WE ARE A CONSPIRACY



56 NOTES ON RED

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JEFF CLARK

## 1

Her comrades called her Red. She may have been born in Chicago or New Orleans as Saundra Cosey, Sandra Lee, Sandra Lane, or possibly Sandra Jones. Gaidi Faraj tells us she was named Saundra Hobson. In her teens, owing to some form of kinship with a man called Omar, she adopted the surname Holmes, and following her marriage to Geronimo Pratt, she was known as Saundra Pratt. Huey Newton, when he expelled her from the Black Panther Party, referred to her as "Sandy Lane Pratt or Saundra Holmes or 'Red.'" Ward Churchill records her name as Sandra Lane and Geronimo's biographer calls her Saundra Lee. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, white journalists writing for establishment newspapers said she was Sandy Pratt, Saundra Holmes, and Sandy Ace Homes. From Gaidi Faraj we also learn that near the end of her brief, rebellious life, intimates knew her as N'Sonde Mande.

After Red was killed, Los Angeles County filed two distinct death records:

| | |
|---|---|
| NAME | Saundra Holmes |
| SEX | Female |
| BIRTH DATE | 11 Oct 1948 |
| BIRTHPLACE | Louisiana |
| EVENT TYPE | Death |
| EVENT DATE | 05 Nov 1971 |
| EVENT PLACE | Los Angeles |

| | |
|---|---|
| NAME | Saundra Pratt |
| SEX | Female |
| BIRTH DATE | 11 Oct 1948 |
| BIRTHPLACE | Louisiana |
| EVENT TYPE | Death |
| EVENT DATE | 05 Nov 1971 |
| EVENT PLACE | Los Angeles |

## 2

Regarding names—their slipperiness, their lack, their imperfections and sometimes insuitabilities—Tiana Reid reminds us of a passage from Toni Morrison's *Sula*:

**"I'm me," she whispered. "Me."**

**Nel didn't quite know what she meant, but on the other hand she knew exactly what she meant.**

**"I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me."**

**Each time she said the word *me* there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear. Back in bed with her discovery, she stared out the window at the dark leaves of the horse chestnut.**

**"Me," she murmured.**

## 3

An article in a January 29, 1970 copy of the *Southwest Wave* quotes a Los Angeles prosecutor who claimed that Red "had given police 13 aliases in 26 arrests."

## 4

I first learned about Red from Safiya Bukhari's *Lest We Forget*, a short "chronicle of those unsung heroes who have given the only thing that was theirs to give . . ." I couldn't easily find much else about Red, and without intending it, a few hours looking around online evolved into a few months of research, interviews, and reading. My desire all along—complicated as it has been by my whiteness, my antagonistic relationship with canonical masculinity, and the histories of gender-based violence in my own family—has been to assemble a document that might contribute to our collective memory of a woman unlike any other in history.

And I've grappled with doubts about my process. I haven't been able to stop recalling Aruna D'Souza's invocation of Édouard Glissant's notion of the right to opacity, one that "stands in opposition to Western ontology's demand for transparency . . . The West's need to know is never innocent curiosity, and rarely is it a simple desire for entanglement—it almost always takes place within a relationship of domination, and thus whatever knowledge results is essentially derived without real consent."

And yet, while many of Red's comrades wielded their right to opacity, perhaps, in declining to reply to my letters, I've felt no certainty that Red herself would prefer to remain lost in the archive. I've gathered together everything I could find so that in 2026 or 2038 a young radical, or an old dreamer, or any other nemesis of oppression, could read a little about a woman called Red, who'd sought to command her own days and nights and to participate in the liberation not only of her community, but of her own being. I hope a day comes when someone besides me will properly animate Red's life.

## 5

Because the history and practice of anarchism have been foundational to me—and because I'm aware of the toxicity of deadnames, the patriarchy embedded in surnames, and the trauma at the root of slavenames and government names—I have a high tolerance for anyone who, whatever the reason, changes their name. I read the shifting of Red's name, over time, as a survival strategy; she was a Black woman in a country founded on, among other things, the abuse and erasure of Black women.

## 6

From Gaidi Faraj's 2005 interview with Geronimo Ji Jaga we have a basic outline of Red's youth. Some of the facts are possibly incorrect (her date of birth and surname, the latter of which is derived from a man named Robert Earl Hobson, Jr., who in 1960 married Red's mother, Dorothy Cosey), and Geronimo contradicts certain details he'd provided several years earlier to his biographer, Jack Olsen, but Faraj's research is nevertheless a blessing.

> **Saundra Hobson was born in New Orleans, Louisiana on October 10, 1948. Her mother was a prostitute in Chicago, but was originally from New Orleans and had returned there to give birth. Soon thereafter, she returned to Chicago and left her child in the care of her mother. Saundra's grandmother raised her and sent her to the prestigious St. Mary Prep School where Saundra excelled. When Saundra was ten years old, her mother sent for her. By this time, her mother had worked and saved enough money to buy a small house in west Los Angeles. Saundra's first few years in Los Angeles were normal, but her life took a turn for the worse when she was just fourteen years old.**

## 7

Red left no writings, at least not any that I could find. And though we have recordings, interviews, and footage of male counterparts who were elevated in the Panther hierarchy, there is nothing of Red. If we want to find her, to place ourselves in the midst of an energy that might have resembled or been resonant with her own, one of our points of departure might be to study whatever we can find from her coevals and sisters-in-arms. I began by transcribing moments from video footage of a 1990 talk by Tarika Lewis, the first woman to join the BPP:

> **Twenty-four years ago I literally put down my violin and picked up a gun.**

**[. . .]**

**I was no stranger to revolution at this time. I was sixteen, in high school at Oakland Tech. I cofounded the BSU . . . We staged sit-ins demanding Black Studies, Black staff, Black cultural activities at the school.**

**[. . .]**

**As a female, I earned the respect of the brothers, because I worked just as hard—or harder—than they did.**

**[. . .]**

**I taught political education . . . I even taught a drill class, to the guys. I earned a lot of respect doing that. When they said, "I ain't gonna do what you tell me to do because you a sistah," I invited them to come on out to the weapons range, and I could outshoot them.**

**[. . .]**

**We heard the FBI or CIA was looking for us, so we would go house to house, city to city, assuming other identities, just to stay one foot ahead.**

**[. . .]**

**There came a long period of time where I erased a lot of things in my memory from that period . . . due to undue stress, fear, paranoia, going underground, and trying to leave all that behind.**

At the end of her talk, when Lewis outlined some of the problems—absences, really—she experienced as a Panther, she listed "the treatment of women, with respect."

Like Tarika Lewis, Red was a practitioner of revolt before she'd even learned of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.

## S

From Geronimo, Gaidi Faraj learned that "[a]t the age of fourteen, Saundra was attacked by a gang of boys while returning from school. She was raped, beaten viciously and she stayed in the hospital for several weeks. Saundra's life changed dramatically." Faraj goes on to describe how, later in Red's fourteenth year, she begins to engage in sex work along Western and Adams Streets, and is shortly "pulled into the stable of her first pimp," Hollywood Silver.

## 9

In his memoir, Wayne Pharr reminisced about Red:

**Red was a fitting name for Saundra Pratt. She was light-skinned and wore a short red Afro; some would even call her a redbone. Red was about five foot six . . . Roland and Ronald Freeman knew Red growing up, as a leader of a Westside gang called the Rebel Rousers. They all grew up together and used to hang out at**

**the skating rink on Washington and Arlington. Red was down, an original gangster who would rob, boost, pull credit card scams, and sell dope and even herself.**

**[. . .]**

**Red and I bonded. Since we were part of the outlaw faction, two of the few from the Southern California chapter that were out on the streets at the same time, it only made sense.**

**[. . .]**

**Red was traveling by bus, so I starting driving her home from court to an apartment way over on the Westside, off of Fairfax and San Vicente. We were hanging pretty tough because I had some action going with weed and red devils, and Red could move those pills. She needed the money, so it worked out for both of us.**

## 10

"Gangs" like Red's, says George Barganier, ought to be conceived of as collectives organized for community self-defense:

**As Black families attempted to escape the overcrowded conditions of Central Ave. they were met with a growing hostility as whites were pushed to outlying suburbs. Patrolled and enforced through both public agencies and private citizens, the borders encircling the Black ghetto became sites of racial confrontations as police and organized groups of white teenagers terrorized the Black community. In the late 1940s, Black youth responded by forming social clubs to protect themselves from the escalating anti-Black violence of the city. Groups like the Dartanians, Huns, Farmers, Gladiators, Del-Vikings, Rebel Rousers, Blood Alley, Haciendas, Slausons, and the Businessmen were formed by young Black teenagers.**

## 11

For some of us, the least compelling part of the Party's history is Newton, Cleaver, Brown, and Seale, just as some of us aren't interested in Fidel and Mao, etc., not because they don't have valuable ideas to impart, but because they came to inhabit positions of authority, and authority is nothing if not a weapon that's most often used to slash downward. We're more interested, rather, in what's been done, and what's *to be done*, by regular people: working-class insurgents, average militants, "folks on the corner," kids in the street, autonomous yet interrelated groups of radicals, organized workers, students, individuals committed to nurturing community health, resiliency, mutual aid, and solidarity.

