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SEIZE THE TIME

The Roots of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California

In 1944 the *Observer*, a local white newspaper in Oakland, bemoaned the "new race problem" caused by "the influx of what might be called socially-liberated or uninhibited Negroes who are not bound by the old peaceful understanding between the Negro and the white" and who insisted on "barging into the white man and becoming an integral part of the white man's society."[1] This comment came on the heels of a railroad station brawl between black and white servicemen and civilians that had turned into a full-scale race riot involving two thousand people. World War II had unleashed the winds of change in Oakland, but the problems of race were hardly new. During the war thousands of African Americans migrated to Oakland from Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and other southern states. Drawn by the promise of work in war industries, these migrants

swelled the city's black population from 8,462 in 1940 to over 20,000 four years later.[2] They transformed West Oakland, a magnet for 85 percent of Oakland's black population, into a bustling, vibrant community complete with its own retail corridor that became known as the "black downtown."[3] These migrants had a profound impact on racial politics in Oakland. Spurred to action by a growing collective consciousness and sense of empowerment as well as visceral experiences of racial discrimination, they challenged the fragile racial balance between the historic black community and the white majority. Their struggles against racism, housing discrimination, poverty, educational inequities, and police brutality in the postwar period would radicalize a new generation of activists who were, literally and figuratively, their children. This new generation would come of age politically as part of the nationwide upsurge of civil rights, social justice, and antipoverty activism in the 1960s.

The Black Panther Party was part of this groundswell. Founded in 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, children of migrants from Louisiana and Texas, the BPP would grow to over forty chapters and branches and become one of the leading organizations of the Black Power movement. The roots of the Panthers lay in the responses of African Americans to the economic inequities and racial indignities of postwar Oakland. Postwar demobilization displaced working-class blacks from the toehold they had been able to gain in shipbuilding and other defense industries.[4] Manufacturing jobs disappeared as trucks replaced ships and trains as the major commercial freight carriers. Some African Americans were able to find work on railroads and docks, in local canneries, government installations, and, to a lesser extent, in domestic service. However, overall economic depression, high unemployment, underemployment, and low wages were the economic fate of many blacks in this period.[5] These structural economic conditions and visceral experiences of racism combined with the limitations of government initiatives such as urban renewal and the War on Poverty in the 1960s to galvanize Oakland's black working class.

The emergence of the BPP is the story of this uprising. It reflects the attempt of the poor to organize for social justice, economic and political transformation, and cultural self-determination. It is the story of individuals: Newton and Seale and the comradeship that developed between them as they journeyed down intersecting paths of political exploration; local activists like Mark Comfort, who laid the groundwork for grassroots black activism before the BPP; regional activists in Los Angeles and Berkeley

whose struggles reverberated locally; and the many rank-and-file members who would swell the Panthers' ranks. While some members would come from Oakland's grittiest streets and were politically inexperienced, others were veterans of Oakland's civil rights struggles, student activists from local community colleges, high school students who had participated in boycotts, and former members of Oakland's many local black nationalist formations. They were united by their sense of purpose, collective identity, and commitment to seize the time.

THE FLATLANDS

The Black Panther Party was born of the problems and potential of Oakland's flatlands, a region within the city that was defined by both topography and politics. Historically, flatlands neighborhoods included West Oakland and downtown Oakland as well as East Oakland—a middle-class area that was racially diverse and contained majority-white neighborhoods in the foothills—and Fruitvale, the core of the Mexican community.[6] However, in the postwar period segregation and exclusion made the term *flatlands* synonymous with the poorest and most dispossessed areas of the city that were hardest hit by Oakland's economic downturn. In March 1966 the inaugural issue of the *Flatlands* newspaper editorialized that race, class, and place determined whether you experienced Oakland as "the all-America city" embodied by the upscale lifestyle of Oakland's hills or as the "city of pain," experienced by the largely black and brown residents of the flatlands. The editorial's message of crisis-level socioeconomic conditions and gaping disparities of wealth was delivered alongside a message of hope: the flatlands were both the spatial expression of oppression and a crucible for resistance. They were a place that "spill[ed] over with people" and "stank with decay" and where "things were getting worst," but that also had the potential for transformation if residents would unite to fight back and declare, "We're not taking it anymore." Founded by a group of local black activists, the *Flatlands* reflected, nurtured, and reported about this spirit of mobilization. The editorial urged action: "We've got to decide what to do. If we're going to change things around this city, we're going to have to change ourselves too. . . . This is a challenge for you [the poor] as much as for the people who sit up high and let things go on as they are."[7]

The economic underdevelopment of the flatlands was not accidental. The downturn there was tied to structural economic transformations,

institutionalized racism, and government policies in the postwar period. By 1946 more than half of the black families in Oakland lived in the flatlands in overcrowded government housing constructed in 1942 as temporary shelters for incoming workers drawn to the war industries.[8] White property owners would often refuse to rent or sell to "minorities," and racial discrimination in the private market hindered the ability of blacks to spread out into other locales.[9] Zoning restrictions and restrictive covenants barred black people from model suburbs created by federally sponsored wartime construction programs, and the banking industry practiced discriminatory policies in allocating real estate loans.[10] A 1965 survey of real estate brokers starkly revealed the constellation of discriminatory practices that reinforced the residential color line: "refusing to open listings to Negro brokers, block-busting, outright refusal to sell or rent to minorities, fast-talking or shaming a client out of the desire to buy or rent, raising the fear of being unwelcome, soliciting neighborhood opinions on race, charging higher interest rates, higher prices, and more discount points, and giving shorter loan terms."[11]

By 1966 Oakland had become a segregated city: whites had left neighborhoods in East and North Oakland and run for the hills and the foothills. With few other choices, middle-class African Americans spread into East Oakland locales that were increasingly abandoned by whites. An estimated 100,000 white middle-class homeowners left Oakland between 1950 and 1960 and were replaced by black and Chicano renters.[12] Between 1960 and 1966, while the white population in Oakland decreased by 36,000, the black population increased by 33,500 and there was a dramatic increase in the number of Japanese, Korean, and Filipino residents.[13]

Residential segregation was not just a result of discrimination in the real estate and home finance industry; it was reinforced by local and federal government.[14] Suburbanization was aided by the availability of inexpensive housing and the relocation of jobs outside of the city, while transportation projects had a devastating impact on the West Oakland economy.[15] Ferry service for train passengers arriving in Oakland and crossing over to San Francisco declined in the 1950s, and train service to Oakland was discontinued altogether in 1958, resulting in the loss of a traditional source of employment for blacks.[16] The Nimitz Freeway, completed that same year, cut through the heart of West Oakland, dividing it in half and destroying many homes and businesses in the process. The black downtown, the economic center of the West Oakland community, never recovered from these losses.

