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SEIZING THE TIME
Australian Aborigines and the Influence of the Black Panther Party, 1969-1972

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This article contributes to recent scholarship that has sought to investigate the international influence of the Black Panther Party. It does this by providing a brief narrative outline of the Australian Black Panther Party, formed at the end of 1971 by militant Aboriginal activists. It then suggests, however, that the most enduring influence of the American Black Panther Party in Australia is not the adoption of the American Party's name and program. Instead, it can be seen in the way Aborigines, inspired by the example of the Panthers' community survival programs, developed their own free medical and legal services.

Keywords: *Black Panther Party; Australian Aborigines; Australia; Black power; international liberation movements; colonialism; racism*

In their recent article, "Global Solidarity: The Black Panther Party in the International Arena," Michael L. Clemons and Charles E. Jones (2001) claim that the international dimension and global role of the Black Panther Party has often been overlooked, despite its importance to the group's larger history. Although scholarship on the Black Panthers has now produced a vast body of material, our knowledge of the party's influence has mostly been confined to its national borders. This, they argue, is an unnecessarily restricted vision that limits our understanding of the "global initiatives, linkages, and accomplishments of African-American actors" (p. 21).

To date, there have been few attempts to remedy this gap in our understanding, although Clemons and Jones (2001) have made an important beginning. Their article seeks to deepen our appreciation

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of the Black Panther Party by investigating the ways in which it "galvaniz[ed] progressive activists throughout the world" (p. 21). To this end, they consider, albeit briefly, the Black Panther Movement and the White Panthers of the United Kingdom, the Black Panther Party of Israel, the Black Beret Cadre of Bermuda, the Dalit Panthers of India, and the Black Panther Party of Australia. They conclude that the ideology of the Panthers, underlined by a commitment to self-determination and the elimination of all forms of discrimination, found resonance with oppressed people around the world (Clemons & Jones, 2001). Jennifer B. Smith's 1999 monograph, *An International History of the Black Panther Party*, is another significant attempt to address the international scope of the Black Panthers. She surveys the way in which the party developed connections in a number of countries, but particularly in Nova Scotia, Canada, and like Clemons and Jones, starts from the position that an international perspective is critical to a fuller understanding of the Black Panther Party (Smith, 1999).

This article contributes to the dialogue about the international influence of the Black Panther Party by exploring the development of a Black Power consciousness among Australian Aborigines. I begin by briefly surveying some of the ways in which Aborigines came to see the relevance of Black Power in their own lives, noting some of the parallels that Aboriginal activists observed between their own sociopolitical situation and that of African Americans. This provides the contextual background for the development of the Australian Black Panther Party. Clemons and Jones (2001) have suggested that overseas Panther groups were typically based around only small core memberships and that there were not always direct connections between the American Panthers and their overseas offshoots (p. 26). This was certainly true for the Australian group and helps to explain their relative anonymity. That the Australian Black Panthers had little success in achieving their objectives, however, leads me to argue that the most lasting influence of the American Panthers lies elsewhere. In the Aboriginal adaptation of their community survival programs, initiatives established by the Black Panther Party to meet the basic needs of the African American community, the influence of the Black Panther

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Party in Australia is both clear and significant and provides an important chapter in the international Black Panther narrative.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

The Australian Black Panther Party was first formed in December 1971 (Townsend, 1971, p. 11). However, Black Panther influences in Australia had much earlier antecedents. From 1968, a number of Aboriginal activists had begun to take an interest in Black Power and the activities of Black Panther Party members. This receptiveness was particularly marked among the younger generation of Aborigines living in Australia's major capital cities. Despite their identification as a dispossessed indigenous people, some of these activists had observed direct parallels between their own situation and that of African Americans. The reasons for this require some explanation.

