Marissa J. Spear on Women, Survival and the Black Panther Party in Baltimore

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SPEAKERS

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Rahne Alexander
Thank you for listening to the Hopkins Press Podcast. My name is Rahne Alexander and I'm the Senior Publicist for the Journals Division of Hopkins Press.

Today on the podcast we have Marissa J. Spear, whose new article in *Journal of Women's History Studies,* "Women, Survival and the Black Panther Party in Baltimore." Now people like Eddie Conway and Afeni Shakur, also known as Tupac's mother, are often considered when Baltimore and the Black Panther Party are discussed. But in this article, Marissa J. Spear focuses on the activities of four women, Angie Hatton, Connie Felder, Lula Hudson, and Nkenge Touré, and the ways they transformed and were transformed by working with the Black Panther Party in Baltimore.

It's a story that comes to a head with three-week-long siege of the Black Panther headquarters by the police and FBI agents. It's a great read for anyone interested in the history of the Black Panther Party, of women's liberation and the transformation of gender politics, and of the City of Baltimore. This article will be free to read on Project MUSE through the end of August. Now let's talk with Marissa.

Today we have Marissa J. Spear, who has a new article in Journal of Women's History called "Women, Survival and the Black Panther Party in Baltimore. Thank you for coming on the Hopkins Press Podcast.

Marissa J. Spear
Thank you so much for having me.

Rahne Alexander
How did you come to write this article? This is such a great exploration of Baltimore history. How does it fit into your overall scholarship?

Marissa J. Spear
Yeah, thanks for that question. So I first learned really about the Black Panther Party through the lens of their free health clinics. I took a course at Goucher College in Towson, Maryland, taught by Dr. Yusef Al-Bulushi, which was titled "Black

Geographies, Gratuitous Violence and the Freedom Drive." And we really talked about the freedom struggle, the Black freedom struggle from the time of slavery to today, and that included the work of the party. And at the same time, I had received a book from my sister titled *Body and Soul,* which is a fantastic book by Alondra Nelson that covers the party's health politics, including their free health clinics and their sickle cell anemia initiative. And at the time I was really studying public health, that I had my own experiences with the healthcare system and disability. And so I was really drawn to this idea of self-determination and what they called medical self-defense. Really they were trying to put health in the hands of the people. And so this, one course turned into an undergraduate senior thesis on the Baltimore branch of the Black Panther Party. And at the time, really the premier scholar on Baltimore was Dr. Judson Jeffries, who's edited a number of Panther volumes about local branches and chapters. And I really wanted to understand what the everyday work of the survival programs look like in Baltimore specifically and what that looked for Panther women. And so I had the opportunity to interview about six former Panthers.And so this article in the *Journal of Women's History* is really a culmination of almost 10 years of work on the Baltimore branch of the Black Panther Party and the Black Panther Party more generally. And it really fits squarely into my research interests. My primary interests are in the gender dynamics of the Black Panther Party and the larger civil rights Black Power era and its specificities. And then my secondary interests are really in the role of health and disability in social movement history.

Rahne Alexander
Amazing. I love how like a single class can really just transform an entire career, an entire practice.

Marissa J. Spear
Yes, absolutely.

Rahne Alexander
Can you give us a little bit of the background of the cultural landscape at the time this article is set? I'm interested that Baltimore's Black Panther Party was considered a smaller chapter.

Marissa J. Spear
Yeah, absolutely. I'll kind of give you a little bit of context about Baltimore and then I'll speak really to kind of the organizing history, kind of what other organizations were in Baltimore at the time, and then give listeners some kind of context about what's happening in the larger Black Panther Party at that time.