While federal and local initiatives would prove detrimental to all flatlands neighborhoods, West Oakland was hardest hit. City Council's designation of West Oakland as a "blighted area" in 1954 meant that it was targeted for "revitalization" projects, which had a devastating impact on the community.[17] Local government agencies destroyed many units of low-rent housing without providing affordable replacements. Between 1946 and 1966 fewer than four hundred units of public housing were built in Oakland. During the same period over seven thousand units—the vast majority of which were in high-poverty areas—were eliminated. Of the 2,334 new single-family dwellings constructed between 1960 and 1965, 1,716 of them, or over 73 percent, were built in six of the lowest-density and highest-income census tracts in the city. In contrast only ten new single-family houses were constructed in the four most densely populated tracts in West Oakland during the same period. Forty-three percent of the new multiple-unit dwellings, 4,099 units in all, built between 1960 and 1965 were around the expensive Lake Merritt area. During the same period in West Oakland only 210 new apartment buildings were built.[18] Poor people's only choice was public housing—less than 1 percent of the city's 146,000 housing units.[19] It was a recipe for displacement, overcrowding, and homelessness.[20] According to the *Flatlands*, West Oakland had become known as "Niggersville" by the mid-1960s.[21]

Although "slum removal" and transportation projects were billed as mechanisms to improve Oakland's economy, they did little to stem capital flight. Oakland was not able to attract new profit-oriented corporations and growth industries. As early as 1935 the Oakland Chamber of Commerce had established the Metropolitan Oakland Area Program to encourage the development of industry outside of the city. As a result, from 1952 to 1962 Oakland, formerly the only major industrial center in the county, accounted for a mere 28 percent of the county's industrial investments. Established businesses and industries left the city in search of more attractive locales. The loss of companies like Cal Pak, which employed between one thousand and five thousand people seasonally, and Marchant Calculators and Nordstrom Value, which each had a workforce of approximately one thousand, had a devastating impact on the local economy.[22] Eighty businesses left town or simply went bankrupt between 1958 and 1963. By 1975 one third of Oakland's manufacturing jobs were gone.[23]

Government initiatives and an infusion of federal money were no panacea for flatlands residents. The War on Poverty, launched in 1964 by the

federal Equal Opportunity Act, did little to change the material conditions of Oakland's poor. Eighty percent of all black people lived in War on Poverty target areas—East Oakland, West Oakland, North Oakland, and Fruitvale—"where the average age of the residents was lower, household income was lower and household size was larger than elsewhere in Oakland."[24] The War on Poverty was administered by four poverty centers in the target areas, four Adult Minority Employment Project offices, and a large skills center—housed, ironically, in a building whose former occupant was a manufacturer that had moved to the suburbs.[25] Sixty-three percent of $5,935,234, the total approved budget from 1964 to 1967, was slated for service, education, and administration. The majority of the job creation allocation, $1,886,354, went to the creation of temporary summer jobs through Neighborhood Youth Corps rather than address the long-term employment needs of the "hard-core poor."[26]

Business interests dominated the Oakland Economic Development Council, the major governing body for poverty programs. Twenty-eight of the Council's forty members were appointed by the mayor. Oakland's poor communities had only twelve representatives, three members from each of Oakland's four Target Area Advisory Committee (TAAC) areas: East Oakland, West Oakland, North Oakland, and Fruitvale.[27] African Americans complained that too many "fat cats" had administrative power over the program as compared to ordinary flatlanders.[28] The *Flatlands* editorialized, "All this government money's has been pouring in—so's the poor can pull themselves up by their bootstraps. But FLATLANDS can tell you how the poor see it; the poor say there isn't nothing that's been done."[29]

Police brutality was a persistent problem in Oakland history, especially in the flatlands. Brutality was not simply a matter of isolated instances of individual police misconduct; it was a reflection of how racial inequalities permeated the maintenance of law and order.[30] Oakland's police force was overwhelmingly white, and many were recruited from the Deep South. Despite the fact that the number of blacks rose from 5 to 35 percent of the city's population from the mid-1940s through the 1970s, black police officers were never more than 3 to 4 percent of the total police force.[31] The police enforced the racial status quo, forcing blacks to either remain subordinate or face the consequences.[32] In 1931 the National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement, which produced the very first federal review of the police, described Oakland as a place of "unjustifiable brutality by police towards citizens."[33] One observer commented that the police would beat "a

Black man within an inch of your life back in the late '30s and all through the '40s." During this period black residents often described the police as "cold blooded" and gave them nicknames such as " 'Ass Kicking' Slim."[34] In 1947 the Alameda County chapter of the National Negro Congress called for an end to the police's "campaign of terror and intimidation" in testimony in front of the City Council after a black woman's arm was twisted and her clothes torn during the issuance of a traffic citation.[35] In June 1948 the Oakland Committee for Civic Unity recommended prohibitions on police use of "violence, abusive language, and other indications of improper respect, regardless of race, color, creed, and social or economic status."[36] Despite the many charges of police misconduct and brutality in the 1940s, by 1950 not one officer had been suspended for using illegal force. By this time Oakland school authorities had begun to coordinate with social service agencies, including recreation agencies, police departments, and prisons, to monitor the behavior of youth defined as delinquent. This led to increased police scrutiny of black Oakland youth.[37]

In January 1950 Oakland held the first hearings in the country that "brought a state investigating body into a certain community to specifically investigate the single charge of police brutality particularly directed towards racial groups."[38] These hearings provided a voice for victims of police brutality and misconduct. Several local residents complained of brutality toward black men and harassment and disrespect aimed at black women, such as when women riding in cars with white male friends were accused of being prostitutes.[39] The Bay Area Civil Rights Council testified that black Oakland residents "live in daily and nightly terror of the Oakland police department."[40] Although Police Chief Lester J. Devine acknowledged that there was a problem of civility and issued orders that "police should no longer refer to Negroes as 'knotheads' and 'Jigs,' " he denied the existence of "systematic racial discrimination." The irony of Devine's comments was not lost on the majority-black audience. When he opined that the police force "compares favorably with that of any Police Department in the country," the crowd erupted in derisive laughter.[41]

By the mid-1950s the prevalence of brutality charges against Oakland police led one newspaper to editorialize, "This treatment of Negroes in Oakland has become almost a tradition. It has happened to so many Negroes, over and over, without any action on the part of the department heads[,] the feeling has grown that Negroes can look for nothing better at the hands of the police."[42] There were over twenty demonstrations protesting police

violence in Oakland between 1965 and 1966, and the California Advisory Commission of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission heard testimony at local hearings.[43]

