Beyond the Black Panthers: An Interview with Kathleen Cleaver
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By Zachariah Mampilly

In a crowded suite in downtown Manhattan, Kathleen Cleaver is still fighting. This time for the right to preserve the legacy of the party that made her an icon - the Black Panthers. Like the mythical feline that was the group's symbol, Cleaver herself has lived many lives. College student, civil rights worker, revolutionary, political exile, writer, mother, lawyer and now, Executive Director of the International Black Panther Film Festival, held this year at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and the Miller Theater at Columbia University in New York from May 3-6, 2001.

Spending her early childhood in Tuskegee, Alabama, where her father taught sociology, Cleaver's family lived briefly in India and the Philippines with the US Foreign Service before she enrolled at Oberlin College in 1963. Cleaver soon dropped out of college to join the civil rights movement, first as a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and then with the Black Panther Party. She and other BPP leaders were forced into exile in Algeria in 1968. Cleaver pursued a law degree when she returned to the US in 1972, and she continues to work as a civil rights activist. She has co-edited a book on the Black Panthers, Liberation, Imagination and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Black Panthers and Their Legacy, and authored a memoir of her experiences, Memories of Love and War.

Cleaver remains incredibly effervescent and open to questions about the many paths she has traveled. I recently caught up with her for an interview at the Film Festival office. Surrounded by posters of Mandela, Castro, blaxploitation classics, and even Michael Collins, the Irish nationalist, we spoke about her life, the Panthers and their legacy, Eldridge Cleaver, and the upcoming film festival.

You have said elsewhere that you were raised in a traditional Southern black family...

[Cutting in] I didn't say traditional. It was very comfortable - it was not traditional. My father had been, when he was young, involved in organizing in the Socialist Club. My mother was a part of something called the Southern Negro Youth Congress, which was a protest movement. So my parents were both quite conscious. They met in graduate school at the University of Michigan.

Why were you attracted to the Black Panther Party?

The BPP in California was one of the first urban organizations at that time that adopted and enacted Black Power. I was at the time with SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee]. I joined the BPP in June of 1966, right at the era of Black Power. I had been in high school during the development of the sit-ins, the protest marches, and I wanted to be a civil rights worker. By the time I was actually able to join in this movement in Alabama and the South, it was a Black Power struggle. The focus was on empowerment, self-determination.

I was fortunate that I met Eldridge Cleaver at a conference in Nashville. He invited me to come out and visit. I went out to work with them after Huey Newton was shot in an altercation with an Oakland policeman, in which the policeman was killed and Huey Newton was charged with murder.
What attracted me was the fact that they were so clear. They had very clearly delineated goals. It was a revolutionary movement. We weren't trying to get the right to vote. We weren't trying to get citizenship. We saw ourselves essentially as putting an end to domestic colonialism.

Do you feel that by trying to connect the struggle of black people in the US with the struggles of colonized people across the world, the Panthers frightened the powers that be even more?

I am sure it frightened them. There is a document I was told about, I have not actually seen it, but a document in the possession of the State Department that was released somehow. It stated that what the government needed most to prevent, what they were most concerned about, was the formation of close alliances to work together between African American or black revolutionaries, the Arab revolutionaries and people fighting in Asia and Latin America, which is exactly what we were doing. We were working with people in Cuba, people in Mexico. We went to conferences with Vietnamese. When Eldridge left the country and went to North Africa, Algeria, we organized something called the International Section of the BPP, which put us right in the same town with representatives of the MPLA from Angola, ZAPU and ZANU from Zimbabwe, ANC from South Africa, with people who were fighting in Ethiopia, in Canada, the FLQ, in Brazil. So we made that link - completely. We were very clear about the way that the struggle that we were a part of was similar to struggles going on by people of color who were all fighting against the same imperialist. It was anti-imperialist from the beginning, and recognized that we were up against the same enemy.

Did you think that people you were trying to reach were able to grasp the same ideas? I mean, was it a bit esoteric?

It is not esoteric at all, because you just have to look at what was going on television with the Vietnam War. It wasn't esoteric. It maybe abstract at this point, but at that point it wasn't. The Vietnam War was always in the news. You would see pictures of soldiers. You would see pictures of Vietnamese, so you knew what Vietnamese looked like. We knew that they were fighting the United States military. In fact, one of the earliest things we said was that in the US, police occupied black communities like foreign troops occupied this country. We could draw a parallel between what the US Army was doing in Vietnam, and what the Oakland police were doing in Oakland. It was not esoteric at all.

Was it difficult for you in exile in Algeria, especially with young children?

