

The Diary of Sandra Washington: A Lens into the World of the Philadelphia Black
Panthers

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The “unessay” project is about the Philadelphia chapter of the Black Panther Party during its most active years. The project is composed of five diary entries from the perspective of Sandra Washington, a 14-15-year-old girl from North Philadelphia during the years 1969-1971. Her mother is Beverly Washington, a schoolteacher from Delaware. Her father is Walter Washington, a Philadelphia native that works for SEPTA. Sandra’s best friend is Robert, the youngest of four children whose parents from the South. The two become interested in the Black Panthers after a rally that took place on May 1st, 1969, which is where the story begins. Sandra, an aspiring writer, is fascinated with the Party because of their uncompromising commitment to social justice and fighting for equality.

The information about Black Panther events and programs came mostly from a mix of primary and secondary sources. One of the articles was “Rapping with Richard Reginald Schell”, written by Dr. Omari L. Dyson, who has written a lot of literature about the Black Panther Party (BPP). Its purpose is to highlight the role that the Philadelphia branch of the BPP had on its community from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. Richard Schell was the Defense Captain for the Philadelphia chapter of the BPP and one of its founding members. Dyson also wrote an academic article entitled “Brotherly Love Could Kill You: The Philadelphia Branch of the Black Panther Party”. This article provided an overview of the history of the Philadelphia branch, including sources from newspaper articles, government documents, and reflections from former Panther members. Another important source used for this project was *We Want Freedom: A Life in the Black Panther Party* by Mumia Abu-Jamal, one of the founding members of the Philadelphia branch. The book is partially an analytic summary of the BPP and partially a memoir of his experiences. These three sources inspired most of the central topics in the diary entries because they contain the most information about the Philadelphia branch. The project also features references to columns and articles from *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and one from *The Philadelphia Tribune* to feature important dates and events in the city within the given timeframe.

There were initial concerns about finding sufficient articles specifically about the Philadelphia chapter to write the diary entries. The Philadelphia chapter was similar to other chapters across the country, but also created initiatives that were specific to them.

Due to COINTELPRO, it is difficult to find opinions of the Philadelphia Panthers during the late 1960s and early 1970s apart from what is in the newspapers. Kathleen Cleaver, a former Panther, mentioned in the introduction of Abu-Jamal's book that some books and newspapers that talk about the Panthers are possibly "corrupted" by those that infiltrated the Party and worked for the FBI at the time. In addition to that, she states: "...the Black Panther Party exploded across the country from a local Oakland formation into a national organization during 1968 and I saw that those of us involved have no time to record the process carefully. No one provided chapter and verse on how it happened and who did what" (p. xvi). This is especially true for the Philadelphia chapter, being smaller compared to its counterparts in New York, Oakland, and Chicago. Fortunately, the secondary sources used for these diary entries described Panther activities were well supported with sources and respected the legacy of the organization.

This project hopes to shed light on an important part of Philadelphia's history and celebrate important community programs developed by its Panthers.

May 1, 1969

Today there was a rally¹ near the school at the State Building for a group called the Black Panthers. I had heard of them before from seeing stuff on the television or reading the newspaper. They always sounded interesting to me because they speak up about how unfair America is. I wanted to skip class to go, but I knew momma would beat me, so I stayed at school. A lot of people at school have been talking about it though and it sounded exciting. Robert went and he told me all about it! There were guys in the Panther uniform with the berets and leather jackets. He also bought me a copy of their newspaper so I could read it and it amazing. It talks about Black people rising up against our oppressors and defending ourselves. Ever since Dr. King died, I've been wondering if Black people should be peaceful. In Philly, Black people are constantly harassed and beat up by White people, especially the cops. We should be able to stand up for ourselves and do something rather than just take it all the time. Momma doesn't agree with this and thinks it's better if we all take the high road. I didn't say anything back because I knew it would start an argument, but we shouldn't have to always take the high road, especially when we haven't done anything wrong.