## 12

Saidiya Hartman, in her groundbreaking work *The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner*, constructs the early-20th-century life of Esther Brown, who was only "factually" locatable in history via a few documents in her prison file at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility:

> **Esther Brown did not write a political tract on the refusal to be governed, or draft a plan for mutual aid or outline a memoir of her sexual adventures. A manifesto of the wayward—*Own Nothing. Refuse the Given. Live on What You Need and No More. Get Ready to Be Free*—was not found among the items contained in her case file. She didn't pen any song lines: *My mama says I'm reckless, My daddy says I'm wild, I ain't good looking, but I'm somebody's angel child*. She didn't commit to paper her ruminations on freedom: *With human nature caged in a narrow space, whipped daily into submission, how can we speak of potentialities?* The cardboard placards for the tumult and upheaval she incited might have said: "Don't mess with me. I am not afraid to smash things up."**

## 13

"After learning as much as she could about street life in Los Angeles," Gaidi Faraj writes of circa-1965 Red, "she moved on to new opportunities in San Francisco where she 'stepped on Fillmore.' After a few run-ins with police, Saundra eventually ended up in Santa Rita Jail for six months."

It's while she is jailed at Santa Rita that Red falls in love with a woman who is also caged there. Upon their release, Faraj tells us, Red and her lover moved to New York "where they worked the streets together."

> **Saundra was using the nickname "Ace," and by the mid-1960s she was "easy-tricking" with a Jewish jeweler who put her and her girlfriend up in a penthouse in New Jersey. Apparently, the jeweler was also a front for the Italian mafia and exposed Ace to his heroin business. Ace told geronimo that she worked hard in this business until she and her lover started using drugs.**

Geronimo tells Faraj that by 1968, "Ace was but a sad dope-ridden image of her former beautiful self with ugly needle tracks all up and down her arms and elsewhere, and two slit wrists she'd done from the pain of losing her lover, who'd overdosed on smack and died in Ace's arms . . ."

While working in New York, Ace had hooked up with a pimp named "New York New York." He was famed for having coast-to-coast stables, meaning that he had women working for him on both the east and west coast. In the early 1960's, New York New York met Malcolm X who had a deep influence on him. He began to turn towards a politicized frame of mind, although he did not stop pimping for another several years. But by the autumn of 1968, New York had changed his name to Omar, and began working with the Panthers. Omar took Ace with him to a meeting in Los Angeles where he introduced her to geronimo. He had briefed geronimo on her background before the meeting, but even so, geronimo recalled being "taken aback" by "this poor wretch of a girl." Ace asked geronimo if she could speak to him in private. Geronimo said that she led him into the bathroom of the small Los Angeles apartment where the meeting was being held and "as soon as I entered, she closed the door and spun around, poking a little .25 automatic in my face, accusing me of corrupting her friend with this revolutionary crap." Geronimo laughed at her and she later told him that his laughter saved his life. Apparently, Ace could tell geronimo was serious and not afraid to back up his revolutionary talk. Ace had honed her abilities to read people through years on the streets and her first impression of geronimo told her that he was alright.

## 14

Kiilu Nyasha, speaking in 1990: "I'm very proud to be among what I consider to be the backbone of the Black Panther movement: the women."

## 15

Faraj writes that a short while after she'd been introduced by Omar Holmes to members of the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, Red was "one of the most dedicated Panthers in Los Angeles."

She was completely cleaned up from the dope and had a new lease on life. She fully embraced the teachings of the Black Liberation Movement, thanks to the consistent hard work of her comrades, who all seemed to warm right up to Red. She was given the revolutionary name N'Sonde Mande, and became a member of the Mande Family . . . N'Sonde was actually the first female member of the Mande Family, which at one point grew to over one hundred people, most of whom were involved in underground activities.

## 16

Panther Harold Taylor told me, "I'm a servant of the people. I'm not interested in serving Supreme Leaders." And he said, "I'm a Panther for life, which means I have an undying love for the people." It should go without saying that in the slogan *All Power to the People* is implied a completely horizontal distribution of power, shared like bread at a table.

"I was in San Diego in 1969, helping to organize that branch. Red was a good friend to me when I got out of jail in 1970. People were choosing sides already when I came back. Red explained the split to me."

Just before 10:00 p.m. on September 10, 1971, Taylor and two comrades were pulled over in a pretext stop near 64th Street and Hooper Avenue and fired upon by LAPD officers and plainclothes members of the Criminal Conspiracy Section. ("After the Watts riots of 1965 . . . the LAPD also established a new intelligence unit, the Criminal Conspiracy Section [CCS], that would almost exclusively deal with the new black militant organizations.") The assault—"in which an estimated 75 shots were fired and the car carrying the reputed Panthers was riddled with bullets," according to the *New York Times*, left Taylor, Wallace Poe, and Jeff Daniels wounded.

Red and Kathleen Cleaver came to look in on Taylor at County/USC Medical Center. "I gave Red a warning, told her people were looking for her. I never got a chance to see her again."

## 17

On October 18, 1969, 18-year-old Panther Bruce Richard, while delivering copies of the Party newspaper to a Jack-in-the-Box at Stanford and Manchester Avenues in South Central, was ambushed and shot twice by cops who'd been staked out in an unmarked police vehicle. Walter "Touré" Pope, his comrade and the distribution manager of the newspaper, was executed. ("Police records show Pope was stopped a month ago in a routine field investigation, and at that time was carrying Black Panther literature in an attaché case." —*The Independent*, October 20, 1969). Though shot in the back and through the wrist, Bruce managed to survive the scene, was delivered to the hospital by a good samaritan, but eventually was tracked down by the State and imprisoned. One of Bruce's dear comrades was Saundra.

"We called her Red. She came from a hard life in the community. I knew her for a short time. A wonderful person. She was street savvy, very dedicated. No-nonsense, very fiery. She was different from a lot of the others. Red was hard. But kind."

## 18

In 1973 there appeared a fugitive book called *Lessons from the Damned: Class Struggle in the Black Community*. Its author was The Damned: "[A] large number of poor and petit-bourgeois black people—the damned—poor students, poor, unemployed, young women and men (the street bloods), workers in low-paying, dead-end jobs, and women welfare recipients." Deep into the book, in a chapter entitled "The Revolt of Poor Black Women," there's a brief passage on the magnetic pull of the paternal figure:

> **We were left with half-fathers or none at all. Too many of us have spent our teenage life looking for another daddy and the security we learned went with having daddies. This is our basic history—loss of security and loss of our daddies. It made every one of us dependent on males economically and psychologically. We can put this together now, but then there was absolutely nobody to hip us to what was really happening, to how everything was connected.**

## 19

"Red had come from the streets," writes Gaidi Faraj.