The Baltimore branch was a really a small chapter and there's kind of debate over how many people, what does it mean to be a small chapter, but really kind of accounts point to about 60 to 75 people over the course of its four years from 1960 to 1972. And there's about, I would say about 25 women who are accounted for in that kind of four year tenure. And as you said, a lot of people do associate Tupac Shakur with Baltimore. Right? And his mother, Afeni Shakur, actually really had no interaction with the Baltimore chapter. She was a New York Panther and his aunt Assata,was also a New York Panther, which is really interesting. But Baltimore specifically, right at this time, there's this long history of Black struggle in Baltimore

and the other organizations that are organizing around this time include the NAACP, who has a long leadership in Baltimore under the leadership of Lillie Mae Carroll Jackson and her daughter, Juanita Jackson Mitchell, which there's some really interesting scholarship there if people are interested, but

Other organizations include SNCC and the Congress of Racial Equality, which was known as CORE. I mentioned in the article the West Baltimore Black, the West Baltimore based Black Cultural Nationalist Organization, which was titled the Society of United Liberators or the SOUL School. And similar to the Panthers, they were doing a lot of Black history work around politics and really trying to address problems in the Black community. And many of the Panthers really took classes at both places, the SOUL School and the Panthers at that time.

And then also right, Baltimore is a blue collar city. So it's facing deindustrialization. We're talking about white flight, blockbusting, right? There's all these urban renewal projects that are disproportionately affecting black communities. And this is the same time as President Johnson's war on poverty programs. And that war on poverty programs come to Baltimore around late 1967. And so a lot of scholars really talk about how the Black Panther Party's survival programs were really talking in conversation with the poor and poverty programs. And ultimately we're trying to address the failure of these programs to really think about community control and really give the black community, community control of addressing these issues in their own communities. And then the last thing I'll say really about Baltimore specifically is this is also the time of the anti-war movement. Right? Both nationally and locally and really the most famous in Baltimore and Maryland more largely is the Catonsville Nine, the Berrigan brothers who led it, a series of direct actions and that really happens, that begins in 1968. So really at this point in Baltimore, there's really this convergence of local organizing that's happening and national organizing that creates the environment for the Panthers to arise in Baltimore. And then just kind of some Black Panther Party context. Right? In 1968, the party is already two years into its inception. And at this point in the party's history, they've really reached a huge boom in membership. There are branches and chapters popping up all across the country.

Huey P. Newton has already been arrested at this point and there's the Free Huey campaign, which means there's kind of this mass media attention to the Black Panther Party. By 1968, 60% of the party membership is women. And so at the same time this is happening, the party's also facing a severe amount of repression. Right?The FBI's counterintelligence program, local police forces, obviously people are being arrested and incarcerated. And so the party makes a strategic decision to freeze membership. And Baltimore is one of the last branches that gets kind of approval to become a formal branch before that membership freeze in 1968.

Rahne Alexander
So, interesting. So in the course of this article, you introduce us to four women who are involved with Baltimore's chapter. Can you tell us a little bit about each of these women and how you came to focus on their stories and developing your article?

Marissa J. Spear

Yeah, absolutely! I love talking about these women and I think each of them deserves kind of their own full deep dive. But I think for some context. Right? I mentioned Judson Jeffries, who's really a prominent scholar on Baltimore. And when I started researching this work, I really was reading everything I could get my hands on, including, you know, Jeffries's work. There's some work by a fantastic scholar of Baltimore, Rhonda Y. Williams. And then there's really these autobiographies of the late Eddie Conway and Steve McCutchen who are both Baltimore Panthers. And so I was really in the beginning, I was just searching for names. I kept this running spreadsheet of every name I could find that was in the Baltimore branch of the Black Panther Party. I was looking through local archives, the Black Panther newspaper, local issues of the *Afro-American* and the *Baltimore Sun*. And this name that kept coming up was Connie Felder. And in part because she is one of the only women in Baltimore to hold a leadership role as communication secretary, but she also was married at one point to Steve McCutchen. So she appears quite frequently in his autobiography. And I had the opportunity to interview Connie. And I think her story is really representative of this, what it meant to rise from a rank and file member to a leadership role, right? This kind of arc of what it meant to take on a leadership role in the party as a woman. And I think it really paints this really interesting story that, you know, sexism, it didn't mean that you were not a victim of sexism at times from the internal party, but you made strategic decisions to continue because the party was kind of the main target and the main strategy. So Connie put me in touch with Angie, who I had the chance to interview. And I think when you pair her story with Lula Hudson's, who had passed by the time I started this work, but their two stories really get at the heart of what was happening in the party around this idea of collective living and communal living and collective parenting, right? This idea of can you be a woman in the struggle and can you also be a mother? And it really shows us that those two were not necessarily mutually exclusive concepts. Right? And oftentimes women made strategic decisions about what it looked like for them personally and for their work in the party. And so I think the two stories together, I think are really interesting and paint a really important picture of that time in the party. And then again, Nkenge Touré , who I also didn't have the chance to interview, but has an amazing oral history at Smith College that's available online that anyone should read if they have the chance. And I think, again, her story is kind of this quintessential organizing story. Right? Where she starts her time really as a teenager and she has this kind of public, she's already a public face in Baltimore as an organizer for Black education before she joins the party. And so, that sort of platform allows her the space to really expand her work and draw people to the party. And then she really goes on to have this kind of phenomenal organizing career over the course of her life. And so part of these four women's stories is what I had access to in the archives and who I had access to really. But I think when they're put in conversation with each other, they really speak to those different facets of what it meant to define revolutionary womanhood and to define what it meant to be a rank and file woman in the Baltimore party at this time.