Robert said he knows people that are thinking of joining the Panthers, so we were thinking about doing it too. His brother James doesn't think the Panthers will bring any change, but I don't agree with him. The Panthers have already been starting a movement in other cities like New York and Chicago, so I think Philly will be the next place. Robert's other brother Michael knows people who are Panthers. He said he wanted to join, but he's at Howard University and that's too close to the feds, so he offers silent support. If I were at Howard, I'd be a

Panther anyway to stick it to the man. Robert said that he heard the Panthers are planning to have meetings at our school, so we can learn more about what they do. I'm so excited! I'm going to get some rest now.

Yours Truly,
Sandra

September 2, 1969

The new school year is about to start and I'm kinda excited. I'll finally be in my sophomore year high school. I hope that I'll have better teachers than last year and that I also hope that I will read interesting books. In my ninth grade English class, we read *Anne of the Green Gables* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and they were super boring. I feel like we only get to read stories about White people adventures and nothing about anyone else. I did like *The Phantom Tollbooth* though. I'm not sure if teachers let us read books about Black people in high school, but I hope it could happen one day. Maybe I'll write one someday and teachers all over the country will make students write long papers about it.

I spent most of the summer with Robert and other volunteers from the Black Panthers or at work in the library. Once me and Robert decided to start volunteering for the Panthers, we got really excited and wanted to know everything about the group. Most days, Robert would bring by newspapers that he went around the city handing out and I would try to leave them around the library without anyone noticing so people could read them. Sometimes after work, we would go to a bookstore in Center City and read about the Party. Sometimes we would even sit in on the political education classes¹, where they talked about stuff going on in the neighborhood, like gangs and police brutality. I like going to those because I usually don't get to talk about stuff like that with my family. My parents often wait to talk about violence or other serious stuff after dinner when I'm doing homework in my room or when I'm getting ready for bed. They don't realize that I listen in on their conversations sometimes.

Momma has been trying to convince daddy to stop encouraging my Black Panther activities. He thinks that they're doing good

for the neighborhood and likes that I'm trying to make things better. He's been in Philly all his life and has seen nothing changing for Black people. On Saturdays, I've been volunteering at the Free Breakfast Program in South Philly. The part that stinks is that I have to wake up really early to catch the bus. Robert doesn't like mornings, so he only came with me the first time. I like working with the kids and singing song about Black Power². I've met a lot of cool people at the Breakfast Program, who have started to teach me a little about communism. A lot of people have been talking about Cuba and how Fidel Castro is changing the rules of the government to make sure the people have free healthcare and education. I wish that could happen here in America. People in America make Castro seem so bad but he doesn't seem that bad to me. He's just looking out for the people.

Momma has been worried that me being in the Party will get me into trouble. I've tried to convince her that's not true, but she won't change her mind. Today, she read a column in the paper³ about five junior Panthers in Michigan that got arrested. She doesn't want a target on my back, especially since the police will use any excuse to give Black people trouble. Robert's parents agree with momma cause they're from the South and left to avoid anything happening to their family. I get why she is being protective of me, but I wish she would understand that I need to be a part of this group. Helping the Black Panthers has been the most exciting thing that has ever happened to me and I don't want that to end.

Yours Truly,
Sandra

February 12, 1970

Ever since Fred Hampton died, Robert has been thinking about becoming a lawyer. He said he realized this at the memorial at Church of the Advocate for Fred Hampton and Mark Clark¹. He realized how fed up he's been with Black people having to deal with injustice. He's been quite excited about wanting to be a lawyer because he never really knew what he wanted to be growing up. It's nice seeing him looking forward to something because he's been pretty down lately. His brother James' birthday was chosen in the lottery for the draft. Even though James always bothers him, they're the youngest kids in his family so they are pretty close. James has been putting on a brave face, but we all know he's scared shitless to go to Vietnam. The Panthers have been thinking about organizing a rally against the draft, since a lot of our brothers are fighting in Vietnam, but still aren't free in their own country. Even Dr. King spoke out against the war before he was killed, yet nothing has changed.