**She brought her street skills to the Panthers as a master of papering and manipulation. Red could forge almost any type of document, producing fake identifications and "official" documents. In fact, though she is generally known as the first wife of geronimo, he has acknowledged that she was part of his security detail and a person who taught him a lot about the streets.**

**Red had tried to convince geronimo several times that he needed a full-time bodyguard because he had become a target for law enforcement and other unknown enemies. However, being an ex-soldier, whose primary job was training others in security, geronimo continually refused to accept security. Upon returning to Los Angeles after a road trip, geronimo was met by a smiling Red. When he inquired as to the root of her amusement, Red informed him that she was his new bodyguard.**

**When he again refused, Red interrupted and informed him that he could not shake her anymore since she was now his wife. Geronimo stood shocked as Red produced the forged documents she had created to marry them without geronimo's knowledge while he was away.**

Before I'd stumbled upon either Gaidi Faraj's writing on Red or Jack Olsen's biography of Geronimo, I'd already located a copy of Red and Geronimo's marriage record, and had taken it at face value. I still wish to, not

because I hope that Red had wed, but rather as some kind of emblem of mutual affection, or an act of connection, perhaps, in the wake of the August 10, 1969 death of Red's mother. Geronimo, though, was born September 13, 1947, which means that he was twenty-two years old when he and Red were married by the County of Los Angeles on November 18, 1969, and not twenty-six, as the marriage record states.

Whether or not Red engineered the marriage, with forged documents, in an act of play, Geronimo's conception of his relationship with Red remains beyond categorization. He wrote the following to Faraj:

> **It's because I helped found the Mande family coupled with the fact that N'sonde was later assigned as my personal bodyguard which misled many to believe that she and I were married. The marriage was a ruse and I always make it clear that in no way was I in league with N'sonde, whom I considered much more than me and to reduce her to a mere "wifey" station would not be correct. Though by the table of organization I was in fact the "Leader," in so many ways N'sonde was much more my leader than otherwise. She taught me and other unwary soldiers so much about the harsh and slick realities of "The Life" in particular and life in general.**

## 20

Before dawn on December 8, 1969, four days after the State-orchestrated executions in Chicago of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, LAPD and FBI units launched assaults on three Panther locations in Los Angeles: their headquarters at 41st and Central Avenue, the Touré Community Center house at 1100 West Exposition Boulevard, and a safehouse at 334 West 55th Street. In this latter location, Geronimo and Red were asleep in a back bedroom when cops kicked the door open and riddled the room with shotgun blasts. According to Geronimo, "They handcuffed us and marched us down the street naked." He was charged with conspiracy to murder a police officer, while Red, based on a photograph agents seized, was charged with possession of an illegal weapon.

The three raids led to the jailing of twenty Panthers. While they were free on bond and awaiting trial, Geronimo traveled the country to help build "revolutionary infrastructure" at Black Panther chapters in Philadelphia, New Orleans, Seattle, New York, New Haven, Newark, Winston-Salem, Atlanta, Birmingham, and elsewhere in the south. At some point during these travels, a snitch named Melvin "Cotton" Smith told Geronimo to meet him and Huey Newton in Marshall, Texas.

Newton was a no-show, and Smith said he'd been instructed to deliver Geronimo to a Party safehouse in Dallas. The moment they arrived, they were arrested. Geronimo Ji Jaga, fka Elmer Gerard Pratt, would remain caged until June of 1997.

## 21

A December 22, 1969 communiqué from LA Panther headquarters stated that

> **[Red] was in good health when arrested at the 55th Street office. When she finally arrived at Sybil Brand Institute for Women, she was suffering from beatings and a broken finger. She was refused treatment for several days, and when jail doctors finally put splints on her hand, it was done incorrectly. According to Dr. Terry Kupers of UCLA Medical Center, when she is finally bailed out, private doctors will have to re-break and re-set the finger because of prison hospital incompetence.**

## 22

The LAPD created the nation's first SWAT team in the wake of the Watts Rebellion. *Collins English Dictionary* tells us the acronym "SWAT" stands for "Special Weapons and Tactics," but Darryl Gates's original name for the LAPD unit feels much more honest: "Special Weapons Assault Team."

## 23

On November 8, 1971, in month nine of the trial of thirteen of the original twenty Black Panthers who'd been arrested in the raids of December 8, 1969—a trial at whose end all thirteen Panthers who would be acquitted of nearly all charges—Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge George Dell issued a bench warrant for Red's arrest. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, it was because "Mrs. Pratt did not attend a session of the trial Monday."

## 24

About the December 8 raids, Geronimo told Wayne Pharr: "While Saundra and me were sleeping, the fuckin' pigs broke into the house and put a gun to my head. What was so wild about it was that my girl lay across me to cover me, to stop the police from shooting me. She was willing to take a bullet for me."

## 25

When I discovered that Red's court-appointed attorney, Joe Reichmann, was still alive in California, I arranged to speak with him by phone. He could recall only a few things about Red. "She was smart . . . She was very calm. *What's gonna happen is gonna happen*—that was her attitude." About Red not showing up in court that Monday, Reichmann recalled Dell's arrangement for the trial: "The judge decided to allow the female defendants to not appear if they didn't want to, so sometimes the women didn't appear. They had things to do."

## 26

Renee "Peaches" Moore stated in the courtroom that Monday she believed Red had been kidnapped and murdered.

## 27

"Red became an invaluable teacher to various elements within the radical black underground," writes Gaidi Faraj.

**Red's expertise in forgery was also a vital skill she passed onto various cadres. She taught cadres how to run basic scams, to pass bad checks, or get free utility services. Red also instructed her comrades on how to make fake identification cards and how to forge signatures that looked like the original. While many of the brothers who joined, particularly in Los Angeles, had lumpen backgrounds and some experience with being arrested, for many of the Panther women, arrests and jail were new. Red coached sisters on what to expect in jail and how to carry themselves with police and guards.**

**Moreover, Red was very knowledgeable about street level drug trade, and was instrumental in helping the Panthers when they began combatting local drug dealers. Geronimo recalled that Red was also involved in a bank robbery in New York that was eventually pinned on Assata Shakur. Red also encouraged the women around her to stand up to the men when they got out of line. Geronimo recalled that "she was one of the first to openly confront our macho/sexist ways and she showed, by her example, other sistas how to deal with us men in much more constructive ways than before." She was not intimidated by men and stood up to them with an ease that made women around her more comfortable doing the same.**

## 28

On November 5, 1971, in a Long Beach newspaper called the *Press-Telegram*, a brief story appeared: "Lead-Riddled Body Found in Lynwood." A streetsweeper operator had discovered Red's body wrapped inside a green sleeping bag along Fernwood Avenue, a couple hundred feet west of Imperial Highway, at half past four in the morning. She was wearing "only a white long-sleeved pullover shirt. A white gold wedding band was on her hand." She had been shot with a .38-calibre weapon, twice in the right arm, once in the left leg, once in the stomach, and then in the head. Swelling suggested to medical examiners that Red was shot in the leg some hours before the headshot ended her life around 10 p.m. on November 4.

She was eight months pregnant.

## 29

The December 15, 1971 issue of *Babylon* ran two tributes to Red. The first one—"The Death of a Freedom Fighter: Saundra Pratt"—with its biographical details and expressions of triumphal romanticism, feels as if it may have been written by Geronimo.

**Our beautiful queen fought her way from her beautiful black mother's womb on October 11, 1948, in Chicago, Illinois. She never knew her father, because her mother, in order to survive in the life of the slums, had to trick—and as a result, our Queen was born a trick-baby. With the love and devotion that a true black woman displays, our Queen's mother struggled very hard to provide for Sandy. When she felt that she could no longer secure our young Queen the security that was necessary for her survival, at the age of five, Sandy was sent to New Orleans to stay with her grandparents. She attended school there for some two years. Then her mother, after getting back on her feet, sent for her, at which time they migrated to Los Angeles. Sandy attended many schools here and was well-known throughout the black colony. While engulfed in the culture of the wretched of the earth, Sandy became familiar with the many forms of survival that one needs to know in order to live comfortably in the asphalt jungle. From tricking, to dealing, to using, to conning, she entered the life here in Los Angeles at the age of 15 and after five long years of existing as a lumpen, and master of just about anything she dealt in, she was brought to us through a high official of the then–BLA, Al (Omar) Holmes, who, being a true black warrior and an advanced lumpen himself,**

had known Sandy through the years, in which time she adopted the name Holmes, based on her admiration and love for a true black man, Comrade Omar, who had been the Malcolm X to many black colonial dwellers. Armed with the initiative and true qualities of black womanhood, Sandy lost little time in intensifying her boundless revolutionary capacity, regenerated with a vivid understanding of the principles of revolutionary action. She, as in everything she endeavored, excelled in the high ranks of the vanguard army. When she met Comrade Geronimo, an ex-lumpen himself and high official of our forces, who also possessed rare qualities of revolutionary ingenuity. Their relationship was like that of two strong forces coming together—black manhood, black womanhood. When they first met, as revolutionary spirits, they searched each other out, evaluating each other, teaching and learning from each other, and it wasn't until after the first three meetings with the Black Amazon that Comrade G commended Sandy Red for her contributions to the struggle and she, in turn, commended him in a like manner. We all worked with our Queen and we know that her love for our Comrade G was as she and G used to always say, a true expression of love in the most revolutionary sense of the word, and a dialectically intensive relationship that we all, as revolutionaries, should strive to formulate as men and women.