Rahne Alexander
Yeah, interesting. So you note in your article that each of these women were on the front lines of a three week long siege by Baltimore police against the Black Panthers headquarters in downtown Baltimore. We can let your readers go through the piece

to read your descriptions and get a better sense of your history, but can you give us a summary of what happened during the siege?

Marissa J. Spear
Yeah, I really love telling this story. It was one of the first stories I found about Baltimore and it was really captivating from the beginning. I think for some context, we mentioned that Baltimore was a small branch, but I will say that for having such a small branch, it faced a disproportionately high amount of repression from the federal government, from the local police. The Baltimore branch had at least four informants over its four-year tenure, including its founding member, Captain Warren Hart, who was an NSA agent. And I'll refer people to Jefferies's work again, because I think he does a much better job than I can of really getting at the why of that. But I think that's important context to have. And then really the siege begins on April 30th, 1970. And really, this is at the height of the Baltimore branch's time in the city. And it's really, the police start the search under the guise of looking for potential suspects in a murder they've falsely attributed to Panthers really due in part to some of this kind of informants that are happening. And so the raid begins first on the breakfast program, which at that point was located in East Baltimore in the basement of St. Martin De Porres Catholic Church. And really what Steve McCutchen describes in the Panthers newspaper is that the police really essentially raid the breakfast program. They come in with guns drawn, they're breaking up the tables, they're scaring the children, and they're looking for suspects. And what happens is then that the coordinator of the breakfast program starts relaying that information right back to the Panthers who are stationed inside their headquarters on Gay Street. And at the same time, the police are going to people's homes and knocking on doors, knocking down doors, looking for families, looking for potential suspects and arresting people. And so really what happens is the raid happens on the breakfast program, people are being arrested. And so word starts to spread to the local headquarters that the police are coming and they need to prepare for a siege. And so the people stationed there, including some of the women we talk about in this essay, but Captain Hart is there, Nkenge Touré is there and Felder is there really. And they're starting to station themselves throughout the house. It's a typical two-story kind of brownstone in Baltimore and so they have the perimeter kind of, they're working around the perimeter, they're at the windows, they're stationed with their guns, and then they make a strategic decision to alert the local community. Right? They're trying to reach out to their contacts, to churches, their local alliances that they already have because by Friday the police have already started to gather and so what happens is that as they spread the word community members also start to gather in the streets.

And there are some really grainy photos that you can find in the Baltimore Sun where you can see kind of the rooftop from Gay Street and their rooftops are covered in people kind of all surrounding Gay Street. It's this really kind of beautiful image and there's people kind of lining themselves around the perimeter of the headquarters. And it's not just black organizations in the streets. It's oftentimes more predominantly white organizations of this time, like the anti-Vietnam War, Baltimore Defense Committee, the Baltimore Committee for Political Freedom, which was this really ad hoc group of academics who were in support of the Panthers. And really, you know, Panthers themselves say that it was those people in the streets. Right? That saved them from a deadly shootout, which was really

common in other chapters and branches across the country. It lasted for almost three weeks, so they devised a pulley system to bring supplies in to bring medical supplies, food, provisions. Right? And it's just this really amazing story of what coalition organizing and alliance building can look like.

