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Orissa Arend, *Showdown in Desire: The Black Panthers Take a Stand in New Orleans* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2009, \$29.95). Pp. xxxiii + 304. ISBN 978 1 55728 896 7.

The historiography of the Black Panther Party (BPP) has recently been dominated by studies of chapters that operated outside the party's Oakland headquarters. Orissa Arend contributes to this trend by piecing together the tale of the BPP's New Orleans, Louisiana chapter during 1970 and 1971. Her research challenges the suggestion of Adam Fairclough's classic study (*Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915–1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 427) of the Louisiana civil rights struggle that the BPP had little impact in the Crescent City. What separates her account from many BPP local histories is that Arend does not restrict her sources to Panther sympathizers but has also interviewed the former mayor of New Orleans, its police superintendent, and a number of police officers and local organizers.

The BPP set up shop in the decrepit Desire housing project, to the east of the city center, in 1970. Desire represented the worst of 1960s urban planning, with facilities for its low-income families being rudimentary at best. The BPP established a small number of social programs in an effort both to uplift the local community and to channel its political sensibilities into revolutionary fervor. Unsurprisingly, this was met with fierce opposition from the white power structure, which peaked with a police shootout in September 1970. Two months later, the tension almost erupted into another round of violence between the police, local residents – who by now were supporting the BPP in no small numbers – and the BPP. Thankfully, common sense prevailed. Arend's narrative focusses on these two events and their immediate fallout in the community and their long-term impact on BPP activists. Particular emphasis is placed on the life of Robert King Wilkerson, a New Orleans Panther who was imprisoned and later became one of the “Angola Three,” who turns out to be an inspirational presence in the book.

Arend points out in her preface that her aim in constructing the book was to record, and not analyse, the events in New Orleans (xxx–xxxiii). This has led her to be sympathetic towards her oral sources, and she occasionally avoids asking tough questions. An interview with former police superintendent Clarence Giarusso is particularly frustrating: when discussing a November 1970 incident in which a police raid was enabled by an officer disguised as a priest, Giarusso professed no memory of the incident and claimed that he rejected such underhand tactics. Arend had evidence that he gave the order for the raid personally but, regrettably, did not reveal this to him during the interview. One is left wondering what might have transpired had she done so and whether other interviewees were similarly let off the hook.

Arend wishes for her book to aid understanding of the New Orleans BPP and to facilitate communication between former Panthers and their enemies (that she is a psychotherapist by trade perhaps explains this). On these terms, the book is a great success. Her emphasis on linking the story of 1970 to the participants' current lives places *Showdown in Desire* amongst the reconciliation narratives of recent BPP autobiographies that seek to enable former Panthers to come to terms with the lifelong

consequences of involvement in the party. Yet where most BPP local histories explicitly link the BPP with 1960s African American protest, *Showdown in Desire* largely eschews such contextualization. Readers wishing to discover how the BPP related to other organizing initiatives in New Orleans, such as CORE's local operation or the Free Southern Theater's work in Desire, will need to look elsewhere. Similarly, the BPP's social programs receive short shrift. While the Desire free-breakfast program appears to have been successful, Arend does not examine it in great depth. Although she argues forcefully that the BPP was a force for good in the local community, this inattention to the BPP's social activities places the organization in a stance defined by the threat and occasional reality of violent action.

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