The second memorial was also run without a byline:

Sister Sandy (Red) is one of the downtrodden, one of the victims of this Valhalla for Black people. She came to Los Angeles with her mother at the age of 11. Driven from the poverty of Louisiana, mother and child journeyed to the West Coast with the dream of a better life, but the bitterness of reality infringed upon the dream. From the lynching South, all the way across the country, to the often subtle and sometimes not so subtle death traps of Los Angeles, the blood of Black people marked the trail.

At the age of 14, Sandy had abandoned the futile attempts to live within the confines of the oppressor's laws, laws which gave her no relief from her wretched station in life. She, like so many other sisters and brothers, searched the filthy ghetto streets for an answer.

A product of a society where one is told that the dollar is the answer—and where black people have no dollars, where we are told education is the answer—and we have no education, this exclusion from the means to provide decent lives for ourselves and our loved ones propel many of us from the tenements and ramshackle houses into the dehumanizing dog-eat-dog existence of Lenox Avenue or

**Central Avenue just trying to live, to get over. This is a world where the shackles of not having a job or the basic necessities of life slowly kill black people. The streets reinforce these bonds with dope, prostitution, and self-hatred. It's a world many of us never leave alive.**

**Sandy engaged in the self-destructive activity of selling drugs, and, cast even deeper into the depths of hell, she, like the black woman in slavery, was deprived of even her body. Again, like the black woman in slavery who was sometimes rewarded by her master with "some" luxuries, Sandy succeeded in enhancing her personal life. She lived well in Hollywood off the fruits of her dehumanization until she realized that the last strain of self-respect was gone and she wondered why she and others like her (lumpen) were compelled to sell their souls, and suffer the degrading life which despotic rulers determined for them.**

**In 1968 a drastic change in her life occurred. It was the kind of thing that had the slavemaster cowering behind his locked door in fear of his awakened slaves. Sandy met Elmer Pratt—"Geronimo"—an unafraid black man, member of the Black Panther Party, dedicated servant of the community. Together, they grew in struggle, together they waged uncompromising battles against repression, unflinching in the face of deadly odds.**

**[. . .]**

**Sandy was murdered because she was a revolutionary. Contrary to pig lies that members of the West Coast faction of the Black Panther Party, who were trying to find out when Eldridge was coming back to Babylon, tortured and murdered her, her fiendish murder reeks of Nixon, Reagan, and Ed Davis. Again, we see the age-old tactic of divide and conquer. We see the pigs gleaming with hope that black people will go to blows with other black people.**

**[. . .]**

**Sandy (Red) was no different than other black women of her time, except that she dared to struggle. She personified the lumpen-proletariat and provided a correct example for the dispossessed, the stepped-on, the dregs of society. The people of tomorrow will forge bold new worlds because of her example. Her blood dripping on the fertile spirit of revolution will give birth to countless freedom fighters. Her unborn, unnamed baby will live to eternity in the hearts of the people. Had she died, I guess I would've cried, but she reigns on as the Queen of the Lumpen.**

## 30

"The Black hustler, Brother or Sister," according to a piece in the November 16, 1971 issue of *Right On!*,

**has dared to struggle and survive against the fascist system that holds all of us in bondage. They comprise the lumpen that never related to punching some pig's clock for slave wages, nor would their pride permit them to ask some welfare agency for a handout. It's a little difficult to ask for help, when you know that the person you're asking has his foot in your throat.**

## 31

Seated alongside Tarika Lewis and Kiilu Nyasha at the 1990 Panther women's convergence was Sheba Haven, founder of the George Jackson People's Free Health Clinic:

**The sisters asked me to speak about chauvinism.**

**[. . .]**

**Our men became chauvinists as they encountered and assimilated the values of the European power structure.**

**[. . .]**

**When I ran the clinic I would occasionally encounter a brother that would say, "Oh, I ain't gonna do what you say because you a sister . . ." and I would say, "Well, you can talk to me, or you can talk to Mr. Smith and Mr. Wesson." And very often, they'd talk to me.**

**[. . .]**

**I really appreciate the Party for giving me the opportunity to be a Panther, which is to flex, to know my own strength. I think that there was no organization that could have afforded me that opportunity, certainly not the NAACP.**

When I told him I was about to read Hugh Pearson's *The Shadow of the Panther*, my friend Darius Simpson suggested it ought to be digested critically. "My initial thought is: put that shit down!" He wasn't wrong; Pearson demonstrates time and again he was no admirer of "unlawful" insurgency. Nevertheless, I was struck by a passage about Sheba Haven, who felt compelled to disappear from the Party a month before Red was killed:

**Newton decided to make Haven a party lieutenant, giving the male rank-and-file members no choice but to obey her. She continued to run the clinic, manage its staff, purchase supplies. When the order came down from Central Headquarters that she would no longer be purchasing supplies because all money in the party was to be centralized, Haven complained vociferously, breaking Newton's most important rule: Do not criticize him. He dismissed Haven from her responsibilities at the clinic and ordered her to move from Berkeley to the Panthers' East Oakland location. But Haven, aware of the severe beatings usually meted out**

**to disobedient party members, feared that this fate awaited her. Dissatisfied with the new edict, in October 1971, just one year after she began working full time for the party, she left and moved underground . . .**

## 32

A 1994 zine entitled *Panther Sisters on Women's Liberation* opens with a tribute to Red:

**Dedicated to the memory of Saundra Holmes, Panther revolutionary . . . assassinated on November 4, 1971. Saundra was the NEW URBAN GUERILLA.**

In one of the pieces collected in the zine, Safiya Bukhari writes of the specific place occupied by Black women during the Women's Liberation Movement of the late 60s—a place characterized not only by their need to survive the violence of the various supporters, enforcers, and agents of the anti-Black United States, but also the gender-based violence of some of their own comrades:

**We had been shouldering the awesome responsibilities of waging a struggle against racist oppression and economic exploitation since we had been brought to these shores on the slave ships. Our struggle was not a struggle to be liberated so we could move into the work place, but a struggle to be recognized as human beings.**

**Sexism or the degeneration of the relationship between the Black man and woman to antagonism and brutality is a byproduct of this history. While I am clearly against the way this history plays out in our community, I am not a feminist. I am a revolutionary. I am a scientific socialist. I believe that we have to struggle on all fronts against those attitudes that threaten to destroy us as a people.**

The zine closes with an extended interview, conducted in 1969 by a reporter from *Movement*, with six unidentified female Panthers.

**[S]imply because of the fact that we are members of the Black Panther Party and are therefore in the vanguard, does not necessarily mean that we can deem ourselves champions of women's liberation. We believe that male chauvinism must be stomped out, because we have come to realize that it is bourgeois. Bourgeois ideas are those which are perpetuated upon us by the bourgeois class and is something we're fighting against. But because we've come to realize all these things just recently, we're very new at it. So that whether or not we will become champions of women's liberation,**

**whether or not we'll be able to provide the example to lead other organizations towards women's liberation will come through our practice.**

## 33

The morning of December 8, 1969, after five hours of siege, gunfire, and bombardment, Peaches Moore emerged from a courageously defended Panther headquarters bloodied and bruised. She had suffered a miscarriage during the onslaught.

So had Lena Powell nine months earlier.