Rahne Alexander
What a beautiful piece of history. Well, what a beautiful and tragic piece of history for Baltimore in so many ways. One of the things I thought was really fascinating that I hadn't considered. You know, I've heard and read about the breakfast programs that the Black Panthers enabled for so long, but you note that it really contributed to shifts in gender dynamics in the parties, which I hadn't really thought about before. How did that play out within these breakfast programs?

Marissa J. Spear
Yeah, thanks for this question. I will say kind of that as a local scholar studying the Black Panther Party, I think it's really important to note that there are often these kind of national touch points. Right? That there are things happening at the national level that kind of impact the local response. And part of my job as a historian of Baltimore is to understand like, how did that happen at the rank and file Level. Right? What did that look like in Baltimore and how did they respond? And so, kind of all touch on the gender dynamics , but one example I like to give is that, you know, women who were arrested and incarcerated at the national level, the most famous being, Ericka Huggins, scholars talk about how that the willingness to put yourself on the line for the cause really contributed to men viewing you very differently, that shift in gender dynamics. Right? And this happens in Baltimore too. Women are willing to kind of put themselves on the line in the siege. And Angie Hatton talks about how she witnessed Afeni Shakur and met her at the Panther trial of the Panther 21. And she decides to kind of come back to Baltimore and join the party because she's so moved by her work. And so I think, for me, it's always about, the directive comes down to start the breakfast programs at the national level, the survival programs more broadly. What did that mean on the local level? And when I was doing my research and talking to these women, I really was like, were there conversations happening? Like, what did that it look like? And what I found was that conversations about gender weren't happening really on a day-to-day basis. It wasn't like they were getting in a round table and kind of having a discussion about gender. But what was happening was that they were kind of shifting these things in practice. And a lot of Whitman told me. Right? Whatever task you were called upon to do in the party, that is what you did because that was the call of the revolutionary. And so I think the Panthers didn't intend to shift gender dynamics by feeding breakfast, but it wasn't just women in the kitchen. Men had to be in the kitchen as well. Sometimes the women were the ones going to the kids' homes and picking them up and bringing them to the breakfast program. It wasn't always men giving out, it was men giving out sickle cell anemia testing alongside women, it was men teaching in the education classes just alongside women. So there's this flip of gender that happens in practice that it wasn't really kind of decided and set out, but it is this kind of tension that, and that tension that arises when that happens in practice. Right? Men and women kind of pushing back against these traditional roles. And I think that is what is so interesting to me as a scholar is that the Black Panther Party doesn't have a perfect record on gender. Right? But it's those tensions that are exciting to kind of dig into. Right? Touré herself talks about how gender, the

gender breakdown and kind of the caretaking and domestic work in the home wasn't perfect and it wasn't always equal. And Felder talks about how she faced sexism in the party even though she had a leadership role. And so there's not always, it's not always like they did it well because they were also human as well. Right? But I think that that kind of space to kind of push back and create that shift intention is I think what is really interesting to me and fascinating to me about the work.

I will say that if people are interested in learning about kind of the collective living and communal aspects of the party, Robyn C. Spencer, wrote a fantastic chapter in an anthology called West of Eden that really kind of broadened my understanding of how they were kind of getting at revolution in the home and in the domestic space as well.

Rahne Alexander
Amazing! So a note that you hit several times is that Black Panther women were more or less redefining Black womanhood, expanding beyond domestic and caretaking roles, taking assignments where they had capacity, as you just noted. One such is Touré who established herself as a writer of signed pieces in the Black Panther publication. So why was her achievements so novel?