By 1966 the flatlands were facing residential segregation, poverty, unemployment, and police brutality. It had become a cauldron of discontent. Observers noted that the condition of African Americans in Oakland were so dire that "Black Dynamite," wide-scale protest, might erupt, making "the city of Oakland . . . tremble from top to bottom."[44] In August 1965, less than ten days after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, the neighborhood of Watts in Los Angeles exploded in urban rebellion. At least thirty-four people died, a thousand were injured, and four thousand were arrested, and property damage tallied $200 million.[45] The catalyst was an incident of police brutality. The very next month the U.S. Community Relations Service identified Oakland and Los Angeles as two of eleven cities outside of the South likely to explode in racial violence.[46] The idea of Oakland being "another Watts" and containing "one of the most dismal and explosive ghettoes in the nation" became part of public discourse.[47] The *Flatlands* described the local reverberations of Watts: "Seems like Watts made the federal government jumpy. People from Washington, they come all the way down here. They ask us what's going on in the flatlands. They want to know how long we can wait. Some of these national magazines and newspapers write about us too. They say the flatlands is an area in which we have a so called 'potential explosion.' "[48] Oakland's explosion would come, but not in the form of spontaneous urban rebellion. It would take the form of organized resistance.

FROM BLACK DYNAMITE TO BLACK POWER

In the 1960s a vibrant grassroots movement spilled out from local high schools and colleges, neighborhood centers, and street corners, spearheaded by Oakland's most dispossessed residents and rooted in the flatlands. These activists drew upon Oakland's long history of political activism to create organizations tackling everything from poverty and housing to police brutality and entrenched racial hierarchies. They included black nationalists influenced by national spokespeople such as Malcolm X; traditional civil rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE); local coalitions representing churches, civic groups, and fraternal organ-

izations such as the Civil Rights Coordinating Committee; and trade union groups, such as the Negro American Labor Council. This local movement for change was framed by the civil rights movement, which had emerged in the postwar South with the goal of ending racial segregation and securing black voting rights through legislation using the tactic of nonviolent direct action, as well as grassroots black nationalist activism represented by the Nation of Islam and other community-based organizations advocating black cultural self-determination, economic justice, and dignity.

As the nationwide movement for social change evolved, debates about defining and achieving black liberation increasingly took center stage. These debates were also present in Oakland, where grassroots activists worked in tension and in tandem with "respectable Negro leaders," New Leftists, and white liberals who often bemoaned the apathy of the black poor and saw the flatlands as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Divisions became more evident as the local movement achieved incremental victories, embraced a diversity of strategies and tactics, and experienced hardening resistance. However, national events influenced rather than prefigured the evolution of local protest. The Oakland movement was also influenced tactically and ideologically by events in nearby Berkeley, San Francisco, and Los Angeles—cities that were national centers of anti–Vietnam War activism, college student protests, and anti–police brutality mobilizations.

Mark Comfort stood at the epicenter of grassroots Oakland's political explosion. Although he would never formally join the Black Panther Party, he played a crucial role in its early evolution and laid the groundwork for the emergence of the organization. Born in Oklahoma City in 1934, Comfort moved to Oakland in 1941 and grew up in West Oakland. He dropped out of school and got involved with local gangs and amassed a police record and jail time for fighting, sometimes in turf battles with white peers brought on by shifting spatial boundaries due to changing demographics. Comfort was politicized by his experiences with low-paying jobs, inequities in the judicial system, and interactions with Mexicans and other people of color. He became a visible leader in the local political scene and joined the staff of the *Flatlands*. Comfort was deeply influenced by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which fostered grassroots leadership, and by activists who immersed themselves in the community. Since 1960 SNCC members had been on the front lines of southern white violence and had engaged in grassroots organizing among some of the most politically

disenfranchised black people in the South. Comfort was also influenced by leftist ideas and black nationalist thinkers. His marriage to Gloria Black, a white activist whose father was a communist and active in union organizing, doubtless furthered his exposure to the Old Left. By the mid-1960s he had traveled to many of the social protest hot spots around the country, forging links between Oakland and the wider world of activism.[49]

Although protest politics in Oakland were too diverse and complex to be reduced to one individual, Comfort's political path wound through many of the major protest activities and organizations in the 1960s. His activism provides a window into the evolution of community organization among blacks at the grassroots level as they sought to work with (and pose alternatives to) movements aimed at achieving economic justice and integration through nonviolent direct action. His commitment to interracial activism, his embrace of black self-determination, his focus on nourishing grassroots activism in the black community, and his nationwide connections laid the groundwork for the Black Panther Party.[50]

The year 1963 was pivotal for grassroots protest in the Bay Area. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference's spring civil rights campaigns in Birmingham, Alabama, had galvanized national attention and invigorated protests nationwide. The Ad Hoc Committee to End Discrimination was formed by activists committed to challenging racial discrimination in employment. It began as a multiracial coalition of organizations that included a representative from the W. E. B. Du Bois club, a Communist Party affiliate; members of the Congress of Racial Equality from Oakland, Berkeley, and San Francisco; and local college students. The Committee was involved in several direct action demonstrations addressing long-standing issues of racial inequality and became one of the most visible organizations on Oakland's civil rights landscape. One of their initiatives was protesting against discriminatory hiring practices by Mel's Drive-in Restaurant, a popular local eatery. The Ad Hoc Committee embraced tactical flexibility. Rather than adopting an explicit commitment to nonviolence, they promised, "We'll defend our line. There was singing, shouting, clapping, smoking, talking, walking two abreast, dancing, and all types of dress on the line." One observer noted that this self-conscious abandonment of respectability politics "consolidated the image of militancy and new notions of protocol."[51] Protesters picketed the restaurant and marched to the home of Harold Dobbs, the co-owner of Mel's who was running for mayor. Dobbs caved to

the pressure after losing the election and agreed to hire African Americans in more visible positions.[52]

Comfort took part in this activist wave. He was particularly concerned with youth activism and unemployment and was a vocal critic of the War on Poverty. In 1963 in Oakland he joined Youth for Jobs, an organization that sought unemployment insurance for high school–age youth and held protests at the local unemployment office.[53] Youth for Jobs played an important role in organizing demonstrations in Oakland and San Francisco to protest the Birmingham church bombings on 15 September 1963 that resulted in the death of four young girls and occurred in the wake of the March on Washington. According to Comfort, who was cochair of the Youth for Jobs Oakland protest march, hundreds of black students, many of them from West Oakland's McClymonds High School, attended the demonstration and marched to a local police station chanting "Now is the hour" and "We want our rights now."[54] Comfort commented on the vibrant spirit of the march: "We blew these people's minds; we caught the police off guard. They went ape."[55] Along with members of the NAACP he addressed the marchers, demanding that the Birmingham killers be brought to justice and a federal investigation be launched. One local newspaper speculated that the "current racial violence" in Alabama "has made the feelings of local Negroes run high" and helped fuel racial tensions between black and white students at local high schools over everything from open enrollment to attacks on students by nonstudents.[56]