**On April 15, 1969, the premature son of Curtis Powell, one of the 21 Panthers kidnapped by the pig power structure, died at Presbyterian Hospital. Mrs. Powell was present when Lindsay's finest pigs kidnapped her husband and held her at gunpoint, while they ransacked their home. The brother's wife suffered unnecessary emotional and physical strain at a critical time, as a result of this—their son was born prematurely and died.**

## 34

When I told Darius about my chagrin after tearing open a just-delivered copy of a thick history of the Panthers, racing to the index, and finding only two entries for Red, he sent me a voice memo:

**There's so many things in play as to why there isn't widespread knowledge. I think that there's a way that people responded to the party in a patriarchal way, which is to say, platformed certain people, asked for books from certain people, idolize certain people, iconize certain people. The people that were in the party . . . are very open about, 1) yes, there were contradictions inside of the Party in terms of patriarchy and sexism, but no more than in the broader society. Safiya Bukhari talks about that; the exceptionalization of the Party as this Grand Organization that had such deep fissures. It's like, No, this was just the society we were living in. And 2) the Party was a reflection of that and struggled through it and combatted it, given that most of the members of the party were women, as well as the fact that leadership in the party was held by by women, which was not something that was happening during that time.**

In 1969, an estimated two-thirds of the Black Panther Party were women.

## 35

Every paragraph of Robyn C. Spencer-Antoine's 2008 essay "Engendering the Black Freedom Struggle" has been instructive to me as I've tried to develop a rudimentary feel for the context of Panther women in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Early in the piece she flags the repetitive tendency of scholars and outsiders to insist on the notion that Panther women were objects of oppression more than they were embodiments of revolutionary agency.

> **Hundreds of African American women joined the Black Panther Party, seeking a place for collective action and social change. Over time, many of these women joined their commitment to struggling against racism alongside black men with a commitment to challenge sexism and patriarchy. When they confronted "multiple jeopardy," defined by sociologist Deborah King as "several, simultaneous oppressions" and the "multiplicative relationships among them," they responded by waging a formidable liberation struggle inside of the liberation struggle in the attempt to put the movement on a more egalitarian course. King warned that "by concentrating on our multiple oppressions, scholarly descriptions have confounded our ability to discover and appreciate the ways in which black women are not victims." The very real lessons about black women's history embedded in these women's survival strategies, and their tenacity and skill in fashioning their womanhood out of the materials they found in even the most challenging environment, is as central to their story as the barriers they faced, the challenges they endured, and the sexism which constrained them.**

## 36

From the *Movement* interview:

> **MOVEMENT: One of the arguments that's been made is that the movement has failed to attract a lot of women because of the chauvinism within the movement . . .**
>
> **PANTHER WOMEN: [T]he argument that the struggle does not attract women to the organization, I think, is coming from a subjective point of view. Because if they understand that it's not a women's or a men's struggle, it's not an attraction for a man or a woman, but we're here for the liberation of oppressed people, irregardless of whether male chauvinism exists, the women would still come into the Party or movement because they agree or are willing to support the revolutionary principles**

**that exist. If they find male chauvinism, they should be willing to fight it on the basis of principle and unity. And to say, "they're not attracted to it"—there's no advertisement for getting rid of oppression. It's an attraction based on principles, not based on some subjective wishes or wants. So I say that women who say that they don't want to come into the struggle because they're not attracted to the struggle aren't really interested in the first place.**

**MOVEMENT: No, they say the movement doesn't deal with their special oppression.**

**PANTHER WOMEN: Well, that may be true, but still, if you're interested in the struggle of oppressed people, you can come into an organization and bring that question in yourself, instead of staying away from it. You can fight on the basis of unity within an organization, not on the basis of, "well, they're not dealing with the women's question and they're not dealing with the special oppression of women, so therefore I'm not going to participate."**

## 37

Mohammed Mubarak designed the cover of Stevie Wonder's *Hotter than July*. Thirteen years before that, in 1967, John Huggins had recruited him into the Black Panther Party. Mubarak was sixteen years old. Among his responsibilities as a Panther was to serve as the chapter's photographer, and to help distribute the newspaper. A mutual contact told me Mohammed had loved Red like a sister, and so when we spoke on the phone I asked if he felt like recalling her.

**I came to know Red when Geronimo was appointed after Bunchy and John were killed. I was from Compton so I was functioning out of the Watts office on 133rd. I was back and forth between offices or whatever house I had to report to. Every time Geronimo came around to check on everybody, Saundra would be with him. I got to know her. She was such a friendly lady. I bonded with her.**

**[. . .]**

**I knew Omar. He knew Red very well, and him and G were tight. Omar and Red had street life in common.**

**[. . .]**

**Near the end, after the shootout in 69, there were about 30 panthers that got arrested . . . Eventually people were bailed out and went underground. A group of them—Roland Freeman, Geronimo, Captain Crunch, and several others went to Texas. Red then was out of jail, COINTELPRO was in full effect—they were paying people inside and outside the Party to provide them with info about shit.**

**[. . .]**

**Twenty-one New York City Panthers got arrested. Their case was a conspiracy to blow up a New York precinct. It lasted for a couple years, and at the end of the day the case got thrown out. A lot of money had been raised for the New York 21, though. When they got out of jail, they confronted Huey about the money. He got upset. He expelled all of them. Eldridge came to their defense. Him and Huey argued and cussed each other out.**

**Deep split. Eldridge himself was expelled by Huey, and Geronimo was supported by Eldridge. Huey decided to close all the chapters. If you wanted to remain a Panther, you had to come to Oakland. The crew that did not follow Huey evolved into the Black Liberation Army. Mutulu, Assata . . .**

**[. . .]**

**Me and Gil Parker—one of the first Panthers arrested at the shootout—we were good friends. We got expelled. After we got expelled, I had a way of getting in touch with Red while G was gone. And we stayed in touch. I knew where her mom lived, near 118th and Central.**

**In September of 1970 I'm out of the Panthers. I went out and integrated myself into society. I was hanging out with folks in the slick life—hijacking, selling dope, robbing banks. I was eighteen and needed money. I'd heard that some of my homeboys in Compton were robbing banks. I did that and got caught. A week before I got caught, I'd gone to visit Red at her mama's house. She welcomed me and my comrade into the house. She had two black eyes. Somebody had roughed her up real bad.**

**A conversation I'll never forget: Red said, "Watch out for Jimmy Johnson." He had propped himself up to be the leader of what was left of the LA chapter . . . Nobody liked Jimmy Johnson.**

**I ended up catching a case. I went to federal prison in Lompoc in March of 1971 . . . I saw on the news they had found Red's body. When it happened, my first mind was: the negroes who were following Huey, they were trying to get at G . . . They did not like Geronimo.**

**[. . .]**

**Red was like a big sister to me; it was heartbreaking. I love her to this day. She was a beautiful soul.**

## 38

When Panther headquarters was under assault, Peaches Moore and Tommye Lewis telephoned comrades, loved ones, and the media. Angela Davis received one of the calls: "They realized that if they had not defended themselves from the beginning, they might have all been shot down in cold blood. They

had tried to hold out until we could gather enough people to witness the aggression, as well as to stand watch as they lay down their weapons and left the building."

To a news crew that was filming her capture, Peaches said, "We gave up because it's not the right time. We'll fight again when the odds are more in our favor."

## 39

Live on air later that day, a KPFK reporter relayed a statement from a Panther attorney:

**I visited a number of the Panther women at the Sybil Brand Institute this afternoon. It's a jail for women. This statement comes from . . .**

**Evon Anderson. They would like the people of the community to know that the Panthers do not want them to do anything in an unorganized fashion because it will simply bring more violence on the people in the community. The Panthers want the black community to know that they cannot be destroyed because the Panthers live in the spirit of the people and they will be back. All power to the people.**

## 40

In 1969, Panther Rose Smith wrote a letter to the people from inside a Connecticut Prison.

**We will fight fascism by building a united front against it. It's one thing to be oppressed; but it's another thing to be repressed. ALL POWER TO THE UNITED FRONT AGAINST FASCISM.**

**Take power from the paper pigs and give it back to the people.**

**The people are rising up like a mighty storm . . . Right on.**

## 41

Almost everything we know about Red comes from the mouths of men. I wrote to a number of her female comrades and heard back from three, none of whom could—or would, understandably—share anything about her.