I still want to be a writer. There should be more people writing about racism and how it effects everyday lives. A lot of people still don't understand why the Panthers fight for what they do. They're not just people who carry guns and fight the police. They want free education and access to basic necessities. Being a part of the Panthers has shown me just how much the government doesn't help Black people. I've been a community worker² for the Panthers, which means that I help them run some events and programs when I can. My momma won't let me be a full-on Panther or even a Panther-in-Training, so this is the most I can do. After school, I've been helping the Panthers at their health clinic in North Philly³, keeping track of their medical supplies. I don't really like needles, so I'm not over

there often, but I like to help. I spend most of my time at the People's Free Library⁴ because they have many books written by Black authors. I luckily got my hands on a copy of Malcolm X's autobiography. I've wanted to read this book for a while now, but the last copy that was at school got stolen and hasn't been replaced yet. His beliefs inspired the Panthers, so I figured it would be good. Plus, daddy loves Malcolm X, so we talk about his opinions before dinner. I've also started to read some Mao Zedong because they mention his book a lot at the Political Education classes³. The Panthers that run the classes say that Mao's teachings can help us expand our consciousness and understand the situation Black people are in now. Some of the stuff is complicated, so I don't understand it all, but it's fun to listen to everyone's ideas. I've noticed in history class at school that we only learn about democracy and nothing about other forms of government. I think the school only wants us to know about democracy so we can think it's the only way to run the country. I never really thought about these things before the Panthers, so I am really glad that I'm learning new things.

I have to go and write a book report on *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I actually kinda like this book. Atticus Finch seems alright.

Yours Truly,
Sandra

September 2, 1970

The past couple of days has been really tough for the Party. The North Philly office on Colombia Ave was raided by police on Sunday morning, as well as the other two offices. There was a shootout between the Panthers and the pigs, one of them died, and 14 Panthers were arrested¹. The whole thing is so messed up. We've heard that the pigs were abusing our brothers in custody and everyone has been really worried about getting them out, especially because the Philly Panthers are hosting a convention² in two days! Everyone in the neighborhood has been a little shook up, so momma wants me to stop volunteering for the Panthers. Unlike last time, daddy agrees with her. The police have been hard on Panthers not just in Philly, but all over the country. He said that if the tension dies down in a couple of weeks, I might be allowed to join back. But with all of the violence against people associated with the Party over the last year, I'm not sure if I want to join back.

At first, I was really excited to be a part of something bigger than myself, doing something that really mattered in my community. I felt like we were making a real change. But I don't know if I am ready to die for the cause. Before dying felt like a possibility far away from my mind, but now I see how real it is. I only started to think about this once I talked to Robert. He's also worried about something happening to him. Last Saturday, he went over to the office on Colombia Ave and was seriously thinking about joining full time and being an official Panther. But since this incident happened, he's started to rethink that. His mom almost got his sister to come down from Detroit to talk him out of it, but she's been busy at the hospital. He was telling me that he was not sure what would happen to him if he got arrested. He's had a few encounters with

pigs before but lucky for him nothing really happened, just typical harassment stuff. But being in a shootout would be terrifying. And that's what made him realize how much he wanted to live. And then I started to think about what would happen if he died or was put in jail. Robert has always been one of my best friends, so I don't know what I would do without him. I didn't tell him this, but I was deep into thought about what life would be without him and started to get choked up. We sat in silence for a long while and I rested my head on his shoulder. Robert and I usually do not do this sort of thing, but we were both so scared and sad that it did not matter.

I feel pretty terrible about all of this because I love the Panthers. I feel selfish for wanting to stop my involvement. I want to always fight for freedom and equality with my brothers and sisters. But at what cost can I continue?

I still really want to go to the convention because people from all over the country are coming to Philly, even Huey himself! But my parents are worried that Rizzo is gonna send every police officer in Philly to be at the convention and that something will go down. It would be worth the risk, but I don't wanna disobey both of my parents.

