

SUZANNE COPE'S BOOK SPOTLIGHTS THE UNSUNG HEROES WHO FED THE BLACK PANTHER MOVEMENT

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POWER HUNGRY



WOMEN OF THE **BLACK PANTHER PARTY**
AND **FREEDOM SUMMER** AND
THEIR FIGHT TO FEED A MOVEMENT

S U Z A N N E C O P E

PHOTO BY SUZANNE COPE

By John B. Thomas

The *Linewaiters' Gazette* recently sat down with Coop member and author Suzanne Cope to discuss her recent book, *POWER HUNGRY: Women of the Black Panther Party and Freedom Summer and Their Fight to Feed a Movement* (Chicago Review Press). The timely book touches on themes of food, community, and social justice through the story of two Black women civil rights activists: Cleo Silvers and Aylene Quin. Although they are from Mississippi and New York City respectively, their stories are united through the use of food as a means to support the voting rights and civil rights movements of the 1960s. What follows is a lightly edited conversation.

Your book tells the story of the fight for civil rights through food. What inspired you to write this story?

I was very interested in stories of women using food as a tool for social and political change—even more so in the wake of the 2016 election as I saw other food writers strive to find ways that they could support causes they were passionate about. I thought there had to be more than hosting benefit dinners or sending pizza to protestors—not that those aren't important as well! So I started researching ways that others had used food as a tool for change around the world and over centuries. I homed in on research for a book with international stories from the last century, but the feedback I received was to center it on American stories. *Power Hungry* was the result.



Black Panther Party Free Breakfast Program and Liberation School at All Saints Catholic Church Harlem, New York, Spring 1969. Photo by Bev Grant.

How did you come across the two central figures in the book, Aylene Quin and Cleo Slivers?

I was initially interested in Mama Quin’s story from seeing her name pop up in multiple accounts of Freedom Summer in 1964. But only a few of the same details were ever shared about her work. I thought she was certainly someone whose work I wanted to know more about and whose story I wanted to amplify. But I was worried I wouldn’t be able to find out enough to write an entire book. I began to consider in what ways the Black Panther Party might have a thematically linked story to complement Mama Quin’s. I found Cleo when I was also looking for women leaders of the Black Panther Party about whom a little was written—enough to get started with—but whose story seemed to beg for deeper research. I reached out to her and she was so lovely and generous with her time. We hit it off, and the book came together! My agent, Monika Woods, and I came up with the parallel narrative and it ended up reflecting common themes so well, and even intersecting in ways I wouldn’t have initially imagined!



PHOTO BY BEV GRANT, COURTESY OSMOS

Community programs like the Free Breakfast Program and Liberation School at All Saints Catholic Church Harlem, New York, were a central component of the Black Panther's political platform, though largely ignored within racist media depictions of the organization. Photo by Bev Grant.

In much of the popular imagination, the Black Panther movement is not known for its work on community support programs, especially its programs to feed poor children and families. Could you tell us more about the history of some of these programs, and what they achieved?

The reason so little is widely known about these programs is because the media largely ignored or misrepresented them, mostly due to racist reasons and FBI pressure to perpetuate the narrative around the Black Panthers as dangerous and lawless. What they accomplished, even with law enforcement continually undermining their efforts, is amazing. Besides the political work they are best known for, they fed so many children breakfast for years, donated groceries to families and individuals, helped te-

nants claim their apartments from delinquent landlords and established revolutionary community health care, among many other initiatives. They also demonstrated and taught those they helped that food (and housing and health care) was a right. They modeled mutual aid in communities, and they continued to support each other and change society even after the Panthers as a group dissipated. They are widely credited with pushing the government to enact the federal free breakfast program. Their approach to community health care is still considered highly effective and a model for progressive nursing.