## 42

I spoke with scholars who believe the LAPD and FBI assassinated Red, and with Panthers who suggested it was internecine—a factional hit. Geronimo himself told an elaborate story of Red having been executed by the mafia. I can't make up my mind, and yet I know two things for certain: the first is that, after paging through hundreds of documents that were forced, by other researchers, from the bowels of the federal government, it's incontrovertible that the sadistic, hyperfunded war against the Panthers that was initiated by J. Edgar Hoover —by which I mean, the United States—is responsible for the death of Red. The second is that if an erstwhile comrade had a hand in that killing, we can despise them, but the object of our vengeance must be the antiblack, misogynist matrix of American courts, law enforcement agencies, politicians, media outlets, and the capitalist overseers who nourish it.

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FACING: Peaches Moore, Red, and Evon Anderson being led into court, December 10, 1969

## 43

When I've felt stuck in this research, I've listened to a playlist of some of the songs from the Billboard Hot 100 for November 6, 1971, the week in which Red was killed. Marvin Gaye's "Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)" was sitting at number 9.

**Rockets, moon shots**
**Spend it on the have-nots**
**Money, we make it**
**Before we see it you take it**
**Oh, make me want to holler**
**The way they do my life (yeah)**
**Make me want to holler**
**The way they do my life**
**This ain't livin', this ain't livin'**

The most revolutionary track was down at number 36. In "Women's Love Rights," the singer declares

**I, Laura Lee**
**I'm startin' a new movement today**
**For women's love rights**
**Stand up and fight**
**For your love rights**
**Love who you wanna**
**'Cause a man sure gonna**

Laura Lee was Red's contemporary, perhaps even born in the same city. Her best-known song, "Dirty Man," can be heard not simply as an indictment of macho duplicity, but moreover as a warning to the racist police state from which the Panthers were trying to protect their communities.

**Cuz I'm a good house keeper**
**I'm going to take my broom and sweep**
**All of the dirt**
**Yes I am**
**Out in the street**
**Boy, I'm cleaning up my whole house**
**Fast as I can, daddy**
**It's time to make everything**
**Spick and span**
**You are dirty**
**Dirty man**
**Oooh you done me dirty for so many years**
**Yes you did, baby**

## 44

In his memoir *Will You Die with Me?*, a Panther from the Los Angeles chapter named Flores Forbes mentions Red exactly zero times.

## 45

Born in Trinidad in 1915, Claudia Jones emigrated to Harlem at eight years old, joined the Communist Party at twenty-one, and in 1955 was deported on account of her activism. When Red was eight months old, Jones published an essay entitled "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!"

> **Historically, the Negro woman has been the guardian, the protector, of the Negro family. From the days of the slave traders down to the present, the Negro woman has had the responsibility of caring for the needs of the family, of militantly shielding it from the blows of Jim-Crow insults, of rearing children in an atmosphere of lynch terror, segregation, and police brutality, and of fighting for an education for the children. The intensified oppression of the Negro people, which has been the hallmark of the postwar reactionary offensive, cannot therefore but lead to an acceleration of the militancy of the Negro woman.**

## 46

Red was only a year and change younger than Assata Shakur, her most lionized revolutionary sister. Though I tried and tried, I couldn't document any meeting between them, but if Red and Assata had in fact made one another's acquaintance, I feel like there may have been mutual resonance. In Red, Assata would have found a protective, fierce, self-reliant survivor, while in Assata, Red would have discovered a renegade intellectual and organizer who was vociferous when mistreated.

In her autobiography, Assata recounts a run-in with a dictatorial comrade:

> **"I threw them away."**
>
> **"What do you mean, you threw them away?" i asked, thinking it was some kind of joke.**
>
> **"I threw them away," he insisted. "Y'all know that you're not supposed to leave the papers out here on the desk. This will teach you to put the papers up on the rack where they belong."**
>
> **I explained that it was my first time coming up to the Ministry and that i had no way of knowing the procedure.**
>
> **"You should have asked," he replied arrogantly. "I threw them away and that's that."**
>
> **I was losing my patience. "Look, man, why don't you just give me my papers so that i can get out of here. I don't have time to stand here all night."**
>
> **"I told you i threw the papers away, and that's that."**

**"Then you're either a liar or a fool," i shot back. He had made me mad, gone and stepped on my last nerve. Then he tried to get all bad, getting all up in my face, trying to defend his stupid arrogance. I was in no mood for fooling around. I cursed him out royally and walked out of the office.**

**The next day, when i walked into the Harlem office, Bashir, the officer of the day, told me i would have to leave. "What do you mean, leave?" i asked. He said that he was sorry, but Robert Bey had called and told him that i was no longer in the Party. I was burnt. I got the Bronx Ministry and told them to put Bey on the phone and proceeded to call him the unprincipled, arrogant idiot he was. In addition to being cowardly, he hadn't even told me to my face that i was expelled. I was so warm i wasn't even surprised when he apologized and told me i was reinstated. I hate arrogance whether it's white or purple or Black. Some people let power go to their heads. They think that just because they have some kind of title in front of their name you're supposed to bend over and kiss them on the ass. The only great people i have met have been modest and humble. You can't claim that you love people when you don't respect them, and you can't call for political unity unless you practice it in your relationships. And that doesn't happen out of nowhere. That's something that has got to be put into practice every day.**

At thirteen, Assata had run away from her mother's place in Jamaica, Queens and was living on her own in a cheap Greenwich Village hotel called the Albert. Spotted on the street one day by an elder who recognized her, Assata was persuaded to move in with her Aunt Evelyn.

According to Assata, Evelyn A. Williams "was determined to be a trial lawyer and to be in private practice. Most of her clients were Black and poor and most of the time they didn't have money to pay her. But Evelyn would defend them anyway. She was always up in arms about some injustice or other." Not only was it her Aunt Evelyn who became young Assata Shakur's first beloved political comrade, it was also Evelyn who exposed her to art and literature.

**I have never been too fond of television and, besides, Evelyn had an excellent library. Those books were like food to me. Fiction and poetry were my favorites, although i liked history and psychology, too. I also liked to read about other countries and about all the different religions in the world. . . . Evelyn was a store of knowledge and she knew about a whole range of subjects. We were always discussing or debating something. Hanging out with Evelyn, i started to think that i was cool and sophisticated and grown up and that i knew it all. You couldn't tell me nothing. I was just too cool. Evelyn and**

**i went to museums and art galleries and the theater. On Broadway, off Broadway, she was turning me on to so many things.**

In the spring of 1973, a dozen or so years after moving in with Evelyn, Assata and other members of the Black Liberation Army were arrested. "For the next several years, Williams served as their defense lawyer in a legal nightmare involving the prosecutorial arms of the states of New York and New Jersey, as well as the Federal Bureau of Investigation." In 1993, Williams published *Inadmissible Evidence: The Story of the African-American Trial Lawyer Who Defended the Black Liberation Army*. A paragraph in the book's afterword, already thirty-odd years old, is a welcome reminder that the battles pitched by Red, Assata, the Panthers, the Black Liberation Army, and their various accomplices, are unfinished, ongoing, and adaptable:

**Our collective effort for survival must move forward as it looks backward. To blame our past leaders because they were able to achieve only partial success during their lifetimes is to dismiss generation-framed limitations and to minimize the tenacity of the racist restrictions the dominant society has imposed on our lives. It is true that past gains are not enough; each generation must continue whatever struggle is required by the changing nuances of the racism they face. But we can no more charge any one person or generation with the responsibility for our past fate and our future direction than we can implant future vision into every eye.**

Although Assata, like Red, was shot in the stomach in the 1971—by a white drug dealer from whom, I believe, she was trying to raise funds for the BLA—unlike Red, she survived. Two years later she again survived being shot, this time more than once and by white cops. The following year she gave birth to a baby girl, Kakuya Amala Olugbala Shakur. Assata's poem "Love" suggests that in the arsenal of weapons at our disposal for a counteroffensive against the entity Nina Simone once named "Mr. Backlash," perhaps the most potent is collaborative solidarity:

**Love is contraband in Hell,**
**cause love is an acid**
**that eats away bars.**

**But you, me, and tomorrow**
**hold hands and make vows**
**that struggle will multiply.**

**The hacksaw has two blades.**

**The shotgun has two barrels.**

**We are pregnant with freedom.**

**We are a conspiracy.**

## 47

"[S]isters, We have a long and glorious history of struggle on this land/planet," Assata wrote in a March 11, 2005 dispatch she titled "A Message to My Sistas."