By the late 1960s, Aborigines in most states were, theoretically, equal members of the wider community. Much discriminatory legislation had been removed from the statute books by this time, and in 1967, a referendum was passed allowing the federal government to take full responsibility for Aboriginal affairs and enabling Aborigines to be counted in the national census (Attwood & Markus, 1997). However, a fuller picture of the true state of Aboriginal citizenship was afforded by statistics, which showed appalling standards of health and high mortality levels for both adults and children. Census statistics for 1966 revealed that Aboriginal children were disproportionately represented among the low achievers and that, by adulthood, the unemployment rate was 7% in a nation with full employment. Of those who did participate in the workforce, 67% were engaged in manual labor (Coombs, 1978, pp. 75-95). In addition, despite their official entitlement to equality, Australian historian Peter Read has noted that there were still places in Australia during the mid-1960s where an Aborigine could not "try on clothes, sit down for a meal, get a haircut, go to secondary school, run for office, join a club, drink in the lounge bar or work in a shop" (Read, 1990, p. 97). Even though most of these instances of dis-

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crimination had no basis in law, White community attitudes toward Aborigines were just as effective an enforcer of social segregation as legalized apartheid.

Like African Americans, these were issues over which Aborigines and their White supporters had been campaigning for decades. The demand for land as an economic and spiritual resource had, of course, been a central concern for indigenous people from the early 19th century. But demands for equality of treatment in education, health and legal representation, the abolition of discriminatory legislation, an end to police harassment, and the simple right to live without racism had also formed a long narrative of protest (see, for example, Attwood, 2003, pp. 131-211; McGregor, 1993).

By the late 1960s, despite the significant gains already made by Aboriginal activists in their quest for civil rights, some were coming to realize that legislative change was no guarantee that their lives would be improved. Here, the parallels with African American activists are clear. African Americans, who dared to believe that the passage of the Civil Rights Bill in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965 would be followed by practical change within their communities, were becoming increasingly frustrated at the slow pace of change (Marable, 1984, p. 85). In Australia, the successful passage of the 1967 referendum had been the outcome of a campaign by Aborigines and White supporters lasting almost a decade. Although its significance was largely symbolic, the hopes of Aborigines across Australia had been raised. Many had expected that the government would take full advantage of this mandate to better the lives of its Aboriginal citizens and that a major increase in funding to Aboriginal programs would follow. In the following months, however, it became clear that the government's overall response was to be one of "business as usual" (Commonwealth of Australia, 1967). As a result, for some activists, the major mood after the referendum was not elation or optimism at their success but frustration and disappointment. Gary Foley, an indigenous activist living in Sydney, was one of these. He recalled that many younger activists such as himself felt a sense of "betrayal and cynicism" after the referendum. When the heightened sense of expectation brought no tangible results, the "non-confrontationist methods

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and tactics of the older generation . . . seemed to amount to nothing." "More effective methods," he concluded, "had to be considered" (Foley, 2001).

Throughout 1968 and into 1969, younger and more impatient Aboriginal voices became increasingly assertive and less compromising. The success of several civil rights campaigns had inspired and prompted them to extend the possibilities of their campaigning. Displaying a much greater degree of militancy, this new breed of activists was often dismissive of the multiracial paradigm of conservative Aboriginal campaigners and their White supporters. Instead, they demanded immediate action that would no longer accommodate White interests. The idea that Aborigines should make the decisions that affected their own lives and organizations was one with a long precedent, and particularly through the second half of the 1960s, there was a growing resentment among some Aborigines toward Whites dominating Aboriginal affairs (Pittock, 1970a). Now, however, the spirit of "Black and White together" that had dominated Aboriginal politics throughout the 1950s and 1960s was fast losing ground to a new mood. Militant campaigners now rejected the ultimate goal of integration. They demanded that Aborigines should be free to determine the direction of their own future as a group and to decide what role, if any, Whites should play in their lives and organizations.

This new mood became commonly known as Black Power. Aborigines had become acquainted with this phrase in the late 1960s through wide exposure to African American activism in newspapers and on television. Watts, Harlem, and Greenwood, MS, were all familiar. But toward the end of the decade, it was also clear that some Aborigines were finding that the ideas and terminology of Black Power resonated with their own life experiences. In mid-1969, Victorian indigenous activist Bruce McGuinness urged all Aborigines to buy a copy of Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton's *Black Power*, one of the foundational texts of Black Power in America. It "should be a prized possession of every Aborigine," he argued. "The content of the book about American Negroes runs almost along identical lines of the Australian Aborigine" (McGuinness, 1969, p. 12). Other activists, hungry for

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information about overseas liberation movements, consumed Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967a) and *Wretched of the Earth* (1967b), Bobby Seale's *Seize the Time* (1970), Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968), and George Jackson's *Soledad Brother* (1970). It was Malcolm X's autobiography and speeches, though, that most captured the imaginations of some of the younger activists, with his uncompromisingly militant rejection of White culture, his pride in being Black, his belief in Black nationhood, and his call for self-defense "by any means necessary" (see, for example, Foley, 2001; Frape, 1969, p. 4).

