathleen Cleaver and others. It is extremely informative, expertly done, and *well worth watching*. The name of the program is: *Lords of the Revolution: The Black Panthers*. It was televised nationally by the VH1 channel and is only approximately one hour in length and will hold your attention to its conclusion.

As sister Kathleen and other former BPP members made crystal clear, each in their own fashion, on the above mentioned VH1 television program; over forty years ago the Black Panther Party understood that the only way to bring about *real* systemic "change" was through and by the people - we ourselves.

Sister Kathleen Cleaver so completely encapsulated this when she so poignantly summarized the program, *Lords of the Revolution: The Black Panthers*, by simply stating, "Wish we could have done better. We should have been smarter. We should have been stronger. We should have been more organized. We were up against a *very*,

very powerful opposition. We didn't know *how* powerful our government was. We were *ready to change our world. We still want to change our world.*" Indeed.

Thank you sister Kathleen. Thank you so very, very much.

All Power To The People.

Onward sisters and brothers! Onward!

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board Member, Larry Pinkney, is a veteran of the Black Panther Party, the former Minister of Interior of the Republic of New Africa, a former political prisoner and the only American to have successfully self-authored his civil/political rights case to the United Nations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In connection with his political organizing activities in opposition to voter suppression, etc., Pinkney was interviewed in 1988 on the nationally televised PBS NewsHour, formerly known as The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour. For more about Larry Pinkney see the book, [Saying No to Power: Autobiography of a 20th Century Activist and Thinker](#), by William Mandel [Introduction by Howard Zinn]. (Click [here](#) to read excerpts from the book). Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Pinkney.



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