By 1964 Comfort had left Youth for Jobs, citing its increasing bureaucracy, and joined the Ad Hoc Committee, playing a pivotal role along with its leaders Mike Myerson, a white student activist from Berkeley, Tracy Simms, and Roy Ballard. In 1963–64 the Committee attacked Jim Crow employment practices in nearby San Francisco at the Sheraton-Palace Hotel and Cadillac Row car dealerships. These massive campaigns mobilized hundreds of college students and resulted in mass arrests and the intervention of both the mayor and the California Fair Employment Practices Commission. The Ad Hoc Committee won important concessions from these industries, securing nondiscrimination policies and commitments to achieve specific percentages of black employees. However, despite the visible and vocal leadership of African Americans in the protest and the endorsement of the head of the NAACP, the black masses were not galvanized. The complexion of protesters prompted one newspaper to point out,

"To the credit of our fellow Negro citizens, let it be noted that their part in these unfortunate events has been minimal."[57]

Ironically the local movement that was deeply inspired by black activism nationwide struggled around the issue of black involvement.[58] CORE exemplified these realities; it had gained strength on and off campus in Berkeley in 1963, and its membership base was among liberal whites as well as college students from Berkeley, many of whom would go on to be active in the Free Speech Movement.[59] CORE attacked discriminatory hiring practices and segregated public accommodations using nonviolent direct action campaigns. One of their most visible campaigns was a series of protests in 1964 and 1965 at Jack London Square, an area near the Port of Oakland filled with restaurants and shops.[60] CORE activists picketed restaurants and held "sip-ins" and "nibble-ins" (where activists would linger interminably over light meals) to protest many restaurants' unstated "white–up front policy," which limited black employees to back room labor. Assemblyman Don Mulford called for an investigation of the protests by the legislature, claiming, "[The] masses are taking over the public streets." Those masses were predominantly white. This was partly due to the isolated location of Jack London Square, but it was also a reflection of local priorities. CORE activists acknowledged, "Discriminatory hiring in the fancier restaurants is a symptom of Oakland's general sickness but does not immediately affront most of Oakland's Negroes." As a result the campaign failed to "gain any significant involvement from Oakland's black community." CORE's acknowledgment of the limitations of their strategy didn't prevent them from castigating the black community and speculating about whether "repeated civil rights arrests [in the restaurant campaign] might break the traditional apathy of the Negro community." Eventually they moved from Jack London Square to large department stores downtown to gain more visibility and diversify support.[61]

Like many civil rights coalitions the Ad Hoc Committee's liberal premises, which had provided points of unity and attracted a committed core of black and white activists, unraveled over time around defining goals, embracing tactical diversity, and race. Comfort's ability to tap into the political priorities of grassroots blacks while working in coalition with liberal whites gave him increasing visibility on the Ad Hoc Committee and in local protests. He gained local prominence during the Committee's campaign against the *Oakland Tribune*, the city's only daily paper. The *Tribune* was run by William Knowland, a conservative Republican and former senator who

had campaigned for Barry Goldwater in the early 1960s. Knowland had been a staunch critic of New Left Bay Area social movements, and to many activists the newspaper represented the white conservative establishment. The Ad Hoc Committee launched protests in 1964 focused on the *Tribune*'s hiring practices. Knowland initially responded with a series of meetings with activists and unions, but after negotiations broke down the Committee organized persistent demonstrations, a letter-writing campaign, and a call for subscription cancellation and even advocated a boycott of the paper.[62] In December they launched a massive direct action protest that included rallies, marches, letters of protest, a request that supporters cancel subscriptions, and demonstrators blocking the trucks at the *Tribune*'s distribution gates.[63] The police swept in and arrested eighteen people.

Comfort had been a vocal critic of the *Tribune* and was arrested several times over the course of the Ad Hoc Committee campaign, including in the 14 December mobilization. Even though he was not directly participating in the sit-in he was accused of being a public nuisance and of failure to disperse and received a six-month sentence.[64] Comfort's visibility increased as supporters raised money for his bail. He believed that greater black involvement was the key to successful protest: "If the Knowland grip is ever to be broken, only the people in the Oakland ghetto can do it." The Ad Hoc Committee called the *Tribune* protests the beginning of a citywide thrust, envisioning "a full-scale project for Oakland like the SNCC Mississippi project" and a follow-up conference at UC Berkeley.

The Bay Area was propelled into the national spotlight as the streams of activism between white and black activists converged. In 1964 the Free Speech Movement was begun by veterans of the civil rights movement's southern campaigns and local activists at the University of California at Berkeley in response to the university's ban on political canvassing outside of its gates. Black students in high schools and community colleges and university campuses formed black history study groups and militant black student unions and demanded black studies courses. San Francisco State University was a center of black student activism and would eventually give rise to one of the first black studies programs in the United States.

Several organizations in 1965 demanded "real solutions" for "real problems" from the City Council. One of these groups, called ACTION, was formed in the fall of 1965 as "an association of ministers, civil rights groups, and local leaders" whose goal was to use direct action to agitate for a civilian review board, more black officers, residency requirements, and a

police academy.[65] These multiple political cross-currents overlapped in reinforcing and collaborative as well as antagonistic ways. In the mid-1960s the *Oakland Tribune* reported on the divisions between, on one side, the NAACP, the Urban League, the Oakland Economic Development Council, city councilmen, ministers, and attorneys who had been active in social improvements and civil rights for the black community for a long time, and, on the other side, the "so-called indigenous leaders" such as Curtis Lee Baker and Comfort, who had been getting press and had the ear of the white civil rights establishment.[66] Comfort was clearly part of a larger activist tradition but represented a different and increasingly more visible alternative to mainstream organizations.