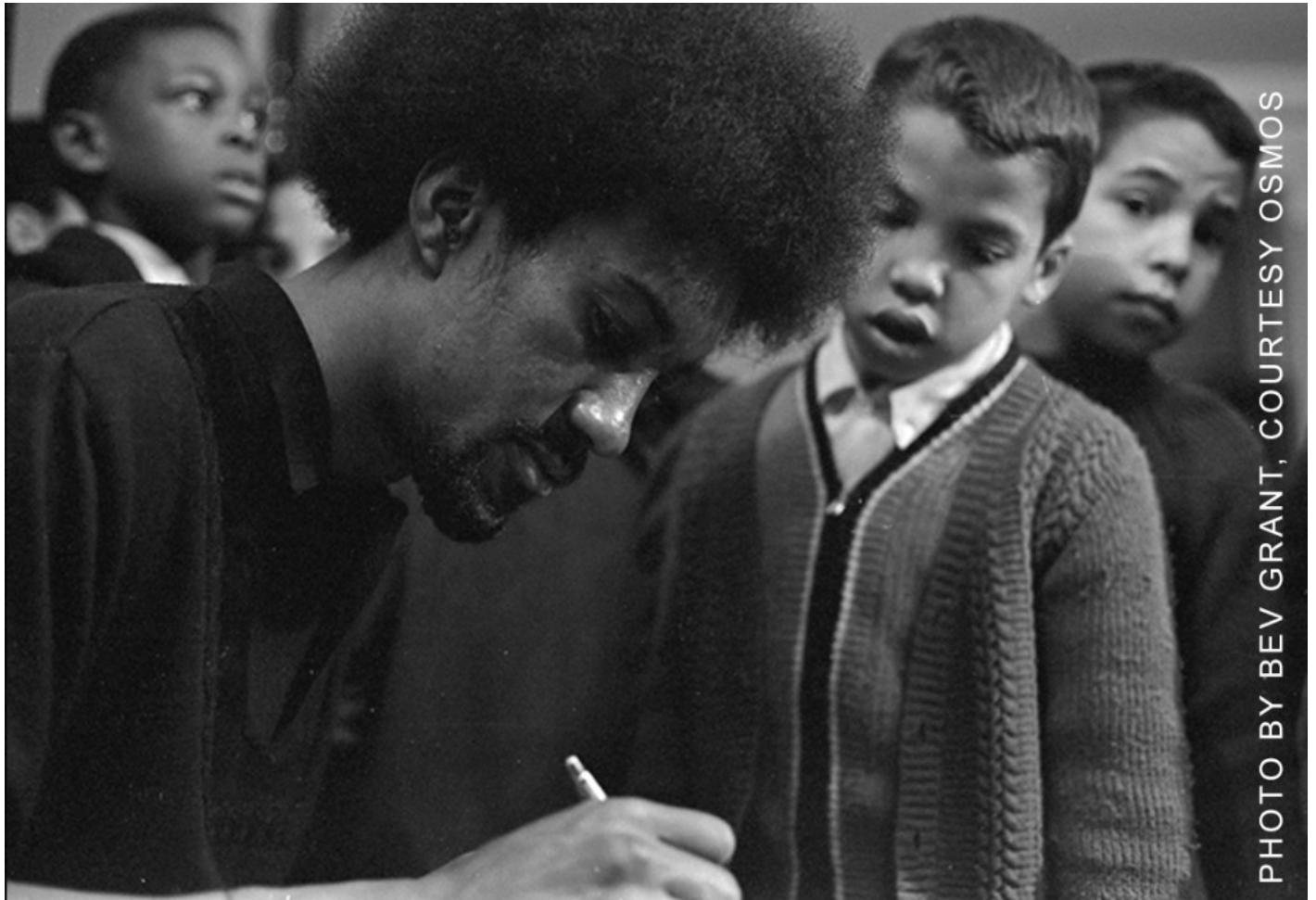
You call Aylene and Cleo “unsung heroes” in your book. Why do you think we haven’t heard the stories of Aylene and Cleo, and the broader community support work carried out by the Black Panther movement?

One reason discussed in the book is because women, and especially Black women, were for so long not taken seriously as leaders. (This is something I think and hope is starting to change today.) I borrow history and Africana studies scholar Dr. Francoise Hamlin’s concept of activist mothering that shows how traditional “women’s work” of feeding and nurturing, for example, was not seen as leadership, despite the many ways it supported the Black Independence movement. Women have long been left out of the narrative of what a leader looks like and what a leader does. But their work was so incredibly important. And Black women were leaders! They comprised at least two-thirds of the Black Panther Party membership and led so many initiatives! And again, the Black Panthers were not fairly represented in the media around these programs, so we have heard relatively little about their survival program efforts and the women who led them.

What lessons do you think your book offers the Coop as models of good food through cooperation?

Certainly the idea of mutual aid—how to support all members who are part of this community, in whatever way we can. For example, we can ask: are there needy members who need help having their shifts covered? It can also inspire us to question how

we think about food. These women show us that it is a right, not a privilege. We should ask ourselves: How can we reframe the paradigm around feeding people so it is not just transactional, but represents our true beliefs?



Black Panther Party Free Breakfast Program and Liberation School at All Saints Catholic Church Harlem, New York, Spring 1969. Photo by Bev Grant.

What else would you like readers, and specifically Coop members, to take away from your research?

To reassess what we think we know about the power of food to help create change; to reframe our thinking around Black women leaders (and female BIPOC leaders in general) with regards to what a leader is and does; to reinvest in community organizing and mutual aid. I hope readers and Coop members will ask how we, as a community, should look to these women to guide us to help those in our community who are in need.



PHOTO BY KURT ARNOLD

Suzanne Cope, Coop member, Gazette Development Editor, and author of *Power Hungry: Women of the Black Panther Party and Freedom Summer and Their Fight to Feed a Movement*. Photo by Kurt Arnold.

John B. Thomas is a consultant working on environmental policy. He has been a Coop member since 2012.



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