I had two children. I had a son born in Algeria and a daughter born in North Korea, in Pyongyang. Actually, because Algeria was a Muslim country and they were in the process of going into a Muslim restoration after a century of French rule, they wanted to restore many of the practices and beliefs as part of their culture. And so having two children was a protection, in the sense that it put me in a position that they were quite comfortable seeing a woman in - with children, being a mother. Had I come there and been a full-fledged revolutionary activist, then I would have been in much sharper conflict with what they were about. But yeah, it was difficult. It was difficult because of the cultural conflict between being an independent, free-spirited African American woman and going into an Islamic society that was trying to go back to something they thought an Islamic world would be.

Did your time in Algeria temper your radical views?
What was happening is that the time I was spending in Algeria was the period of the most vicious destruction of the BPP. It was like someone was being killed, or an office was being raided, or someone was being imprisoned, or someone was being shot, just about every week. It was an onslaught of violence against the BP. So when I was in Algeria I felt very protected. I wasn't tempering my views. I was saying this was a blessing that I am here, and I am able to survive, because it is not clear that I would have survived in the US under those circumstances.

How did you perceive the role of women in the BPP? There have been critiques that the BPP was male-dominated...

Yes, there have been critiques, but who made these critiques? I am just asking you. Are the critiques coming from the women who were in the BPP?

Not that I have seen.

Well, of course you can always make a critique. Let's say this, BPP was both men and women. It was started by two men - there were no women involved in starting it. However, from the very beginning, we started having women members. I came in. I was the first woman on the leadership group, the central committee, but not the only. Women could do almost anything in the BPP. There was not what we call "sex roles." It wasn't like if you were a woman you went to this office, if you were a man you did that. It was more how people perceived their own selves, how they perceived what their community found acceptable.

Did you have any relations with the leadership of the Party when you came back from Algeria?

I did not have any relations. I had been expelled. I was no longer a part of that. Eldridge Cleaver was no longer part of it. All the people I knew best were no longer part of it. Many of them had drifted away. Essentially you could say it was destroyed. We were very critical of the policies and positions they were taking and the actions they were doing. They got people killed. We were more than critical. We saw them as collaborating with the enemy.

Can you gauge the relevance of the work of the BPP when you came back?

The point is not the Party. The point is the political struggle and the movement. It had a huge influence. It was profoundly transformative. The consciousness reached a peak in 1969. In 1969, the overwhelming majority of black people when they were being polled were supportive of the BPP. It was at that point that you see the repression becoming most vicious. The murder of Fred Hampton, the SWAT team attack on the Los Angeles office, the New Haven trial of Bobby Seale and 14 Panthers - the same period that support is strongest, the repression is strongest.

There has been no movement like the BPP that combined so many different segments of the black community. We had people from prison, people from high school, people from colleges, people who were drug addicts, people who were parents, people who were teenagers...[it was an] across-the-board, young organization that made alliances with people and other groups. In fact, it became a model for Chicanos, who started the Brown Berets; for Native Americans with the American Indian Movement; for Puerto Ricans, who started the Young Lords; Appalachian
whites, who started the Young Patriots Party. This was an inspiring model. That's what is important about it. People took it and used it. That's why the government had to destroy it. They did not destroy the model, and they did not destroy the people now who want to be Black Panthers. There aren't BP's, but there is a group that has appropriated the name. There are people who have appropriated aspects of it. The significance is continuing. It is a bit early to tell. We don't have all the facts. Before there was tremendous denunciation or tremendous exaggeration. There was a lot of journalism. There were a lot of government investigations. There was a lot of media attention. But there was very little scholarship. Now the scholarship is beginning. The impact is still being evaluated.

**Why did you decide to return to school after leaving the BPP?**

Well, when Watergate was on, I noticed that all the particular individuals engaged in the Watergate trials were all lawyers. And these are the closest associates of the President of the US. It became clear to me that lawyers were central to the political world. Now, I had been involved in a very political movement that had been destroyed, so how was I going to continue to have a political role? So I said, "Well, it looks like I should be lawyer." But at that point I had only had a year and a half of college. I made up my mind then, 1972, to be a lawyer. In 1981, I went back to school so I would be able to enter law school, which I did subsequently. After graduating from Yale, I was elected Phi Beta Kappa and went to Yale Law School and finished there in 1989. So it was my decision. My plan of what I would do with my time.

**Do you think going to law school symbolized a switch in your perspective, a desire to work within the system instead of outside it, like the BPP?**

No, no! It symbolizes a switch in the reality of what I am facing. When I had the opportunity to join the BPP, I took it. In 1981, I had no opportunity to join any active revolutionary movement. There wasn't one. I moved and did something else. That is what many revolutionaries do. You have to understand with revolutions, either you win or you die. We did not win. Our movement was dead. But the people, we aren't dead. So what do you do next? How do you continue to function? You can't do it within a revolutionary movement if it is not there. You have to move on. Be a part of what we call "civilian society."