Comfort left the Ad Hoc Committee and went on to found the Oakland Direct Action Committee (ODAC) in 1965.[67] An organization that embodied his activist vision of doing community work to address racism and poverty, ODAC was multiracial but firmly based in the black community. In addition to Comfort three white activists took the lead to demonstrate that "there can be a black and white unity in working on human problems without 'white control.'" Rather than begin with a platform and try to gain community support, ODAC put the impetus in the hands of the community and sought to bring black "people together so that *they* can decide how *they* want to live" and define "*real* freedom and *true* democracy." Although there was some initial support from white college students, the type of sustained face-to-face organizing that Comfort called "block work" and that was central to ODAC's mission proved challenging. Comfort recalled, "No one has been back because it's hard, going from door to door talking to people, and a lot of people don't like to do it because it's a long, drawn out process. But it's very important, because how are you going to know exactly what is happening in the black community unless you talk to the people themselves to find out exactly what they would like to see done, what seem to be the biggest problems in the community, and what type of activity they would be willing to participate in?"[68]

Comfort saw no contradiction between embracing the politics of black pride and unity being advocated by spokespeople like Malcolm X and Robert Williams while working in interracial alliances. Nationalism in Oakland was a pivotal political force, and Malcolm X's visits to local mosques dovetailed with growing student activism around a black history course at Oakland City College, which became Merritt College. Comfort worked closely with local nationalist allies such as Curtis Lee Baker, a flamboyant activist

who promoted self-defense and black pride to local youth.[69] Comfort believed, "The whole thing is black liberation, and what the white people have to realize is that the black people in this country are no longer waiting, that they are going on, beginning to call their own leaders, beginning to take some steps forward for themselves." He engaged with the organized left, such as the Communist Party and the Progressive Labor Party, but articulated a nonsectarian leftism rooted in grassroots organizing. "It's going to take the *people* to make the revolution. Just poor, working people striving for a better way of living will bring about the revolution and set up a government. And it doesn't matter what kind of government it is, just so long as it isn't a capitalist, fascist government. That's what counts."[70]

ODAC started as a small but dedicated group that focused on the major concerns of the black community: jobs, schools, and police brutality. The organization tackled police brutality by getting local residents involved in fighting back and raising awareness about local cases. They saw their activism as in line with SNCC, reflecting "the same esprit, the same urgency, direct confrontation."[71] ODAC quickly gained community support; their office was dubbed "Freedom Now Headquarters." Melvin Soriano, a fifteen-year-old ODAC field secretary and a member of the Alm Boy Dukes, a local gang and social club, spearheaded ODAC's work with teenagers. His goal was to unify warring gangs and politicize their activities.[72] Comfort hoped to send some of these youths to the South to work in SNCC projects to learn organizing skills they could bring back to Oakland. He wanted to create a cadre of youth who would "come back to organize people into opposition to end local white rule in Oakland, and to join with their brothers and sisters in the South, and all over this country, to bring about real democracy in America."[73]

This was just one way that protest politics in Oakland were connected to civil rights activism nationwide. Some groups traveled to demonstrations and saw their local activities as an extension of the national movement. In 1965 local CORE chapters sent representatives to Selma, Alabama, to join the demonstrations for equality. They argued, "We think that the most important thing to do is to let the people of Selma know that we are really with them, that we are willing to fight for our own freedom, here in Oakland, now."[74] Other groups were more explicitly focused on marshaling local resources and support for the southern movement. Organizations like Bay Area Friends of SNCC supported southern civil rights activities through fund-raising and community development work. They took the official

position that while they were "not indifferent to racial problems close to home," their priority was "significant change in the political and economic status of the Southern Negro" as a "prerequisite to permanent change in race relations throughout the nation."[75] This official stance belied the local impact of Friends of SNCC. The organization served as a conduit through which southern civil rights leaders like John Lewis traveled through the Bay Area for fund-raising and speaking engagements.

By 1966 Comfort had made connections with activists in fourteen states. His links to the larger black liberation movement provided one conduit through which the imagery and symbolism of the Black Panther came to the Bay Area. The panther was the symbol of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), an independent black third party in Alabama founded in 1965 by SNCC activists. It would eventually become known as the Black Panther Party.[76] Comfort had gone to Lowndes to work on voter registration activities. In September 1965 he was interviewed in the SNCC newspaper the *Movement* talking about ODAC, the local impact of the Watts riots, and his work with young people following the SNCC model. He argued, "You have to stay with them like the SNCC workers in the South. You live in the houses: people respect this. You don't run in and run out, and then say you got arrested for the Negro people." Comfort would return to Lowndes in 1967 to donate twenty-two tons of food.[77] The cover of the *Flatlands* for 1–20 January 1966 had a picture of Comfort wearing a beret featuring a button of a snarling black panther.[78] Several issues over the course of the year show him wearing the beret and button.[79]

Panther imagery was a reflection of the connective tissue linking protests nationwide. In Berkeley the campus-based Friends of SNCC organized meetings to support the LCFO, and in 1966 John Hullett, an LCFO leader, spoke in the Bay Area at a public meeting against the war in Vietnam and asked for support for their organizing efforts.[80] An organization called the Committee for Lowndes County sprang up in Berkeley for the purpose of organizing locally. Their literature pointed out, "Negroes in northern ghettos have the vote, but they suffer under the same conditions that Southern Negroes do namely, poor schools, poor housing, and either poor jobs or no jobs at all."[81] Oakland's connections to multiple and shifting currents of activism around the country could not be more evident.

Black-led organizations arose to address bread-and-butter issues, and the War on Poverty's limited delivery on lofty promises made it a prime target. The first statewide convention of the poor was held in Oakland

in February 1966 and brought together 175 to 200 delegates from fifty statewide antipoverty organizations to discuss welfare rights, housing issues, fair employment, and the federal antipoverty program. Criticism of government policies and initiatives was a unifying theme, and the groups present demanded "a full voice in policy levels and in policy decisions."[82] The California Federation of the Poor grew out of this meeting and was established in March 1966.[83] In the spring of 1966 antipoverty activists demanded major changes in the local War on Poverty administration to shift power from the "fat cats" to community members in the TAACs. They demanded policymaking power and 51 percent membership in the Oakland Economic Development Council for the TAACs, which had only "advisory authority and the power to initiate proposals, but not final authority over any program or over the community organizers paid to report on neighborhood conditions."[84]

This antipoverty activity buoyed ODAC's efforts, which continued to expand the scope of their activism to reflect the concerns of Oakland's young people. Education remained a key issue; a state commission on equal opportunities in education had issued a report that connected the tension in the schools to tensions in the community and suggested that the Board of Education act decisively in response to protests about historic inequities. Educational segregation had closely followed residential segregation in Oakland's history. In 1956 four elementary schools in the hills were created with a $40 million budget, while the population-dense flatlands received only four portable schools. In 1958 hot lunches were terminated in flatlands schools, and parents increasingly protested how school attendance boundaries were determined.[85]

The creation of Skyline High School in 1959 was a turning point in segregation debates in Oakland. Skyline's district boundaries were created to include only the hill areas, which would lead to an all-white school district.[86] Black teachers who spoke up about educational inequities were fired.[87] In 1966 a coalition of activists from civil rights groups, teachers, parents, and education groups founded the Ad Hoc Committee for Quality Education to advocate for flatlands children. The Committee demanded a review board investigate suspensions of teachers in flatland schools and ask for restrictions in the police's ability to question children in schools, free hot lunches, and equal equipment in hill schools and flatland schools. They threatened direct action if their demands were not met.[88] ODAC worked with the Committee to organize a three-day boycott of schools. One-third

of flatlands high school students participated in this boycott, attending alternative "freedom schools," where they discussed everything from local politics to U.S. involvement in Vietnam.[89] A few weeks later students at Castlemont High School took out their frustration at police brutality outside of school and poor conditions inside in spontaneous acts of vandalism and confrontations with authorities.[90]

Comfort turned to electoral politics; he ran for the 15th Assembly District in Oakland and began to speak out against the war in Vietnam.[91] But his campaign was derailed when he was sentenced for the *Tribune* demonstrations and had to serve a six-month sentence beginning in May 1966.[92] Although he was subsequently released from jail due to a state supreme court stay, the *Flatlands* editorialized that Comfort's incarceration signaled a turning point in the consciousness of local activists because it meant that protesters who used "channels available within the system under which they live (votes, rallies, strikes, pickets, etc.)" that represented "faith in the basic rules of the system" were increasingly ineffective.[93] Driven by local and national events, many activists had come to this same conclusion.

