

BLACK PANTHERS CALL A REVOLUTIONARY PEOPLE'S CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION:

When Afeni Shakur called the Radicalesbians asking them and Gay Liberation Front to Washington for a planning meeting preparatory to the Constitutional Convention I was charged with excitement. Afeni Shakur — beautiful Black woman, virile, revolutionary, nickname "Power" — sexual excitement. REVOLUTIONARY PEOPLE'S CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION — that has the flavor of an historical event — visionary excitement. The Black Panthers are making a statement on Gay Liberation; Gay Liberation Front invited to participate. Consciousness of sexism, heterosexual oppression of women and Gays, finally linked with the struggle against racism. A public revolutionary document, perhaps the first manifesto of the New World, its consciousness complete. A naive enthusiasm but this unexpected recognition sparked it. The oppression of Women and Homosexuals so long denied, ridiculed, misunderstood — is a story that has hardly begun to be told. So ancient an enslavement, so branded into our psyches, we assume our bondage to be the natural order of things. Yet for all its new awakening, its voice still feeble, its smoldering rage still leashed, we know that an understanding and uprooting of sexism is the end of all oppression, all power games — the key to the final blow for human liberation. This acknowledgment from what seems to be the heaviest group of people dealing with racism energized and inspired each gay woman and man rolling toward Washington for the meeting.

As groups we represented the THIRD WORLD GAY REVOLUTION, RADICALESBIANS and GLF women and men. But the telling of this has to be completely subjective. I was a white woman coming into the Panther presence — active in the movement a little more than a year — freshly awakened and growing consciousness of Women's and Gay oppression — sick and angry at almost everyone except radical Gay sisters, questioning the validity of working with gay men and their infuriating unconscious sexism — ruling out straight men categorically as SUPER PIG — and here were the Panthers, a straight man's trip in cinemascope and technicolor. Super butch, the brown, muscled bare-armed, deep-voiced Afro-American — their words cracked with rage and self righteousness. They moved the meeting along tracks of their prearranged program oblivious of everyone unless she or he was in agreement or of use. They insulted us with words of democratic procedure while bulldozing through their agenda. I felt intimidated, angry and defensive. "I have come here to find out why and if gay people should relate to this convention. Is there receptivity to Women's and Gay Liberation?"

"We'll tolerate that crazy talk about 30 seconds and you'll be asked to leave!" The room exploded and hummed with long harangues by black women and men who were outraged at my white thin-skinnedness, my racism, my gross lack of empathy and awareness of Black oppression — That I should question the need for a new constitution! Two GLF men tried to support me explaining that I wasn't questioning the need for the constitution or denying Black oppression — that we were under the impression we were asked here for a dialogue. Jim proclaimed loudly his support of the Panthers as the vanguard party. "Fool," I thought, "you are not speaking for me. These fascists would obliterate us." I wanted to leave.

People began signing up for committees. Some gay brothers and sisters, feeling like me, left the room downcast, ready to leave. On impulse I put my name in for the agenda committee; perhaps in an effort to understand, or desire to battle the thing through a little further — or maybe I just couldn't stand the feelings of defeat and disconnection. In the hall Kip said to me, "I told you to come on as a revolutionary first and save the sexist confrontation till after you made that connection." Ann said, "You came on like Whitey. You were talking down to them. That one from you oppresses and enrages Black people." I began to understand a little. Two groups, one Black, one Gay — both locked inside our awarenesses of all the gross and subtle tones and manners designed to keep us down. They didn't know yet how they looked to me but I caught a glimpse of how I looked to them.



The agenda committee turned out to be 3 Black men (one Panther) and 5 women, one Spanish and 4 white. The first argument arose over the keynote speaker who was expected to be Hughey P. Newton. I began to feel that I was on that railroad again. "Look," I said, "It is very painful for me to argue with you like this but I am sitting here torn whether to continue to relate to this or not. Black consciousness is very well defined and because of the efforts and struggle of Blacks its presence is heavy in this room. The oppression of Women and Gays is scarcely articulated. Some people sitting here aren't even aware of it and think I am crazy as I talk. But I am both a woman and gay and if this congress is going to reflect my awareness how can I accept a male hero figure? No matter how great a person he might be, the straight man glorified is my oppression. Do I relate to the Black movement at this time in history and say fuck it to my struggle? or do I say fuck it to anything that oppresses me even revolutionary sisters and brothers?": A white sister, Leslie, spoke up. She dug what I said but also felt that Hughey was a good choice for speaker because of his revolutionary practice and inspirational qualities. But there should be a heavy woman speaker too with a strong Woman's consciousness. The Panther, Doug, nodded and left the room. When he came back I knew we were off the tracks and this group of people were actually formulating an agenda. A man and woman would speak and there would be a chairwoman for the meetings. The workshops would include women's rights, sexual self-determination, child oppression, the family, as well as self-determination for racial minorities. One of the Black men started to put us down as frivolous, with a barb for the sexuality of the gay women. Doug said, "OH no, brother, that just doesn't go anymore." The meeting took off. We were together. When the larger group reconvened I somewhat expected the Panthers to protest the tentative agenda but no one questioned it. We broke up planning another meeting in a few days. At this point the THIRD WORLD GAY REVOLUTION handed out to the Panthers and the assembly their strong and beautiful statement THE OPPRESSED SHALL NOT BECOME THE OPPRESSOR (reprinted in the center fold). One of the male Panthers

