

HOWARD L. BINGHAM'S
BLACK
PANTHERS
1968

For Dr Tessa Hicks
Congratulations
Thanks for being a part of this
Book it means a great great deal to me.
Best Always
Howard L Bingham
June 7, 2009

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PANTHERS
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AMMO

COLOPHON

This book is dedicated with love to my ninety-year-old mother,
Willie E. Bingham.

HOWARD L.BINGHAM'S BLACK PANTHERS 1968
All photographs by Howard L. Bingham © 2009 Howard L. Bingham

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AFTERWORD

by Tessa Hicks

As he has done for half a century, Howard Bingham helps us to see, understand, and imagine both the public and private lives of our country's cultural icons. In this special book we are let inside the lived experiences of one of the most potent organizations of our times, the Black Panther Party. This book represents a memorial for a bygone era and a commemoration of a struggle that never dies. It remembers the Panthers' legacy and invites a new generation to imagine what legacy they might leave behind. It is a collection of pictures so intimate, so telling, so raw with emotion and action that you can hear the singing and shouting in its pages. It is a lens with which you can see inside a movement, a community, a moment so powerful that it took forty years to arrive in your hands.

The Panthers could be glorified or forgotten if left up to the capricious tendencies of memory and media; thankfully, this quintessential documentation thwarts that possibility by capturing and keeping alive crucial images of our shared history. In Howard Bingham's photographs, we uncover the contradictions and the accomplishments of times that were as much about political and social turmoil as they were about personal and collective liberation. This book combats collective social amnesia or singular control over the perception of who the Black Panthers were and what they aimed to do by re-membering—bringing back the members of this struggle—through a series of striking images. We are often taught that past political and social change "just happened" or, worse, was the result of a Machiavellian concession given to us by the powers that be, rather than something that was desperately fought for and achieved by those without power. However, in these pages we see how power was seized by those traditionally on the margins of society (and on the receiving end of a police baton) and used to demand the most basic of human and civil rights: respect, education, employment, land, food, housing, and justice.

These are timeless demands, resulting in timeless struggles. They continue today, albeit with slightly different requests and outcomes. Both the conditions and context we are fighting in and against have changed, due in large part to the achievements gained by the Panthers and other movements of that era, and by the development of new struggles. And so while they still exist, major political demonstrations and discriminatory practices aren't always as obvious now as they were during the 60s. While we may mourn the loss of a particular activist energy of that time or feel more disconnected in our fight against new and old issues of social and political injustice, we are also more informed and interconnected than ever due to the "web" that connects us.

Our awareness of social issues and their potential solutions are influenced by new media, giving us a medium for seeing, thinking, and documenting on the Internet that we are only just beginning to appreciate and understand. Today, direct-action mobilization occurs at rapid-fire pace and on simultaneous levels locally and globally on issues of poverty, race, war, environment, education, immigration, disease, health care, rights, and faith in ways that allow the advocacy around these issues to be broken

down into smaller (yet still effective) subgroups. Simultaneously, these smaller groups and actions are constantly cross-pollinating and intersecting as it becomes clear that both the problems and solutions have become increasingly entangled. In this web of interconnected movements (with a lower-case "m"), activists continue fighting for the things the Panthers (and others with and before them) brought to our attention.

Hopefully we have learned much from the ways in which the Black Panthers envisioned a better world and had the courage to demand it; regardless of whether or not all of their demands were met or if that better world was delivered, we learn about the power that exists in the act of envisioning and working together to build a different society. For it is in the imagining of a better world that we learn a great deal about ourselves, our neighbors, our capacities for change, and the kinds of strategies that might lead us there. As Robin D. G. Kelley, the visionary black history scholar, reminds us, "Without new visions we don't know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us." (2002)

So, how have these recent attempts at making a revolution transformed us? For many, the struggle still follows a path of resistance, self-defense, a call to arms, a push toward socialism, or even anarchy. Yet, for a growing number of activists, there is a tendency to merge and select political strategies from various past movements in the process of creating new tactics for radical change. Often this calls for critically reforming systems and institutions rather than dismantling them altogether. This does not mean giving up dreams of a better world; in fact, it demands that we function both within and outside of the realms of the current system, demanding changes of ourselves and the institutions we uphold (or are held under by) while simultaneously dreaming up entirely new values, cosmologies, political systems, and social paradigms in which we could exist.

Calls are being made to focus on the existing strengths and assets in communities, rather than perpetuating a system that depicts marginalized populations as needy victims in need of more paralyzing services. Social uplift is taking place through collective practices of decolonization, cultural affirmation, and interculturalism, while the concepts of hope, love, and compassion are being recognized, once again, as pillars of political organizing. Efforts are being made to regenerate traditional models of interconnected and self-reliant communities through local and sustainable food, water, energy, and economic systems. And people are finding that often in this process of rooting down and nurturing their diverse communities, there is a move beyond the endless critiques of our systems' failures as we imagine a new world into being. Indeed, moving our focus toward the creations of new visions of our world is crucial for any lasting change to occur.