Under the leadership of Stokely Carmichael, SNCC moved away from integration and tactical nonviolence. Carmichael and Willie Ricks popularized the phrase *Black Power* during one of the last southern civil rights marches in Mississippi, in June 1966. In its urgency and pride the phrase captured the mood of blacks nationwide. In Oakland Black Power provided a language for the evolution and radicalization of social protest and a broad umbrella under which various political and grassroots groups could coalesce. Activists seized on the term and rooted it in black self-determination, unity, political power, and knowledge of self and history. The chair of the NAACP defined Black Power as black politicians "doing what the people want and not what the power structure wants." A local SNCC representative pointed out that "Black power is opposed to assimilation. It means no longer being absorbed into a white liberal consensus with no real power." The local activist Curtis Baker explained that Black Power "isn't necessarily for violence, but it does include the power to defend oneself when attacked. White people had that power a long time ago." Comfort defined Black Power expansively, as a movement with the potential to remind blacks that "they will never be anything until we win full human rights for anyone."[94]

Black Power continued, rather than began, Oakland's connections to nationwide activist trends. It was a concept that progressive whites who

had played a visible role in local struggles tried to adapt and fit into. But it belonged to the black community, where it was bandied from campus to street corner, from dinner table to community meeting in organizations fighting against poverty, police brutality, housing shortages, unequal education, and racial discrimination. It was cross-generational, engaging seasoned activists like Comfort, a veteran of many organizations and campaigns, as well as blacks who were just cutting their political teeth. It was deeply intellectual, visceral, explosive, and uncontainable. The black dynamite activists had been warned about for so long had arrived.

GRASSROOTS BLACK NATIONALISM

The Black Panther Party was one of the organizations founded during the explosion of Black Power in Oakland. While activists in San Francisco, New York, and other cities around the country had been inspired by the LCFO's panther symbolism and strong stance of black self-determination to create organizations bearing the panther name, it would be the Oakland organization that would lay ultimate claim to the name that Carmichael believed belonged "to the people."[95] The BPP was conceived in a War on Poverty community center by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, two black men with prison time, military service, nationalist organizations, and college activism under their belt. Newton and Seale were among the wave of children of migrant parents that swelled Oakland's grassroots formations. Seale, born on 22 October 1936 in Dallas, migrated to Oakland with his family in 1942. Newton, born in Monroe, Louisiana, on 17 February 1942, did the same in 1945.[96] Both men had come of age amid harsh socioeconomic realities in Oakland's flatlands. Housing shortages forced Newton's family to move several times around West and North Oakland searching for decent accommodations. Newton had many disciplinary problems growing up and was expelled from school after school. Filled with a sense of alienation from the teachers and the learning process, he soon became involved in petty crime.[97] Seale's family lived in an overcrowded government housing project in Berkeley before moving to Oakland. Like Newton's, his family struggled economically and he grew up poor. He joined the military, but a conflict with white authority led to a bad conduct discharge after almost four years. Afterward he worked on and off around the state as a sheet-metal mechanic, draftsman, and comedian.[98]

Newton's and Seale's paths crossed at Oakland City College, a junior college in North Oakland. Seale had been attending the college part time since late 1958; Newton enrolled in 1959. As Merritt College it had become a center of political activism for first-generation college students, and the demand for black studies was fueled by strong student organizations and the presence of seasoned community activists. The atmosphere on campus had become very charged. Debates about the civil rights movement and discussions of black history and politics spilled out from classrooms to lunchrooms, sidewalks, and street corners. After school and during lunch black students mounted their sidewalk soapboxes at informal street rallies where political debate and jive talk were common. Newton and Seale were often in the thick of these debates; according to Seale, the two men solidified their friendship during a sidewalk discussion of the U.S. blockade against Cuba.[99] They gravitated to the same political circles and college courses and would move in and out of many of the same organizations. Seale recalled a memorable meeting with Newton when they shared their backgrounds and copious amounts of fast food: "This when we first get to know each other. This is 1963. So I want to find out about Huey. I asked him why he went to college, he said really, ah, more than anything to entertain my mind. I liked that. It was a good answer. . . . And I thought Huey had a lot of good theory and a lot of good heart. And I liked him."[100] Seale's down-to-earth wit and life experience were apt complements to Newton's mix of street smarts and intellect, and their friendship flourished. Together they embarked on a journey through Oakland's local political formations on and off campus that brought them into contact with national and international political trends growing in their own backyard. Their politicization process reveals the confluence of forces that would give rise to the Black Panther Party. While Comfort's brand of grassroots activism laid the groundwork, the Black Panther Party's origins would also be derived from the increasingly seamless nexus between the campus and the community.

Like many urban youths, Newton and Seale gravitated toward the message of pride, unity, and self-determination articulated by black nationalists. In their political universe black nationalism was both a local and a national phenomenon. Malcolm X, the fiery spokesperson of the Nation of Islam's largest mosque, had emerged as a vocal critic of nonviolent resistance and one of the most forceful advocates for black nationalism and self-determination. He urged black people to protect themselves against white violence, arguing, "We should be peaceful, law abiding—but the time has

come for the American Negro to fight back in self-defense whenever and wherever he is being unjustly and unlawfully attacked."[101] Although both men encountered Malcolm's ideology in radio addresses and the Nation of Islam's newspaper, he also delivered his message to Oakland in a series of speeches in Bay Area mosques and community institutions in the early 1960s.[102] After attending one of these speeches Newton began to go to political discussions at Nation of Islam mosques in Oakland and San Francisco.[103] Seale saw Malcolm X speak at McClymonds High School in Oakland.