> **Afrikan women were strong and courageous warriors long before We came to this country in chains. And here in Amerikkka, our sisters have been on the front lines. Sister Harriet Tubman led the underground railroad. And sisters like Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Sandra Pratt and our Queen Mother Moore have carried it on. Sisters, We have been the backbone of our communities, and We have got to be the backbone of our nation. We have got to build strong family units, based on love and struggle. We don't have no time to play around.**

## 48

The world doesn't need another exegesis of the 1971 rift in the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. But while it's undeniable the split was, at its base, a perceived irreconcilability between armed struggle on the one hand and community organizing on the other (which mushroomed, Robyn C. Spencer-Antoine reminds us, when the number of women in the Party increased), we should also consider the possibility that a portion of the Party's membership would have been disinclined, circa 1971—for many reasons—to remain under the control and direction of a centralized authority. Ollie A. Johnson III has drawn our attention to "elite theory": the idea that "popular, revolutionary, and democratic socialist organizations are confronted with a paradox, namely, that despite their attempts at equitable membership participation, the necessity for organization leads to oligarchy."

The egalitarian potential of widely distributed, self-organized clusters of insurgency might have felt more appealing, and seemed more full of liberatory potential to anyone who'd grown weary and wary of the various wielders of power.

## 49

Of Geronimo, one of his attorneys, Stuart Hanlon, said: "I think he was an anarchist at heart. I learned an odd thing—he really wasn't a Panther. He'd never officially joined because he hated the idea of leadership."

## 50

According to a story he told his biographer, the spring of 1969 is when Geronimo first makes Red's acquaintance. But based on how Geronimo describes Red's age in the very same story, the date would more accurately be 1967 or 1968. Before I quote from the biography, there's a bias I want to acknowledge.

My distaste for some of the ways in which biographical memory gets reconstituted, massaged, and stretched in order to become narrative prose has at times interfered with my reading of *Last Man Standing*, and I feel this owes to the authorial tendencies of Jack Olsen, whom the *Washington Post* called "the dean of true crime authors," and who was at least ignorant enough about Black revolutionary history that in the book he refers to George Jackson as "a career criminal."

I'm also intrigued by some of the slight discordance between the recollections of Red that Geronimo conveyed to Gaidi Faraj in 2005 and those he shared with Olsen in the late 1990s:

> **After this latest stop Geronimo was bemused by an offer of round-the-clock protection from a woman. "I'd never had a bodyguard. When they named me to the Central Committee, Bobby Seale and David Hilliard offered me security. I told 'em, 'Hey, I'm my own bodyguard.' Then this cool-looking sister, nineteen years old, big, rangy, waltzes into headquarters, says, 'How do you do, Mr. Pratt, I'm Saundra Lee. Call me "Red." I'm your bodyguard.' I says, 'Say what?' I'm laughing! I told her, 'Hey, baby, I train bodyguards!' She pulls up this denim skirt and shows me a .25-caliber automatic in her black panties. I'm breaking up! A peashooter! She says, 'Don't underestimate this weapon, Mr. G. It already put several cats to sleep.' Sticks the barrel in my face, says, 'You're not so tough. I'll *kill* you.' She says, 'You jive son of a bitch, you think I won't do it?' I laughed louder. She told me later, 'The second time you laughed, that's when I decided I want this mother.' Me, I just figured, This chick is crazy, and ushered her out.**
>
> **"I asked around and found out she had a history. I mean, a *history*. Her mother sent her to good schools, gave her everything. She was number one in her high school class when she discovered her mama was a 'ho.' Red took it hard. She was gang-raped at thirteen, became a hooker herself, went up to San Francisco, rejected her pimps and became a 'stud broad'—an independent who goes both ways. She was sixteen by then. Goes east, ends up as the madam for a guy in the Cosa Nostra and begins shooting up heroin. At that time the Panthers were rounding up drug dealers and**

**pimps and trying to straighten 'em out. A couple of our people found Red in a gutter, no veins left, shooting up in her tongue. They dried her out and found out she was so smart she made 'em all feel stupid."**

**The country boy from Atchafalaya swamp country was more surprised than anyone when the rehabilitated Saundra appeared at Panther headquarters to attend his night classes in guerrilla warfare and area defense. Soon she was visiting his bedroom and telling him to sleep in peace—"nobody gonna bother yo' ass while Red's around."**

**He returned from a trip to Chicago to find a marriage certificate hanging over his bedroom door. She said, "Now lemme see you reject me as a bodyguard! We're legally married!" Geronimo pretended that the license was valid. "Everybody else thought I was married to her. So we acted like we were." In time, Saundra became one of the best-loved Panthers, a cliché "whore with a heart of gold," and Pratt developed a genuine affection for the woman known as his wife.**

A few weeks later, following the State's assassinations in Chicago of Mark Clark and Fred Hampton, Geronimo and Red received a death threat by telephone and began sleeping in a safe house. "Me and Red," Geronimo said, "we're not afraid of dying, but we're not gonna die like Fred and Mark. We're not gonna die like dogs."

## 51

In the course of a 1993 prison interview with German journalist Heike Kleffner, Geronimo weighs in on the sexism described by some of the Panther women she'd interviewed.

**When I became a member of the central committee, I was always in support of women's liberation issues, but we didn't have to be in support of anything, because the sisters would make sure that you respected them and that their points got across and were adhered to. One of the first sisters who comes to mind is sister Afeni Shakur and, of course, the sister they called my wife, known as Saundra Pratt [. . .] We had to face our sexism and our machoism because of them. They would educate us . . . and you would respect and love them, because they made you look into yourself; you became a better person because of them.**

Afeni Shakur and Red were separated in age by about a year and a half. In a 1970 communiqué she drafted inside the New

York Women's House of Detention, Shakur addressed the colonial, genocidal project known as the United States:

> **We know that you are trying to break us up because we are the truth and because you can't control us. We know that you always try to destroy what you can't control. We know that you are afraid of us because we represent a truth of the universe. [. . .] We know how you turn nation against nation, tribe against tribe, brother against brother.**

Six months before Red was killed, she and Afeni became sisters in affinity: On June 16, 1971, Afeni gave birth to Tupac Amaru Shakur, whose godfather was Geronimo.

## 52

Red's funeral was held Sunday, November 21, 1971, at the First AME Church on South Harvard Boulevard (the church for which, in a diabolical twist of fate, the snitch Julius Butler—whose lies to the LAPD led to Geronimo's twenty-seven-year imprisonment—served as deacon).

> **More than 150 persons Saturday attended funeral services for Black Panther Saundra Pratt, 23, found shot to death two weeks ago in Lynwood.**
>
> **Her husband, Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt, 29 [sic], former chief of the Southern California Panther Party, could not attend the services because he is in custody without bail. A Superior Court judge denied his request to attend the funeral on grounds it presented too great a security problem.**
>
> **The funeral was a mixture of tradition and revolutionary rhetoric. Eulogies written by Pratt honoring his dead wife as "revolutionary comrade" were read.**

In an isolated concrete cell inside Los Angeles County Jail, Geronimo wrote a eulogy for his beloved accomplice.

> **What words, what syntax is there that would suffice in describing how I feel about my fallen comrade, cradling in her precious womb a new generation to come that wasn't allowed to come forth. From the womb to the tomb. My Queen—True Queen of the Lumpen—High Commander of the Amazonian Army—My Most Faithful Comrade in Arms—Symbol of Complete Black Guerilla Woman of the 21st Century—My Righteous Revolutionary Mate—My Other Half.**
>
> **Through the many missions of valor endeavored, through your wit, sustained**

through your strong ties and love for our people, culminating in success and victory, through your rare leadership traits and the audacity, the excellence you showed in combatting and conquering the chauvinism in men, you endured and excelled. Complete Black Woman, pregnant on your sacred mission for eight months to bestow into our struggle a new warrior. I got your message, Soldier. I have always breathed you into me and my heart beat three times as fast as before. I am stronger—I shall endure. I will endure, as I've sworn on the grave of our King, Bunchy, my every action to the annihilation of the murderous, cowardous pack of immoral beasts. My love and dedication to you, Your Highness, will persevere in my existence. "We should hate our enemy with revolutionary love." —G

Owing to Gaidi Faraj's research, we know Red's pallbearers called themselves Sisters of the Revolutionary Change. And though we're told Geronimo's brother Timothy read Bunchy Carter's poem "Black Mother" to the gathered mourners, there's a passage from June Jordan's "I Must Become a Menace to My Enemies," written a few years after Red's death, that feels more resonant with her life:

I plan to blossom bloody on an afternoon
surrounded by my comrades singing
terrible revenge in merciless
accelerating
rhythms
But
I have watched a blind man studying his face.
I have set the table in the evening and sat down
to eat the news.
Regularly
I have gone to sleep.
There is no one to forgive me.
The dead do not give a damn.
I live like a lover
who drops her dime into the phone
just as the subway shakes into the station
wasting her message
canceling the question of her call:
fulminating or forgetful but late
and always after the fact that could save or
condemn me

I must become the action of my fate.