came up to me. He had been particularly hostile to the sexism issue during the meeting. I found out later his name is David Hillard. "I want you to know that what I said had nothing to do with the fact you are a lesbian. I say 'right on' to lesbian liberation." I told him it certainly didn't seem that way to me. We came because invited, to test the receptivity of the convention toward Gay and Women's Liberation and not only was my attempt smashed down but I was called crazy and saboteur. I told him I had been made aware that I came on in an oppressive way but he and others made no attempt to understand me. He repeated that he had nothing against lesbians getting their rights but he couldn't support male homosexuals because in prison they were "snitches" and besides he had problems with his own masculinity. He said that the Panthers were coming out with a statement on Gay Liberation next week and as a Panther he would "back up his word with his life". As I watched him walk away I felt that I had just talked to a human being — another connection had been made. The bombastic Panther-in-public gave way to a black man caught in the contradictions of these times. Rising out of his incredible oppression the assertion of his humanity takes the form of "Being-A-Man" and that is what he has become. Now he is being told that this too is oppression and has to go. Perhaps through the discipline of the Party and because of his own oppression he is open to this new struggle. I think perhaps I can be part of that struggle. Certainly in some way I felt that the people present had been affected by us, or would be. I know that I was touched and affected by them.

What came through to me was an immense commitment to revolutionary struggle born of an oppression beyond my experience. The task is to somehow make the pain and enslavement of Women and Gays felt as a force and presence.

On the way back to New York I realized my real connection to the struggle to transform the Black Liberation movement was in the people of the THIRD WORLD GAY REVOLUTION. I remembered that part of the reason I went to the agenda meeting was Frenchie's smiling at me saying, "What did you expect? We've only just begun." My involvement had alot to do with Kip's and Ann's confrontations and their continued acceptance of me as a gay sister and friend.

As I look forward to the convention and the formulation of our new constitution I have no doubts that the present hierarchial, dogmatic structure of the Panthers is an oppressive force and I wonder what this spoken solidarity will really mean. But the constitution is something else. If the document is actually permitted to be the product of the oppressed peoples convening to write it then it will transcend all of our individual limitations. For this I can work — that our emerging consciousness, our first attempts at alternate forms, will not bear the features of THE MAN.

A WHITE LESBIAN RESPONDS

Lois Hart

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photo by Ellen Bedoz

LESBIAN DEMANDS

PANTHER CONSTITUTION CONVENTION

SEP. 5, 1970

Women are the revolution. It must not be alluded to that women are merely an extension of a male ego game. Women are not machines that will mass-produce infant revolutionaries. The entire success of the revolution does not depend on whether or not the male will "allow" the woman her liberation, but rather on the woman freeing herself of all crippling male identities and realizing the strength that is found in solidarity with her sisters.

All previous revolutions were dominated by the male mentality. In fact, previous revolutions have been incomplete. While they have served the purposes of men, there have been no revolutionary changes in the conditions of women. Women's revolution will be the first fundamental revolution because it will do what all the others aspired to.

The demands of the Lesbian workshop on September 5 in connection with the "People's Revolutionary" Constitutional Convention call for the complete control by women of all aspects of our social system. What evolved when twenty to twenty-five lesbians wrote these demands is in itself proof of the validity of these demands. Women who have asserted their autonomy, women who have severed the ties between themselves and the male power structure (even in the form of a one to one relationship with a man), women who are already learning to love and cooperate with one another, women who are not making the mistake of trying to deal with men with whom the ultimate decision always lies because women have no power base from which to speak.

The Lesbian Workshop demands will eventually lead to the equalization of all power resources, so that someday human beings of all sexes can deal with each other on a more realistic level.

DEMANDS OF THE LESBIAN WORKSHOP

1. Sexual autonomy
Prohibit sexual role programming of children.
2. Destruction of the Nuclear Family
The nuclear family is a microcosm of the fascist state, where the women and children are owned by, and their fates determined by, the needs of men, in a man's world.
3. Communal care of children
Children should be allowed to grow, in a society of their peers, cared for by adults whose aim is not to perpetrate any male-female role programming. It is advised that these adults be under the direction of women-identified women.
4. Reparations
 - a) Women are a dispersed minority and we demand that amount of control of all production and industry that would ensure one hundred percent control over our own destinies. This control includes commerce, industry, health facilities, education, transportation, military, etc.
 - b) Because women have been systematically denied information and knowledge and the opportunities for acquiring these, we demand open enrollment of all schools to all women, financial support to any woman who needs it, on the job training with pay for all women attending technical schools and under apprenticeship.
 - c) Women demand the time and support to research, compile and report our history and our identity.
 - d) The power and technology of defense are invested in men. Since these powers are used to intimidate women, we demand training in self-defense and the use of defense machinery. A Woman's Militia would be organized to defend the demands, rights and interests of women struggling towards an unoppressive social system.