Malcolm X's critique of nonviolent civil rights strategies and advocacy of armed self-defense resonated with both men, who had grown up with the stark reality of police brutality. Seale recalled, "We dug quite specifically how he talked about the right of the people by the Constitution of the U.S. to defend themselves with guns, because the U.S. government wasn't doing its job to protect the poor, oppressed people."[104] Seale took Newton to his house one day and showed him an impressive collection of weapons, including pistols and shotguns. His long history with weapons demonstrated the impact of transplanted rural traditions in Oakland: "I was raised a hunter and a fisherman. . . . I was using guns from age ten. When I was ten and eleven, my brother and I would be hunting and fishing in northern California. . . . We would shoot the squirrels with the .22. Then at twelve my father bought me my first high-powered rifle. He bought me a .30-30 Winchester and bought me deer tags because at age twelve with the approval of your parents you could have a high-powered rifle in the state of California."[105]

Newton and Seale joined organizations that were influenced by Malcolm X's vision. Seale joined the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) in the early 1960s.[106] Formed in 1962 in Philadelphia, RAM openly called for international black revolution and preached revolutionary nationalism: "RAM is dedicated to the *national liberation and self*-determination of our captive non–self governing African nation–Black America and all oppressed dark nations of the world." They would achieve this "by using any means necessary."[107] RAM operated covertly and focused on political education and study. Seale remained active in the West Coast branch for two years but would eventually leave the organization, criticizing its focus on cultural activities.[108]

Both men played pivotal roles in the Afro-American Association led by Donald Warden, a popular black talk show host and nationalist voice.

Founded on the Berkeley campus of the University of California, the Afro-American Association grew outward into the Bay Area's black communities and would provide a space for the area's black college and high school students to discuss nationalist theory and practice. Newton and Seale became active participants in book discussion groups on black history and attended street rallies, forging many crucial political ties. It wasn't long, however, before both became critical of Warden's leadership and disillusioned by the focus on capitalism as the solution to the economic problems blacks faced. They eventually left the organization.[109]

Newton's academic activities and growing political consciousness blended seamlessly with his street life. While he was a student he continued to participate in petty thefts, credit card scams, and short-change scams, and he remained a familiar face in Oakland hangout spots. He had cultivated a street-tough, fearless reputation, and people had grown to respect his intelligence and his debating skills. At the time, he justified his petty theft activities in his own mind as stealing from the oppressor. Newton had begun to take classes at San Francisco Law School and studied the California penal code intensely. He was arrested several times, but because of the legal knowledge he had acquired he was able to defeat some charges, get out on bail, or be paroled. After being arrested for assault with a deadly weapon after an altercation at a party, Newton was sentenced on 8 October 1964 to serve six months in jail and a three-year probation period.[110] After his release in 1965, he continued his political involvement, and the friendship with Seale began to deepen.

Malcolm X's political trajectory was a frequent topic of their conversation. Malcolm had moved toward a more secular activist political stance when he broke with the Nation of Islam in early 1964. Although attracted to his political philosophy, both men had rejected the theological foundations of the Nation of Islam, which Seale had dubbed "unscientific stuff about Yacoub." Seale recalled raising a cheer when Malcolm traveled to the Middle East and Africa to meet with activists and heads of state and began talking about human rights: "I said yea! A whole lot of us did. I'm talking about all across this country. . . . Then he [Malcolm] defined it as a civil rights struggle in terms of human rights. Yes. It's much more three-dimensional when you start talking about human rights."[111] When Malcolm returned from abroad he articulated an anti-imperialist, internationalist philosophy rooted in black self-determination. He founded the Organization of African American Unity, reflecting his anti-imperialist stance and

growing conception of the black liberation movement in the United States in terms of a worldwide struggle for human rights. He began to advocate that black Americans seek justice through the United Nations for the violation of their human rights.

Malcolm X's assassination in February 1965 was one of the catalysts that led Seale, Newton, and other students in a study group called Black History Fact Group to initiate the first black studies course at Merritt College. Newton and Seale joined the Soul Students Advisory Council, whose goal was to "develop Black student leadership, advocate for a more inclusive curriculum and to connect the university to the community." However, differences of opinion about the allocation of funds, acceptance of donations from whites, and the issue of armed self-defense divided the fledgling organization, and Newton and Seale eventually resigned.[112]

By this time Seale and Newton felt empowered to see themselves as agents of change. Seale's house, located right around the corner from Merritt College, became the site of heated discussions and debates over the black struggle on local, national, and international levels. Rather than joining yet another organization, creating one that they could customize became an imperative. They envisioned a blueprint for the type of organization they felt was needed to transform black people's conditions. Newton and Seale fused nationalist paradigms with understandings derived from their study of Malcolm X. They believed that black America was an internal colony of the United States and that the relationship between the black colony and the "mother country" was one of pure exploitation of labor and resources. As such, their goal was to create a political vehicle that would raise political consciousness in the black colony and forward the struggle for self-determination there. However, they did not see black self-determination as an end unto itself. They posited that black control of the black nation-state, or national liberation of the black colony, was a part of the larger goal to transform America and eventually the rest of the world.[113]

The civil rights movement had been framed by the international context of African independence movements, the reality of the cold war, and the escalating protest movement against the Vietnam War. Civil rights leaders had made explicit in their speeches the connection between the struggle of blacks in America and the struggle of African nations for their freedom. This connection was more than a rhetorical flourish; it had concrete expression in the consciousness of movement participants. In the fall of 1964 a SNCC delegation traveled to newly independent Guinea and met with

President Sékou Touré, a vocal proponent of socialism. One SNCC leader observed that year, "Something is happening to people in the southern Negro community. They're identifying with people because of color. . . . They're conscious of things that happen in Cuba, in Latin America, and in Africa."[114] The ideological soil in black America had become more receptive to international revolutionary theorists like Amílcar Cabral, Kwame Nkrumah, Fidel Castro, Frantz Fanon, and Mao Zedong.

Newton and Seale turned to Marxist theoreticians at home and abroad to explain the poverty they saw all around them. They identified capitalism as the root cause of oppression worldwide and linked the cause of African Americans with the cause of Third World liberation movements. They studied anticolonial movements worldwide and tried to apply the tactics of liberation struggle to the African American situation. They were particularly influenced by theories that posited that a small, armed group of dedicated people could lead the revolutionary struggle and that guerrilla warfare could be an effective strategy for progressive social change. They avidly read Mao's writings on the crucial role of the guerrilla in the struggle for national liberation. Mao argued that the guerrilla acted as both a political theoretician and a military commander, gaining support among the masses through his participation in the struggle and leading the masses to a higher state of consciousness by his words and example. Cuba's Castro further sanctioned the role of the guerrilla as a conduit through which revolutionary consciousness was transported to the masses. He declared, "It was enough for the ideas to take root in a sufficient number of men for revolutionary action to be initiated. . . . The masses started to acquire these ideals . . . and consciousness."[115] Mao's and Castro's theoretical depictions of the guerrilla fighter's role in the struggle for national liberation were especially relevant in the context of Vietnam, where guerrillas were stubbornly and effectively holding their ground, despite the superior technology of the United States.