In reading these theorists, Aborigines were not unaware of the profound differences between Aboriginal culture and that of African America. Black Power activists frequently argued for the need for Aborigines to understand their own history and culture (see, for example, Frizell, 1971; Maza, 1969). Nonetheless, the writings of Black Americans enriched the reflections of Aborigines on their own society, worked to stimulate pride in Aboriginality, and offered useful strategies for combating oppression. At demonstrations and marches, within their organizations, and in numerous speeches, articles, and pamphlets between 1969 and 1972, Aboriginal activists consciously and explicitly deployed aspects of American Black Power. "Whiteness" as "rightness" was overtly rejected. In its place, "Black is beautiful" and "power to the people" became often-heard slogans (e.g., McGuinness, 1970; 1972, p. 4). In 1970, a delegation of Aborigines traveled to Atlanta to participate in a Congress of African People ("Aborigines Visit the US," 1971). In 1972, a National Black Theatre was created, drawing on the philosophy of Barbara Ann Teer's theatre of the same name in Harlem but incorporating elements of traditional indigenous performance (Bostock, 1985). Black berets, clenched Black fists, and "Afro" hairdos became popular symbols of commitment to militant Aboriginal politics. "Uncle Tom" became the name given to those who did not share their vision (Lothian, 2002, p. 135).

Within Aboriginal organizations, self-determination became a fundamental principle. Just as CORE and SNCC in America had ousted Whites from membership in the 1960s, a number of Aboriginal organizations also underwent traumatic upheavals, riven by the

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issue of White involvement in decision making. The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, the major organization representing Aborigines across the country, faced a crisis at its 1970 conference when those favoring indigenous control of the council broke away to form their own organization (Pittock, 1970b). Sydney's multiracial Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs narrowly averted two Black Power takeovers in 1970 and 1971 (Jobson, 1970; "Rowdy Night," 1971). It was Victoria's Aborigines Advancement League, however, where Black Power was most conspicuously felt. In August 1969, militant indigenous members of the organization invited Roosevelt Brown to visit. Brown, chairman of the Caribbean and Latin American Continuation Central Planning Committee of the Black Power Movement, and member of Parliament for the Progressive Labor Party in Bermuda, stayed for only 3 days but provided the catalyst for a revolution ("Roosevelt Brown Meets the Press," 1969). Soon after his departure, those Aborigines aligned with the philosophy of Black Power instigated a challenge to White leadership within the organization. Led by Carmichael and Hamilton's decree that "before a group can enter the open society, it must first close ranks," the league's annual general meeting saw the organization formally give self-determination and Aboriginal control the name of Black Power and adopt it as a guiding principle ("Black Power," 1969).

This was the ideological ground on which radical Aboriginal activists stood in the late 1960s. Passionate about campaigning for their entitlements as indigenous people, particularly land rights, they had nonetheless eagerly embraced aspects of African American Black Power. Black Power promised self-determination, Black pride, Black control, and a refusal to tolerate oppression.

THE AUSTRALIAN BLACK PANTHER PARTY

Although there were many different ways in which Aborigines spoke about Black Power, and many ways in which the philosophy was deployed in Australia, it was Denis Walker who took the term to its most militant ends. Walker was a young activist in his 20s,

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whose attraction to outspoken aggression and predilection for shock tactics, as well as his black clothing, dark sunglasses, and Black Power badges, made him the model of a Black militant. He had grown up in the world of Aboriginal politics, where his mother, Kath Walker, was a tireless campaigner for Aboriginal rights. She herself had been one of the earliest advocates of Black Power in Australia, helping to institute the changes toward self-determination in Aboriginal organizations (Walker, 1969). In December 1971, though, Denis Walker revealed just how far his philosophy of Black Power had diverged from his mother's more moderate position by declaring himself to be the minister for defense of a newly formed Australian Black Panther Party. Along with a small group of "field marshals" that included indigenous activists Paul Coe, Gary Foley, Gary Williams, Billy Craigie, and Sam Watson, they were, he stated, "going to be the vanguard of any revolutionary struggle" (Black Panther Party of Australia, 1972a; Townsend, 1971).