Marissa J. Spear
Yeah, think this is, I really love talking about Touré, because I think it's her, there's so much to kind of mine in her organizing history. I'll start by talking a little bit, giving some context for the Black Panther newspaper, because I think it's an important understanding to have is that the Black Panther newspaper was really the primary means of income for the party. A portion of the income they received went back to the national party and then a portion of that stayed in house at the Baltimore chapter. So it was primarily a primary means of income. And it was also their main recruiting tool. Right? They were out in the streets every day selling papers and recruiting people to the Panther cause. It was the main way that they communicated with chapters and branches across the country, across the globe. Right? It was the way they communicated what they wanted and what they believed right in their 10-point platform. And it was also a means, a tool that the state could use for repression. Right? There are often instances in which production of the Black Panther newspaper is held up or, you know, Black Panther newspapers got to where they are, but they're soaked in water. Right? Because the state was using all of the means that they could to repress the party because it was such a powerful tool of recruitment and education. And so I think, Touré, achievement may be not be novel in the context of the larger party. Right? There are lots of women who wrote in the party, who wrote for the Black Panther newspaper, who worked on its production, many of whom wrote with and without a byline. But I think it's important to remember why it's important in Baltimore. And again, that's kind of why the local context is so critical. Right? She is a organizer at the age of 16. Right? For those of you who haven't read the article, she essentially leads this walkout at her high school because she has faced a series of racist incidents at the high school and her, along with some other high schoolers, stage a walkout. They end up kind of bringing together high schoolers from all across the city. They make a list of 28 demands and the police respond with violence. Right? And so they're arrested and known as the Eastern Eight. And there's articles in the Black Panther newspaper about the Eastern Eight, kind of before Touréenters the party. Right?

The SOUL School comes out in support of the Eastern Eight. Right? There's pages of the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Afro-American* that are talking about this instance. And so by the time she joins the party, she already really has this kind of public face and platform to continue her calls for Black education. You know, she's willing to put her name on a byline, which at that point in time really was like willing to subject yourself to repression at every one used a byline or put their name on it on on the byline. Right? Even steve McCutchen in the Baltimore chapter used a pseudonym he went by the name Little Messiah because he was on the run from he was evading the draft and so i think there are lots of ways that you know she was willing to put herself on the line and also really recruit people. Right? At the time she's a 16 year old who has all of this kind of public attention around her work and the party and the branch at that time really needed people. It was kind of hemorrhaging members. And so it really also acts as a recruitment tool. Right?To share with the community what's going on, to kind of call out the government for their injunction against the paper. Right? She's kind of using all of these tools that we think of when we think of the Black Panther newspaper. And I think that is why her contribution in Baltimore is so novel. Right? Because of the specific context in which she was living in.

I will say that if people are interested in learning more about kind of the paper and the way that they use the paper, Jane Rhodes is a mass media historian who's written a fantastic book about the Black Panther newspaper that people should definitely check out.

Rahne Alexander
Whoa, I love getting more reading. So there's a term that you mentioned earlier in the podcast, revolutionary womanhood. And there's a passage that I highlighted where you write, women carved out space for themselves to reshape the party's ideas of revolutionary womanhood, responding to their local context and political moment rather than a gender specific understanding of men's or women's roles. Can you maybe talk a little bit about how we move from this position of what you call visibly invisible to this newer model of revolutionary womanhood within the Black Panther Party?

Marissa J. Spear
Yeah, absolutely. I will say kind of to start. When I started this work over 10 years ago, was scholarship about the Baltimore women, or there was scholarship about women in the Black Panther Party, but I would say in the past 10 years that scholarship has grown exponentially. And so I really do feel indebted to so many other women who are writing about the Panthers, including Ashley Farmer and Robyn C. Spencer. I mentioned Rhonda Williams and Mary Frances Phillips, but there's kind of this huge expansion in scholarship, which really kind of transformed my own understanding of how to make sense of what they were doing in Baltimore. I think what's fascinating about the party is they really created space. Right? They were confronting revolution not just in the streets but in every aspect of life. Right? From the home to the school to, you know, combating police violence to healthcare to food and I think because, the party took that expansive approach. Right? Revolutionary womanhood could also take that expansive approach. And you hear women say that that's kind of one of the reasons they joined the party. Right? Because there was kind of this space to carve out for themselves what it meant to