Fanon, who analyzed the Algerian political situation and argued that national identity, culture, and pride could be achieved only through violent struggle, particularly influenced Newton and Seale. To Fanon violence was not only an effective tactic but also a psychological imperative to liberation. In the preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, Jean-Paul Sartre explained that Fanon "shows clearly that this irrepressible violence is neither sound, nor fury, nor the resurrection of savage instincts, nor even the effect of resentment: it is man re-creating himself." Fanon asserted, "The armed

struggle mobilizes the people; that is to say it throws them in one way and in one direction." Furthermore "the mobilization of the masses, when it rises out of the war of liberation, introduces into each man's consciousness the ideas of a common cause, of a national destiny and of a collective history."[116] Newton and Seale had also read Lenin and believed that a small group of people could act as a vanguard to lead the way to liberation. They saw themselves as that vanguard and resolved to put their ideas into action.

Newton and Seale were filled with optimism and determination and cognizant of the upsurge of activism and consciousness locally. They believed the revolutionary moment had arrived. Newton wrote in his autobiography:

> We had seen Watts rise up the previous year. We had seen how the police attacked the Watts community after causing trouble in the first place. We had seen Martin Luther King come to Watts in an effort to calm the people, and we had seen his philosophy of nonviolence rejected. . . . We had seen the Oakland police and the California Highway Patrol begin to carry their shotguns in full view as another way of striking fear into the community. We had seen all this, and we recognized that the rising consciousness of Black people was at the point of explosion. One must relate to the history of one's community and to its future. Everything we had seen convinced us that our time had come.[117]

On 15 October 1966 Newton and Seale drafted a program for their organization in the back room of the North Oakland Neighborhood Anti-Poverty Center, where Seale worked. After all those months of discussion it took only a short time to create the founding principles and a statement of goals of their ten-point platform and program. It was separated into two sections: "What We Want" and "What We Believe." The first point called for self-determination: "We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our black community. We believe that black people will not be free until we are able to determine our destiny." The ten-point platform and program went on to demand full employment, reparations from the federal government, decent housing, education representative of the black experience, and exemption of all black men from military service. Point 7 called for an end to police brutality and affirmed black people's right to organize self-defense groups. It took its justification from the Second Amendment's guarantee of the right to bear arms. Point 8 called for freedom for

black prisoners, and point 9 called for a jury of peers for black defendants, as guaranteed in the Fourteenth Amendment. Point 10 demanded "land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace."[118]

This ten-point platform and program was not a revolutionary manifesto, a blueprint for radical social change, or a carefully thought-out plan of action. Instead it was a program of radical reform rooted in the nexus between visceral lived experiences of discrimination in Oakland's flatlands and the strong sense of connection with forces of radical social change around the country and the world. Newton and Seale starkly enumerated the failures of American democracy to its black citizens and sought justification for their points from the U.S. Constitution. Their platform and program fell squarely within the radical democratic tradition of American protest. It did not put forward a systematic analysis or critique of capitalism or imperialism. Instead it named "white landlords," "white American businessmen," "the American racist," "racist police," "racist government," and "racist military" as the oppressors of the black community. It did not call for the overthrow of government but instead sought to make the government antiracist and responsive to black citizens, whether that meant providing reparations or creating housing. They ended with an excerpt from the strongest statement for political independence and nascent nationhood in the history of the United States: the Declaration of Independence. Point 10 concluded with the statement that all men are created equal and are endowed with inalienable rights, and "whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new government."[119]

Tactically the ten-point platform and program had the potential for broad mass appeal. Newton emphasized that the program had to be accessible to "the brothers on the block"—the brothers whom he had engaged in rap sessions on street corners and at parties.[120] One such block was 84th to 85th Avenue on East 14 in Oakland. This area was known as "the Block" and was typical of poor areas in Oakland.

For two young men who had experienced everything from prison to college, this commitment to the streets cast a net wider than their gendered articulation of the streets allowed. The goal was "a program for the people. A program that relates to the people. A program that the people can read and see, and which expresses their desires and needs at the same time."[121] These people were potentially from the streets, the campuses, local political organizations, and nationwide social protest groups. They

were men and, potentially, women. To all who answered the call the ten-point platform and program would provide a foundation on which a more specific framework of implementation and action could be built. Armed with a thousand mimeographed copies of their program, the two founding Black Panthers hit the streets of Oakland in October 1966, determined to seize the time.

The type of political study and activism that led to the formation of the Black Panthers was central to the movement of Black Power. It was not just action, but discourse—both practice and theory. In Oakland this translated into two conferences that reflected local engagement with notions of Black Power. On 21 October 1966 the Committee for Lowndes County sponsored a symposium on Black Power at Merritt College.[122] All proceeds would go to the Black Panther Party in Alabama. A constellation of black grassroots activists from the *Flatlands*, CORE in Oakland, Soul Students Advisory Council, San Francisco State's black student union, and the editor of the Friends of SNCC newsletter, *The Movement*, met to share information and chart future directions.[123]

Students for a Democratic Society, one of the leading New Left organizations, held a second Black Power conference in Berkeley in October. The visible role of white students in planning the conference became a source of controversy, and student leaders at three Bay Area campuses threatened to boycott. The organizers argued that their goal was to educate whites about the need to organize in the white community, while critics pointed out that white commitment to the cause of Black Power might be fleeting: "If this fine strategy should backfire, some of those people in [Students for a Democratic Society] are merely going to shave and go back to New York."[124] Despite this tension, many Oakland activists did not use Black Power as a vehicle to express racial animus or political skepticism toward whites. Instead they offered a sharp critique of white racism, urged black activists to avoid white control, and suggested that sympathetic whites focus their efforts in their own communities. One activist summed up this spirit: "Black power has some enemies who are Negroes and some friends who are white."[125] The Berkeley conference went forward with a program that included panels on "Black Power in local communities," "Black Power and violence," "black culture and integration," and "organizing whites."[126] Local leaders such as Mark Comfort and regional activists like the Los Angeles nationalist Ron Karenga spoke alongside Stokely Carmichael, who offered intellectual analysis, historical insights, and searing polemics, urging

white allies to answer the question "Can the white activist not try to be a Pepsi generation who comes alive in the black community but can he be a man who moves into the white community and starts organizing where the organizing is needed." The *Flatlands* reported an audience of ten thousand.[127] It was a scene that played out all over the country as people gathered to give voice to multiple understandings of Black Power. But it would soon become clear that the Black Panthers would define Black Power, even as it defined them.