## 53

A month after Red was killed, and just two weeks after her funeral, a woman named Marcia Blake, who was also known as Marcia Benton and Lujuana Campbell, was discovered inside a vacant apartment building directly across the street from First AME.

She had been shot in the head but was clinging to life.

As far as I can tell, Blake had once been a Communications Director of the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party. And according to court documents I found (from Geronimo's 1980 habeas corpus petition), immediately following the January 17, 1969 killings of Bunchy Carter and John Huggins, an undercover agent named James F. Naveau, who'd infiltrated the Students for a Democratic Society, contacted the LAPD and suggested it would be an opportune time to snatch Blake, Geronimo, and others. A car in which Blake was riding was "stopped by the police shortly after it departed the [Huggins residence]. [Blake] had a loaded .45-caliber automatic pistol in the waistband of her capris." Geronimo was in the driveway, unarmed.

A brief notice in the *Daily Breeze* of December 20, 1971—twelve days after she was shot—says that Blake "regained consciousness but still has been unable to talk with doctors."

Although I spent nearly two full days trying to learn more about what became of her, the *Daily Breeze* of Torrance, California was the last newspaper to ever mention the twenty-five-year-old Panther. Her names appear in the none of the histories of the Party that I've read. I don't know if she lived or died, and if she lived, what became of her.

## 54

I was a fool to have ever felt stunned that so little exists to be discovered about Red's life, and maybe a fool all over again to hope I might be able to disambiguate Red's story from that of some of the men around her. Joy James writes,

> **African-American male revolutionaries are not perceived as having been politicized through their romantic or personal relationships with female counterparts; rather, their speeches and deeds mark them for public recognition. The same cannot be said, to the same degree, for female black revolutionary icons. Not because they did not produce important works, words and acts for liberation, they did. But because they were, and are, viewed as appendages to male initiatives and endeavors. And so their very appearance co-mingles in the conventional mind with that of the male revolutionary.**

Compounding the gender-based removal of Red not only from her own life but also from nearly all discourse related to twentieth-century revolutionary struggle is the fact she was Black, lumpen, armed, and had long been an outlaw. Gaidi Faraj: "While typically given less attention in traditional civil rights literature, black women are even more absent in texts about self-defense and armed struggle."

Perhaps, following Saidiya Hartman on Esther Brown, Red's relative absence from the histories of radical struggle owes most to an inability of historians to properly grasp just how critical to revolutionary organizing was the unique contribution of someone like Red.

> **For the most part, the history of Esther and her friends and the potentiality of their lives has remained unthought because no one could imagine young black women as social visionaries, radical thinkers, and innovators in the world in which these acts took place. This latent history has yet to emerge: A *revolution in a minor key* unfolded in the city and young black women were its vehicle. It was driven not by uplift or the struggle for recognition or citizenship, but by the vision of a world *that would guarantee to every human being free access to earth and full enjoyment of the necessities of life, according to individual desires, tastes, and inclinations*. In this world, free love and free motherhood would not be criminalized and punished.**

## 55

Maybe it's enough, for now, to know that Red, Marcia Blake, Esther Brown, as well as all the other women whose names we'll never learn, were committed to changing their worlds. In the process, according to Ashley D. Farmer, they envisioned and fashioned for themselves a new identity, one that could trace its renegade ancestry back in time over countless generations:

> **Like their activist foremothers, Panther women engaged in extensive conversations over how to best conceptualize black womanhood in the party and society at large. In an effort to align their activism, political theory, and emancipatory goals, Panther women theorized a gender-specific version of the Panthers' political identity: the Black Revolutionary Woman.**

Peaches Moore declared as much in her "Open Letter to My Mom and Dad—from Peaches, Political Prisoner" (1970):

> **Mom, Dad,**
>
> **I'm communicating this way to you because it would take too much time and emotion on my part to do so through glass windows and earphones.**
>
> **Mom and Dad, you both have always wanted me to be someone you, others, and most of all myself can look up to and respect. All my life I've been taught that people were people. All my life you have told me that no matter what I was or how I was, be the best.**

**Mom and Dad, I am a Panther, I am a revolutionary woman. I am willing to fight and die for the rights of myself, my people, and all oppressed people in general. What greater pride can one have? How much dignity can one feel? How much respect can one receive, if he/she takes the initiative to go after and fight for a goal.**

**Mom and Dad, I love you both for striving and working and sweating so that I may have the things that I needed. I love you both for what you've taught me.**

**Sure, I could go out and hold any job I desire. Have all the luxuries in life, get set, and die of "natural" death.**

**But to me there is more life than that. There are the people. People who need to be helped and loved. Not stepped on, used, and misled as "we" have been for so long.**

**I have found what I've wanted out of life. I didn't find it in the streets, or through dope, or through luxuries. I found what I wanted through the Black Panther Party. And that is to "Love and Serve the People."**

**Please, Mom and Dad, I love you for what you are, and what you do. Can't you love me for what I am, and what I want to do?**

**LOVE—Your only child**

**"Peaches"**

## 56

Navigating a period of grief it would be difficult to articulate, I've been struggling to end this essay. Not a fear of closure; not a reluctance to let it go. I don't want to have failed someone I deeply wished to attend to, but failure feels more redolent of existence, right now, than its opposite.

In a long impasse, I heard Laura Lee again. In 1972 she recorded a song called "It's All Wrong but It's Alright," about a woman who feels an intense need for love from someone who's let her down. This makes it a poor song through which to summon a parting image of Red; but its seventh line, if we can untether it for a moment from the song's story, brings Red so strongly to mind:

**And it's your love that's keeping me alive**

May Red's devotion to the well-being of her comrades and to the resilience of her community remain an archetype for each of us. Even more, may we always seek to emulate her commitment to mutiny, to making her own way, and to staying free.

♥

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*

NOTE: If you knew Red, or know something about her life that would benefit this living document, or if there is an error that should be corrected, please feel welcome to email the author at: crisis_studio@riseup.net.

*

The web-based version of this zine features links to many of the sources: tinyurl.com/NotesOnRed.

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The seizures are made under an Ecuadorian statute that sets a 200-mile limit on its own territorial waters. The U.S. limit is 12 miles.

The Ecuadorian government has collected about $1.7 million in fines and penalties so far this year.

U.S. vessels entered Ecuador's waters in search of skipjack tuna, which is the only variety that may still be caught under the quota. The international quota for yellowfin tuna was achieved earlier this year.

Southern California has a tuna fleet of 93 vessels—77 based in San Diego and 16 in San Pedro.

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...ning from a shootout with police at the Black Panther headquarters Dec. 8, 1969.

Police said it appeared to them that Mrs. Pratt had been slowly executed with five bullets. She was shot twice in the right arm, once in the left leg, once in the stomach and finally in the head. She was eight months pregnant.

Police said they were considering the theory that the killers were Newton supporters trying to learn from her when Cleaver would be returning to the United States.

Cleaver's wife, Kathleen, who arrived in Los Angeles recently from ...defendants that afternoon until Monday, but Saundra never arrived home.

The coroner's office fixed the time of her death as about 10 p.m. Thursday night. Her body was dumped in the street near the intersection of Fernwood Ave. and Imperial Highway. A streetsweeper operator found the body at 4:27 a.m. last Friday.

When Judge Dell issued a bench warrant for her arrest on Monday, she lay in the morgue a few floors below the courtroom identified only as Jane Doe. Her body was eventually identified by her attorney.

**EXECUTION VICTIM?**—Saundra Pratt, whose body lay unidentified in morgue for nearly a week. Photo, copied from one in police files, is part of evidence in case in which she was a defendant.