Yours Truly,
Sandra

March 25, 1971

My parents let me continue my work with the Panthers after the raid situation, but a lot has happened between then and now. I have been doing less stuff with the Panthers since they closed their office in North Philly¹. Now, they mainly plan in West Philly. My momma thinks that the neighborhood was safer when the Panthers were around. Now that they're gone, some of the gangs have been more active, which is part of why I'm not doing as much with the Panthers². I'm not allowed to be out too late, so I don't get caught in the middle of a gang fight. That's what happened to that one girl a while back³. She was around my age too. It was really sad. I've also been busier with school. I joined the school newspaper so I could write more. And when I'm not doing that, I'm helping Robert study so he can get his grades up since he's still thinking about becoming a lawyer. His family is pretty happy that he stopped doing Panther stuff last year because now they have one less person to worry about. James left for Vietnam not too long ago and he just wrote to Robert saying that he's okay.

The Panthers have also started to change since Reggie, one of our leaders, left. A lot of leaders left when he did, and we even stopped having the Breakfast Programs¹. I miss them a lot. They weren't that much older than us⁴ and for the most part were easy to get along with. Some of them moved to different parts of the country and others just stopped being Panthers all together. The Philly Panthers also have been running out of money¹ and getting less people to donate. Apparently, bailing Panthers out costs a lot of money and they barely had money to begin with. They also had to fix the offices after raids, which also costs money because the pigs would completely trash the place. The Panthers have been planning to create an after-school program

and a program to help protect the elderly¹. When I am helping the Panthers, it's usually at the clothing drive¹ cause it's on the weekends. Momma and daddy help me convince some of our neighbors to donate their old clothes, but people don't usually have much. At first, I was surprised that my momma would help me with this, but since she's a teacher, she sees a lot of her kids without coats and jackets, especially in the winter. She often tries to get the parents of her students to go to the clothing drive cause it's the only way she's allowed to help them out.

I don't know if I'm gonna be a part of the Panthers for much longer. The vibe of the group has changed, and word has gone around that the feds are snooping in Panther business all over the country⁴. More Panthers are worried about being followed or having people listen in on their phone conversations. I'm not a full-on Panther, but it's possible that the feds are going to spy on me too. I told Robert about this and he thinks that I shouldn't risk anything happening to me and that I should leave the party. I think that he's right, but I also still want to help my community and the Panthers is the only way I know how. There are other groups that help out the community, but they don't all have the same values that the Panthers do. Part of me knows that the Panthers wouldn't last forever and even if they did, I'm not sure if I could be in it forever with everything that's going on. I think I'm just trying to hold onto it for as long as I can before it's gone for good. It's been almost two years since this all started, and I feel like I've really changed. But I can't be naïve and ignore the truth, which is that I'll probably have to leave the Panthers soon before anything major happens. Realizing all of this has just made me sad. I think I'm going to read so I can get my mind off of this. Daddy got me a copy of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya

Angelou and it's my new favorite book. It's a pretty serious book, but it's so good!

Yours Truly,
Sandra

Endnote Citations

May 1, 1969

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February 12, 1970

1. "Rites Held for Slain Panthers" *The Philadelphia Inquirer Public Ledger (1934-1969)*, December 15, 1969, 6.
2. Abu-Jamal, Mumia. "A Panther's Life", chapter 8 in *We want freedom: A life in the Black Panther Party* (South End Press, 2004).
3. Dyson, Omari L. "Rapping with Richard Reginald Schell." *Journal of African American Studies* 21, no. 1 (2017): 120-121.
4. Dyson, Omari L., Kevin L. Brooks, and Judson L. Jeffries. "'Brotherly Love Can Kill You': The Philadelphia Branch of the Black Panther Party." *Comrades: A local history of the Black Panther Party* 214 (2007): 223.

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1. "A Week of Violence: The Facts and the Meaning," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 6, 1970.
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3. Clay Dillon, "Gang Members Told to Stop Killings Here," *The Philadelphia Tribune*, November 11, 1969, 1.
4. Abu-Jamal, Mumia. "A Panther's Life", chapter 8 in *We want freedom: A life in the Black Panther Party* (South End Press, 2004).