Walker and Watson, along with other Black Panther recruits, had set up headquarters in Brisbane, the capital city of Queensland. Here, throughout the 1960s, Aborigines declared by the government to be in need of assistance were denied civil rights such as the ability to control their own earnings and to move freely within the state. They could be moved against their will from one Aboriginal reserve to another and subjected to pervasive and regimented control by reserve managers. Although 1971 legislative amendments removed some of the most offensive clauses, oppressive control of reserves remained. Other party members such as Foley, Coe, Williams, and Craigie, while locating their tribal lands across Australia, had congregated in Redfern, Sydney. Redfern was a site of intense political activism in the late 1960s. An inner-city neighborhood with a high Aboriginal population, it was home to many committed indigenous activists (Anderson, 1993).

At the first official meeting in January, Walker announced the group's intentions. A commitment to the American Party's revolutionary ideology, along with the right of armed self-defense of the Black community and the eventual "overthrow of the system," would form the backbone of the Australian Party. This would be

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underpinned by a reworking of the American Party's platform of "What We Want" and "What We Believe." As was the case in America, party rules demanded that all Panthers in leadership positions were to read for at least 2 hours each day to "keep abreast of political developments," while political education classes or Black studies courses were to be mandatory for general membership. New recruits were shown films of the American Party and were required to read and discuss Black political theorists, including Fanon and Malcolm X, and the Black Panther Party's own ideologues, Seale, Cleaver, and Carmichael. Soon after their formation, the group was the subject of a feature newspaper article. Here, the article's subtitle ("We have only a small supply of explosives at present and thought we'd save it for something important"), along with the numerous clenched Black fists that crowded their photograph, lent some credibility to Foley's warning that they would be "ready to move in a month, and then all hell will break loose" (Taylor, 1972; Townsend, 1971).

Yet, the demands of the Australian Black Panther Party were not wholly derivative, nor were they irrelevant to the concerns of Australian Aborigines. Although the rules of the Aboriginal Panthers and their program of "What We Want" and "What We Believe" were mostly identical to the American Panthers, they nonetheless expressed Aboriginal political preoccupations as much as they did African American ones. Basic equalities and control of decision making, for instance, were central concerns of both African American and Aboriginal campaigners. Both groups demanded "land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace," as well as an "education that teaches us our true history," and "an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY." Both stated their major political objective to be a plebiscite for "black colonial subjects" to determine "the will of black people as to their national destiny" (Black Panther Party of Australia, 1972c; Foner, 1970, pp. 2-4). In these demands, Black Americans and Black Australians shared a common goal. As such, the Aboriginal adoption of the Panther program did not represent an imported politics but a call for very basic human freedoms.

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And in some respects, the Aboriginal program did differ from the African American one. Point 7, for example, added rape to the crimes of the police force, reflecting the experience of many Black women in Australia through both the 19th and 20th centuries, and Point 3 of the platform, rather than demanding "forty acres and two mules" as compensation for slavery, introduced the concept of land rights. Drawing an analogy between the Holocaust and the attempted genocide of the Australian Aborigines, it called for "restitution for the armed robbery of our land, which is the social, cultural and economic base of any people" (Black Panther Party of Australia, 1972c).

In the end, the Aboriginal Black Panther Party's plans for violent revolution and armed self-defense never came to fruition. Only the most militant of Aborigines had joined the group, and in Australia, where Aborigines formed only 1% of the population, they had neither the large support base nor the financial resources with which to initiate their plans. Instead, this small group of activists concentrated their efforts on verbal threats. Although Walker had claimed that "the system will not listen to words," the party began to issue menacing warnings to the "pigs." "*We know you*," proclaimed the last lines of their first manifesto. "*We know how you pigs operate. We are ready for you*" (Black Panther Party of Australia, 1972a). As the party's minister for defense, Walker issued the most frequent warnings of violence. In particular, he argued for the necessity of armed self-defense of the Aboriginal community. In Australia, where there was no constitutional right to bear arms, this demand represented an even more radical proposition than it did in the American context. The party's *Manifesto Number Two* expanded this argument. "We say," it announced (Black Panther Party of Australia, 1972b), that