As Laura Pulido, the preeminent scholar of radical activism, suggests, "Among dominated communities, fundamental change does not occur through the ballot box, or even through mass uprisings, although both can play important roles. Rather, it centers on producing a shift in con-

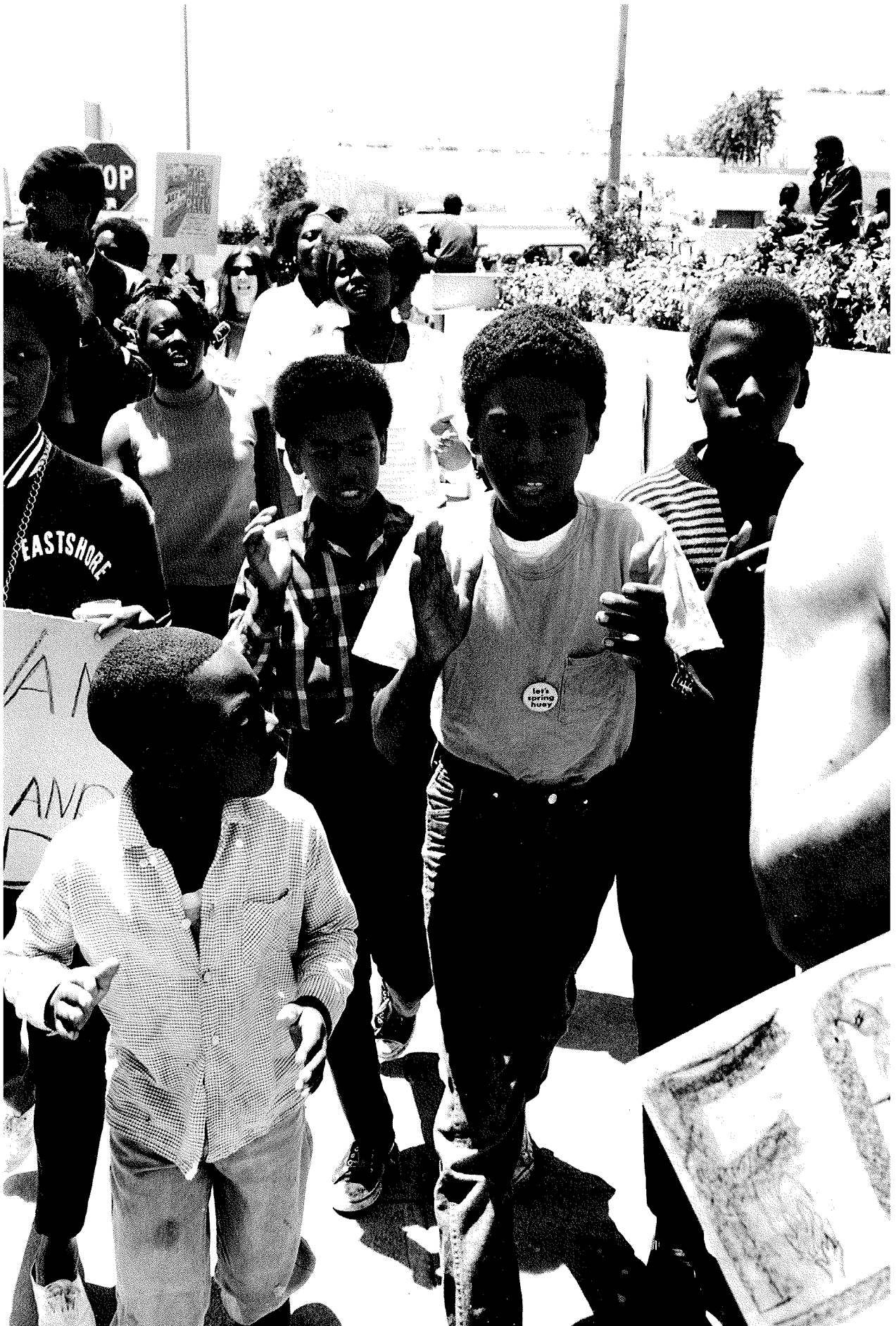
sciousness—an alternative vision of what the world might look like, an expanded sense of personal efficacy (often called empowerment), and a clear set of demands—and on systematically mobilizing. Such changes constitute the beginning of a movement.” (2006)

As we create new visions of the world we want, it is crucial that we look closely at the images from our past to understand where we've been. And while the introductory words in this book are intended to contextualize the significance of these photographs, it is deeply important to recognize that this celebration of history is being represented not through theoretical pontifications but through art.

The arts—be they songs of protest, community-based theatre, or photographs capturing the change makers of our time as they move and shake up systems of oppression—can make just as important a difference, sometimes more so, as a new theory or policy that touts social change. The arts can communicate our individual and collective emotions, political ideals, and cultural representations. The arts can act as a call for revolution or a vehicle for reconciliation; a mode of self-expression or a tool for political organizing. The arts give us a free space in which to collectively imagine a new way of being and the tools to map out the manifestation of that vision. As our world spins between the realities of racial, cultural, economic, gender, and religious oppression and the dreams and visions of empowerment, equality, and freedom, we rely on the arts to give us blueprints, inspiration, and faith on the journey.

The gems in this book document the people, the emotions, and the energy of a terribly important moment in our history and remind us that by looking into the eyes of these fearless activists, we may just see reflections of ourselves or of our children. We desperately need these reflections, these reminders, and these artistic representations of change that compel us to continue envisioning and creating a just world.

Tessa Hicks was born into a family of artists-activists (her grandparents were blacklisted actors and her parents made an LA Newsreel documentary film with, about, and for the Black Panthers.) Tessa is the Interim Director of the Center for California Cultural and Social Issues, and Visiting Faculty of Urban Studies at Pitzer College.



Children at "Free Huey" Rally Oakland, CA