be a revolutionary woman. And you can see this arc of the change in the party's ideology. You can see it in the newspaper. Right?In the arc of their depictions of who is a revolutionary. Right? In the beginning, Ashley Farmer does a great job of talking about how, you know, in the beginning, it might look like a man, and then it kind of is a woman with a gun. And then kind of by the late, early 1970s, they're kind of thinking more about the survival programs. And so there are depictions of older women carrying their food bags with their political pins. Right? And so it's not just, you know, kind of the young woman with the gun who can be a revolutionary. It also can be the elderly woman who is taken care of per community. And it can be the mother who is working in the survival programs every day. And so I think those four women's actions in Baltimore kind of really represent a piece of that arc of revolutionary womanhood. Really they speak to those kind of specifics that kind of unite all Black Panther women. And I think really the militancy is the key one. Right? That militancy, that everyday acts of militancy. Right? You see that in the siege, you see that in them defending their breakfast programs. There's the political and ideological consciousness that you find in Toure and her writings. And then there's kind of this collective living and communal parenting. Right? This kind of, this back and forth between what does that look like and how can we push against the idea of the individual and Hudson and Hatton stories. And then really there's kind of that quintessential, like, what does it mean to rise into a leadership role from a rank-and-file woman? And that really is Connie Felder. So I think these women's actions really kind of are a little piece of that really expansive arc of revolutionary womanhood.

Rahne Alexander
Yeah, it really speaks to the power of the quotidian, just that day-to-day ways that our actions can really transform on a larger political scale, I think.

Marissa J. Spear
Mmmmh.

Rahne Alexander
Well, thank you again for this article. We're going to make this available for everybody to read for free for a time so that everybody can participate in reading this and catch up on this history. Do you have anything else to add? And would you like to tell us a little bit about what you're working on next?

Marissa J. Spear
Yeah, I'll add one more thing which I think kind of goes back to the siege and why it's so important. I think I'll just kind of make the case that I think there's so much more to be researched and discovered about the Black Panther Party, particularly on a local level. I think the coalition organizing is something, again, when I started this work, I was kind of looking for something different. Right? I like had this one idea of what a lot of us think of Fred Hampton and the Rainbow Coalition. Right? This kind of gold star of a multiracial coalition. And I felt like I was trying to look for that in Baltimore. Right?But it didn't look that way. Right? But it still had these like really strong kind of material impacts in the work of the party. And so I think it's important to do these local case studies because you learn so much about how the party looks different on a case by case basis in a different city or a different state and really kind of see the party anew through kind of the rank and file members.

I do think, I do have kind of things to talk about that I'm working on next. My essay on disability in children's historical literature was just released through the University Press of Mississippi in an American Girl anthology, which happened in early May. And then the next thing that I'm working on, again, part of my initial work on the Black Panther Party was really trying to understand the local context. And that meant kind of that meant walking the streets where the Panthers were.

And I became really interested in like, what does it mean to memorialize these civil rights and Black power sites? Like lot of the times when you're walking the streets. Right? It's just kind of a brownstone or a home and that kind of lives on and in a different setting as someone's actual home. Right? And so oftentimes these sites of activism are also sites of violence, right? People are murdered there and assassinated. And so what does it mean to kind of memorialize these sites and should they continue as radical community spaces? Should they become historical markers. You know? Should they be museums? And so really thinking in conversation with a lot of other Panthers and Panther scholars who are thinking through kind of like, how do we preserve what happened and how do we make sure that people remember the party and like, what is the best way to do that? And how do we memorialize these sites?

Rahne Alexander
Thank you for being on the Hopkins Press Podcast. It's really good to meet you.

Marissa J. Spear
Yeah, thank you so much for having me. It was such an honor.

Rahne Alexander
We hope you've enjoyed listening to this episode of the Hopkins Press Podcast. If so, please rate us, subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. We've made Marissa J. Spears' article, “Women, Survival and the Black Panther Party in Baltimore,” from the new issue of Journal of Women's History, free to read through the end of August. You can find a link to the article in the show notes. Thanks again for listening and we hope you'll join us again in two weeks for the next episode of the Hopkins Press Podcast.