> if the pigs are not forced to respect our legal rights then we advocate that we be allowed to arm ourselves to defend ourselves and the Black Community against the naked undisguised aggressive violence of the exploitationist system and the fascist pigs who are armed and payed [*sic*] to protect it. (p. 1)

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If the Aboriginal Panthers did not achieve their stated goals, how are we to understand their significance? In my view, White writers have insufficiently acknowledged the immense anger within the Aboriginal community during the late 1960s. In particular, the attractions of the Black Panther Party for Aborigines is an issue that remains largely unaddressed. Overall, however, I would argue that for most of the Aboriginal Panthers, this attraction was centered not on a commitment to the revolutionary ideology of the American Panthers but on the extraordinary visual and rhetorical power that they commanded. Most Aborigines felt their race much more keenly than their class, and the Aboriginal Panthers had, despite their adoption of the American group's platform and program, blatantly dismissed Marxism as "White" politics on other occasions, useful only for those who had reached the socioeconomic levels of poor Whites ("Anti-Racism Action Plans," 1972). For Aborigines as a national group, Black Power was an overt rejection of the lack of power in their lives—politically, economically, socially, and ideologically. The different programs proposed by Black Power activists were about the ways in which they could regain opportunities to decide the course of their own futures and to counteract the feeling of defenselessness in the face of White institutions.

Here, the importance attached to weapons within the Black Panther Party is significant. Guns, after all, are not mere instruments of killing—American Panthers repeatedly insisted that their own carrying of firearms was a political tool. Guns symbolized the very thing that they lacked—an unmistakable and formidable source of power over Whites. By strapping on a gun, American Panthers were transformed. No longer victims, no longer subservient to the pigs and the oppressive power structure, they could go forth to defend their community and "organize the people" (Foner, 1970, pp. xvi-xvii; Heath, 1976, pp. 40-42). This ability of guns to symbolically convey the depths of Black anger and hatred of White institutions was not lost on Aboriginal activists and explains, I believe, the insistence with which Aboriginal Panthers spoke about the right of Aborigines to arm themselves.

What little analysis of the Aboriginal Panthers that does exist has tended to merely state the fact of their threats of violence and to

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describe their program as an "almost wholly derivative" politics. Ted Robert Gurr (1983) has thus claimed that the Australian Black Panther Party was a complete failure. The group's demands, he argues, "expressed in the language of the American Black Panthers, rang hollow in the Australian context" (pp. 359-360). But despite Gurr's claim, it would be a mistake to conclude that Panther influences in Australia were limited to an admiration for their call to arms and the mouthing of violent threats. The Black Panther Party did offer militant activists a vehicle for expressing their anger and served an important function for activists in counteracting their sense of powerlessness. But the legacy of the Black Panther Party in Australia has been much greater than that, as the next section of this article shows.

COMMUNITY SURVIVAL PROGRAMS

By the time of the formation of the Australian Black Panther Party, indigenous activists Gary Foley, Paul Coe, Gary Williams, and many other radical campaigners had been living in Redfern, Sydney, for several years. Despite the importance this group of activists attached to land rights, one of their most pressing problems was their frequent encounters with the police. This was what hit most directly at their personal sense of injustice and victimization. In 1969, more than 2 years before the formation of the Aboriginal Black Panthers, these activists decided to "seize the time." This was where they decided they could attend to their most immediate needs.

All agreed that police treatment amounted to an official campaign of intimidation, harassment, and high-level surveillance (Eggleston, 1970, pp. 17-81; Lucas, 1995, pp. 44-59). Gary Foley has often told a story about his first encounter with this style of policing. In about 1968, he claims, he was forced to admit to having had sex with a White acquaintance. After the confession had been beaten out of him, the girl was beaten by police officers for "hanging around with boongs."[1] The incredulity that Foley felt about this experience is palpable in the recounting: "I didn't even know the

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girl's name" (Foley, 1988a, p. 108; de Brito, 1972). This incident, according to many Aborigines living in Redfern at the time, was common police behavior. Most often related is the story of how police would wait outside bars such as the Empress Hotel (the "Big E") in Redfern on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday evenings. "It was like a taxi rank," Foley (1988a) claimed,

> They'd come in and beat the shit out of everyone inside, arbitrarily arrest anyone who objected, and when the wagons were full they'd drive off and lock people up on trumped-up charges. . . . You couldn't walk from the Empress Hotel up past Redfern Station without getting ambushed by fucking mad coppers. (p. 108)

Other activists have confirmed that there was an unofficial curfew operating around the streets of Redfern after 10 p.m. If you were on the streets after then, recalled activist Chicka Dixon, "brother, you're taking a chance" (Tatz & McConnochie, 1975, p. 36).