**I want to ask you about Eldridge.**

I am not the person to ask. First of all, I don't think people have enough information. I am working right now on a book with his literary agent to bring together different features and aspects, like his writings - his fiction writings, some of his political writings, poetry, interviews, and articles that people wrote about him. People tend to have a one-dimensional view -- Eldridge Cleaver, the Black Panther; or Eldridge Cleaver, the Born Again Christian; or [for] people in prison, Eldridge Cleaver, the Black Muslim. Very few people have pulled all these pieces together. I think he was so very, very controversial that he inspired so much, either anger, or rage, or admiration, or love. There is context for his legacy. It is not there yet. There's a lot of people who want to repudiate and denounce him, but I think that is very emotional, because he repudiated and denounced just about everybody. It will take a little more time and a lot more information.

**Nowadays you are involved in a lot of human rights work...**
I am the Co-Director of something called the Human Rights Research Fund. What it is about is to look at the gross human rights violations conducted by the intelligence agencies and the police agencies against those movements during the 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s that were in opposition to policies of the government. Either military policies like the Vietnam War, racial policies such as segregation, or basic white supremacy - policies of social and gender discrimination. There are a host of organizations. What we want to do is document violations [committed by the US government] over this period of time, year by year, organization by organization. The violations include murder, assassination, severe bodily harm and torture, use of the courts to falsely imprison. The kind of outrageous human rights violations committed against the Black Panthers are fairly known, but it was not the only thing. The idea is to compile a series of research centers with project directors in different regions of the country to accumulate this information, and also to locate people who are able to give live testimony. We want to use this document to call for congressional investigations. The United States that carries out these abuses is responsible for correcting these abuses. And it's responsible not only to the citizens, but it's responsible under international law to the international community not to do this.

Do you think that these issues are still relevant today?

Very relevant! Particularly when you look at who is the attorney general, and what kind of politics he has. Look at the arrest of Jamil El-Amin [formerly H. Rap Brown] in Atlanta, and a few recent arrests of people who were formerly in the BPP on charges that are over 30 years old.

You are also working on establishing the Black Panther Film Festival. Why did you choose this medium to get your message out?

I was the Communications Secretary of the BPP, and I worked very closely with filmmakers, photographers and press. People are continuing to make films about aspects of the BPP, or to make documentaries about the Young Lords, or to make dramatic films involving these movements - films which take on aspects or characters from these movements. The making of the films is not the problem, it is the seeing of the films. So the young people for whom these movements changed the country - to improve the standard of living, improve the life chances for the next generation - that young population has never even seen these movies. The purpose of the festival is to make available films that already exist. Not to create something, but to bring together things that are already created and put them together to be seen, to make it visible, to make it available, so that the young people understand what that legacy is. That is what they inherit.

For many it is extraordinarily transformative. They can actually see Panthers or Young Lords or the American Indian Movement on film, hear what they have to say - it is a very direct confrontation. My role is just to organize and pool this information, and find these films, and find these directors, and put it all in one place. The place we have chosen is the Schomburg Center at the New York Public Library, Malcolm X Boulevard and 135th St. in New York, and the Miller Theater, which is at 116th and Broadway by Columbia University.

Is the purpose of the festival to change people's perceptions of the BPP?

Well, the purpose is for people to have their own information. If you come and meet Black Panthers and talk to them, and read about them, and see films about them, you can come to your own conclusion. That's an opportunity that most people don't have. The purpose of the
festival is to generate that opportunity on a broader and broader scale. People can come to their own conclusions. I am not here to explain who the Panthers were, but I will be Executive Producer of an event that provides a lot of information to people so they can come to conclusions that are more consistent with the information that is available.

**Are you still raising money for prisoners?**

[Laughing] We’re raising money right now for the film festival. When we have proceeds, it goes to prisoners who were former members of the BPP serving extraordinarily long time. People like Eddie Conway, who has been in for 30 years and is still trying to get a hearing.

**The festival is not just to show films...**

A film festival is a series of events that focus on films and bring filmmakers, bring people who have other things to say. One of the panels that I will moderate is called "The International Impact of the Black Panther Movement." We will have someone talk about the global solidarity and the way the BPP served as a model internationally. Maybe Bobby Seale will talk about his international work and traveling, and what he did as chairman of the BPP on the international level. And I will probably talk some on the international section of the BPP, to give people in Harlem and who come to the festival access to this information. This information is not a secret, but it is very hard to get.

**Is there a general theme to the films that you will be showing this year?**

The films are about resistance to oppression. The BPP was about resistance to oppression. We show films that show that active form of resistance. This is not something that happened in 1968 and finished. We have a span of people who are working in this medium on this topic, and that is something that is not known. Just like people have a very narrow view of the BPP, they have a very narrow, or even no view of what these films are. Part of the purpose of the festival is to explode that. Hopefully that will nourish their imagination, particularly if they want to make films.

For more information about the 2nd International Black Panther Film Festival, please log on to www.pantherfilmfest.org

**About the Author**

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