It was Coe, Williams, and Foley who eventually took decisive action. Coe, Foley claimed, "started trying to convince me and Williams that we could do something about [police harassment]." Coe had begun encouraging them to read political literature and directed Foley to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Malcolm X, 1965). Eventually, Foley claimed, they read the "whole gamut of Black American political literature" (Foley, 1998a, p. 108). For Foley, Malcolm X was not only his introduction to African America but also his introduction to radical Aboriginal politics. Malcolm, Foley recalls, "transformed me and blew my mind." What he and other writers were saying, Foley (1988a) believed,

> could have been written about me and other blackfellas around Redfern. . . . One day Coe started talking seriously about how we were going to sort out these policemen. Coe referred us to one of the Black Panther books and to a program which the Panthers had started in Oakland which they called The Pig Patrol. He said, "This is a great idea. Read this." (p. 108)

These activists were intrigued by the Black Panther Party's initiatives in dealing with police brutality. They were impressed with

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the way Panthers had traveled Black ghettoes armed with guns, tape recorders, and law books, searching for signs of police harassment and ready to ensure that proper procedure was followed. In Redfern, activists realized that the idea of monitoring police activity could be easily adapted for their own situation. Although it was illegal to carry guns, it was decided that they could at least carry notebooks and pencils. Thus armed, some activists entered the Big E one Saturday evening in 1969. "As the pigs began to do their nightly act we started writing down everything that they were doing. We wrote down their numbers, their van numbers, who they were arresting," Foley (1988a, p. 109) recalls. After several months, this small group of activists had amassed a vast amount of incriminating evidence. In particular, accusations were leveled at the notorious New South Wales "riot squad." Aborigines claimed that this squad was using Redfern as a training ground—it was certainly not their normal operating area ("The Twenty-One Police Squad," 1973).

While the pig patrols were in operation around the Redfern bars, Aboriginal activists continued to read about Black Panther Party community survival projects—their free clothing, political education classes, free food programs, news service, as well as their free breakfast program for children, the People's Free Medical Research Health Clinic, and the free legal service that drew on the voluntary support of sympathetic lawyers. Coe had recently begun a law degree at the University of New South Wales. Along with Foley and Williams, he approached Professor Hal Wootten, the dean of law, for assistance in setting up a shop-front legal aid center along the lines of those run by the Panthers and other community groups in America. After Wootten had read through the notes the pig patrols had made about police treatment of Aborigines, and after he had expressed disbelief that such police brutality was a common occurrence in Sydney, he agreed to accompany the three to the Big E one night to see for himself. As Foley tells it, "If we could have paid the police to put on a performance they couldn't have done better than they did that night. They were marvelous. . . . At one point Wootten wanted to intervene. We told him: 'No, just sit there and shut up and watch. We don't want you getting pinched.'" As

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a result, Foley claimed, Wootten wanted to help (Foley, 1988a, p. 109).

What followed was a series of meetings between Wootten, Coe, Williams, Foley, and other young activists. They were, Wootten noted, an "impressive group," intensely proud of their Aboriginality and determined to immediately solve the social problems that beset their community. The outcome of these meetings was that only a short time later, in October 1970, the Aboriginal Legal Service of New South Wales was officially inaugurated (Chisholm, 1971, p. 26). Although some multiracial organizations had been arranging legal representation for Aboriginal clients on an ad hoc basis for many years, the Aboriginal Legal Service was the first organization in that state to be conceived, established, and controlled by Aborigines since the 1930s. Within weeks of its establishment, an overwhelming number of White barristers and solicitors had volunteered their skills, Aborigines from the service held discussions with Redfern police, and the federal government had offered funding that enabled the employment of a solicitor, a secretary, and an Aboriginal field officer. The organization also initiated a temporary "observer service" in Redfern hotels, a variation of the pig patrols that used the services not of young radicals but of people from less likely sources. Barristers, professors, and the like would, thought Wootten, "be reasonably hard . . . to impeach in the case of a conflict of evidence." This particular move, according to Wootten, caused a "revolution" in the behavior of the local police, who not only came "far less frequently" to the bars but also dropped the Redfern curfew (Wootten, 1973, pp. 172-173).

The success of the New South Wales Aboriginal Legal Service soon inspired other Aborigines to tackle their own community policing and legal problems. The South Australian Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement was established in November 1971. The Victorian Legal Service was established in June 1972, again with the support of law academics. Queensland and Western Australia also established services in 1972 and there was an Aboriginal Legal Service in every state and territory by 1974 (Eggleston, 1977, pp. 353-355).

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If the establishment of the Aboriginal Legal Service grew out of police oppression on the streets of Redfern, then the Aboriginal Medical Service was a reaction to an overwhelming lack of interest on the part of Whites once those Aborigines were removed from the public gaze. Several similar stories circulate around the beginnings of the medical service. Gordon Briscoe, an inaugural council member of the Aboriginal Legal Service, recalls going to a Redfern house in June 1971 on business related to the service. Inside, he found the Aboriginal client so ill that he was unable to speak, his impoverished family unable to afford medical attention. Another version of this story suggests that the man sat for hours at a Sydney hospital waiting for treatment and was finally refused because of his inability to pay the fee (Sykes, 1992, p. 106). Foley's recollection is that the man refused to go to the hospital at all, preferring to die than to be treated "like scum" by the White medical staff (Pisarski, 1992, p. 19). All of these stories are possible. All are bound up with race and Aboriginal poverty and disadvantage in inner Sydney and continue to be familiar to many of its Aboriginal residents. Whichever of these versions is accurate, Briscoe's resulting disillusionment and outrage was such that within only a few weeks, activists had held meetings with medical practitioners, and the first Aboriginal Medical Service had opened for business a few doors down from the legal service in Redfern (Briscoe, 1972).

With initial government funds and a grant from Freedom from Hunger, this service set out to provide basic health care as well as to develop programs to counteract the large numbers of patients in Redfern who had health problems caused by malnutrition. This included Aboriginal children who, even in the inner city of a first-world country, were malnourished and suffering from extraordinarily high incidences of eye diseases, respiratory infections, ear infections, skin diseases, parasite infestations, and anemia (Lickiss, 1971). These programs included variations of the Black Panther Party's "Feed the People" and "Free Breakfast for Children" programs. Volunteers distributed free fruit and vegetables to Aboriginal families in Sydney, and the Breakfast for Children program, run in conjunction with a local chapel, provided Aboriginal schoolchildren with breakfast on school mornings where otherwise

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they might have eaten nothing. With a renovated warehouse being donated by a wealthy White businessman in August 1972, this program survived on little more than donations of food and volunteer labor. Eventually, in January 1973, the program evolved into an Aboriginal preschool ("The Breakfast Program," 1972). By 1974, similar Aboriginal health services were operating in Victoria and Western Australia (Nathan, 1980, p. 1; Reid, 1978, pp. 53-55).

Despite their critical importance for Aboriginal activists, few nonindigenous historians have considered the beginnings of these Aboriginal-controlled organizations. Even less consideration has been given to the connections between these institutions and the philosophy of Black Power or the ways in which they drew on the example of the Black Panther Party survival programs in America. Foley and other indigenous activists readily acknowledge that both the medical and legal services owed their origins to the Black Panther Party and they argue that the establishment of these services was the "birth of the modern day Aboriginal political movement." They point to the ways in which, although the programs were "stolen from the Black Panthers in Oakland," they grew out of Aboriginal community activism and reflected the needs of this community (Pisarski, 1992).

White historian Heather Goodall, however, has sought to downplay the existence of a significant Black Panther Party influence among these activists. Instead, her emphasis is on the way in which these Aborigines "conceptualized their situation, even in urban areas, in terms of their position as a dispossessed and colonized people." Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, she argues, was as widely read as Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (Goodall, 1996, pp. 335-336). Goodall is correct to point out that the medical and legal services were a response to the local and unique conditions of the Aboriginal community, but this is not to argue that there could not have been a significant Black Panther influence on these organizations as well. As far as Redfern activists in the late 1960s and early 1970s were concerned, the parallels between the American Black Panther Party activities and the needs of their own communities were unmistakable. According to activists and others, including Wootten, police treatment and the poor

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state of Aboriginal health in this inner Sydney Aboriginal community rivaled that of any African American slum, and it was thus "only natural," argued Foley (1988a), that activists would be attracted to Black Power methods in America (p. 108). And like the American Panthers who were attempting to speak to the needs of their own ghettoes, activists believed that solutions to the problems of the Aboriginal community needed to be solved within and by that community. Whereas Redfern activists did see themselves as a dispossessed and colonized indigenous people, and whereas issues of land were central to this, they also saw themselves as part of a more general worldwide liberation movement and as part of a racially oppressed minority. Dee Brown, Eldridge Cleaver, Bobby Seale, George Jackson, Angela Davis, Fanon, Marx, Mao, and Malcolm X all had potentially useful lessons to teach, and activists drew on all of these.

Clearly, the Aboriginal Legal and Medical Services developed in very different ways from that envisaged by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale for their community survival programs. From the outset, these services were not informed by a proletarian consciousness, even though some of those involved were Marxists. White involvement in both services was seen as a necessity, given that there were no Aboriginal doctors or lawyers in Australia at this time. There was, however, no commitment to forging alliances with poor Whites, nor any suggestion that Aboriginal oppression arose from anything other than racism.

Yet, despite one legal academic's claim that militancy had no role within the legal service and that its very existence implied a commitment to "accepting the basic political and legal structure of the society," this understanding found little support among the Aboriginal creators of the services (Eggleston, 1974). In some ways, those involved in the services from the beginning did see them as revolutionary, representing an important step toward Aboriginal autonomy and the granting of land rights. Roberta Sykes, a Black activist living in Redfern, argued that both the legal and medical services were "Black Power" organizations, where Aborigines worked toward "the power of self-destiny—the power of self-determination" (Smith & Sykes, 1974). For Foley, Gordon

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Briscoe, and other activists, the medical and legal services were to be considered as part of the continuing resistance to the "invasion and subsequent mass destruction of Koori people, their society and their land" (Briscoe, 1978, p. 14; Foley, 1991, p. 4). Paul Coe, the activist who originally saw the way in which Black Panther programs could be adapted for Aborigines, saw the legal service as having a quite definite role. It was, Coe argued in 1975,

> an interim step leading towards a Black nation. I believe, and always have believed, that the Aboriginal people have never ever relinquished their sovereignty or their rights to the lands that we now know as Australia, that we have always been and still are, a nation within a nation—that we are a sovereign people.

CONCLUSION

Many years later, indigenous activists continue to point to the late 1960s and early 1970s as moments of dynamic activity that provided Aboriginal Australia with a "psychological boost." In these years, Foley argued, Aborigines proved to themselves that they could "stand up and fight." They could, "to all intents and purposes, beat the system. They could cope with it and counter it" (Foley, 1988a, p. 109; Foley, 1988b, p. 30). To a significant extent, the initiatives in the Redfern community that drove this positive experience of activism owed their genesis to the Black Panther community survival projects in America. The Aboriginal Legal and Medical Services by no means represented a systematic adoption of the Black Panther Party program. Nonetheless, I argue, they embodied the spirit of these programs, described by Black Panther Party Chairman Bobby Seale (1970) as a means to "seize our right to live, and . . . seize our right to survive" (p. 473). From their small beginnings, these services have grown to become a major, Australia-wide network of government-funded agencies. They continue to offer indigenous people community-appropriate health care and legal assistance and enable Aboriginal people to have a degree of control over these aspects of their lives.

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Scholarship that seeks to document the ways in which the Black Panther Party inspired activists throughout the world has typically looked to those international groups that adopted the Panthers' name or their platform. The Aboriginal Medical and Legal Services, however, at least hint at the possibility that the global role of the Black Panther Party is much bigger than previously thought. They are a far more subtle manifestation of this influence. But in Australia, at least, this is what has endured, and this is what represents the Black Panther's importance.

NOTE

1. *Boong* is a derogatory term for an Australian Aborigine.

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