Oral History Center
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Ericka Huggins

# AN ORAL HISTORY WITH ERICKA HUGGINS

Interviews conducted by
Fiona Thompson
in 2007


2010

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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Ericka Huggins

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**Interview History**

This series of four interviews with Ericka Huggins was conducted in the fall of 2007. They cover her life from her childhood through the late 1970s, and focus primarily on her work with the Black Panther Party.

Ericka Huggins has been an activist for her entire adult life – longer considering that she attended the March on Washington on her own at age 15. A few years later she was dropping out of college to join the Black Panther Party in Los Angeles, where she quickly became a leader within the Party's chapter there. In 1969, Ericka's husband John Huggins was shot dead by members of the US Organization, a Black Nationalist group. Tensions between the Black Panther Party and US were later shown to have been fomented by an FBI counterintelligence campaign. Shortly after John's death, Ericka traveled with their infant daughter to John's family's home in New Haven. In Connecticut she helped to found a new Party chapter, but within a few months she found herself a defendant (along with Party Chairman Bobby Seale) in an internationally notorious murder trial. When the trial ended and the judge dropped all charges against her and Seale, Ericka moved to Oakland, California where she continued her work, at first at the Party newspaper, and then at the Party's Oakland Community School, where she was the director for almost ten years.

In 1976, Huggins became both the first woman and the first African-American to be appointed to the Alameda County Board of Education, an agency that, among other things, administers educational programs for incarcerated youth. Along with activism, spirituality has been a consistent thread through Ericka's life. She taught herself to meditate while in prison, and since 1979 she has been a practitioner of Siddha Yoga. Ericka is the mother of three children and also has two grandchildren. Although her more recent work was not covered in this interview, she has continued her commitment to education and service, working for non-profit organizations such as the Shanti Project in San Francisco and for various schools. She has also taught meditation to children and to prisoners. She currently teaches Women's Studies at California State University East Bay.

I met Ericka after writing about her on my blog (bayradical.blogspot.com) which focuses on the history of radical activism in the Bay Area. I'm not an academic or a professional in the history field, but rather I have a lay-person's fascination with history and a particular interest in the Black Panther Party. (In the interest of disclosing my background and perspectives I should also explain that I'm a white woman, 33 years old, a lesbian, a mom, and I grew up here in Oakland).

Ericka and I did four interviews, each lasting about two hours. In the first interview, Ericka discussed her memories of a childhood in segregated Washington DC, her family, the 1963 March on Washington, her experience in the first class of women to attend Lincoln University, her husband John Huggins, and their trip together to Los Angeles to join the Black Panther Party.

The second interview covered John's death, her own dramatic arrest the night that John was killed, and her trip to New Haven, Connecticut where he was buried. She talked briefly about starting the Connecticut chapter of the Party, and then about the death of Alex Rackley in New Haven, the charges of conspiracy and murder that were filed against her in relation to Rackley's death, and the long-term impact of his death on her life.

In the third interview Ericka remembered teaching herself to meditate and organizing prisoners while in Niantic Women's Prison. She described civil-rights attorneys Charles Garry and Catherine Roraback who defended her and Bobby Seale during their high-profile trial, her move to Oakland, and her time running the Oakland Community School from the mid-70s through the early 1980s.

The fourth and final interview dealt mainly with Huey Newton and his increasing instability and violence due to intense pressure from the FBI's counterintelligence program along with his worsening drug addiction. Ericka also talked about her introduction to her spiritual teacher, Swami Muktananda.

Although I read a number of books in preparation for these interviews, my main references for this project were Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power*, Donald Freed's *Agony in New Haven: Murder in the Model City* by Paul Bass and Douglas Rae, *Agents of Repression* by Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, and Ericka's own book of poetry, co-written with Huey Newton, *Insights and Poems*. The website www.itsabouttimebpp.com provided original party newspaper clippings along with photos which I hadn't found elsewhere, specifically of the Oakland Community School.

Ericka also made some of her personal records available to me. Her partner Lisbet Tellefsen has organized a large binder of relevant news clippings, photos, and articles from both mainstream sources and underground news sources, including the Black Panther Party Newspaper. This collection, which includes articles written by Ericka herself, was very helpful for me in forming my questions for the interview.

I want to specifically note how open Ericka was throughout the interview process. She spoke willingly on topics that must still be quite raw, and spoke both with pride and with honest self-awareness about the work that has carried her through her life so far. She is a great storyteller, often taking on the accents of various characters she describes, and laughing or crying openly while sharing stories that are sometimes funny and sometimes heartbreaking. I confess I was inclined to like Ericka before I met her, but after meeting her and hearing this much of her story, I feel tremendous admiration for her and her life's work. I'm honored to have had a chance to be a part of sharing her story.

Fiona Thomson
12/07

**Interview 1: Fall 2007 [undated]**

Audio File 1

01-00:00:00
Thomson: Alright, Ericka Huggins, can you start by telling me where you're from?

1-00:00:21
Huggins: You mean where was I born?

Thomson: Yes.

1-00:00:28
Huggins: I was born in Washington, D.C. on January 5th in 1948, and that's almost sixty years ago.

Thomson: And what was D.C. like in the fifties and sixties?

1-00:00:42
Huggins: It was a pretty African-American place to be. However, there was quite the class stratification. I remember we used to go to Easter egg hunts at the White House every Easter.

Thomson: You did, huh?

1-00:01:04
Huggins: Oh yeah, we'd roll eggs and hunt eggs and the President would come and stand – who was the president at that time in the fifties? Eisenhower?

Thomson: I'm not sure.

1-00:01:17
Huggins: I think Eisenhower. Each president, whichever ones they were, would come on to the balcony and wave at all of us little kiddies. I remember that very distinctly, I can still see it, a very beautiful lawn.

Very beautiful place, the White House, it's very beautiful. Kind of – constipated on the inside, in terms of the furnishings, but it's a beautiful mansion. Then we would ride back down 16th Street over to Southeast Washington where I lived and – I lived at 55th and East Capitol Street; there's a picture of it here, the house I lived in – and on the way back from the White House I would notice going through Northwest and sometimes Southwest, that people were living on the street. Well, nobody was living on the street around the White House. No one seemed to be lacking, or hungry, or poorly clothed.

We also went to the Christmas tree lighting in downtown around the White House, the Capitol area, and in the winter time I would notice the same thing.

Easter is different; it was spring so I wasn't worried about people being cold and freezing. But I always felt such concern for people that I would see. So when I got old enough to figure out there was something going on that didn't quite make sense I asked my mother why there were there these people who had nothing and all these who had lots of something, and how did that work. She tried to explain it to me to the best of her ability: that there were people who have a lot and don't want to share it, and there are people who have nothing and don't know how to get it. And there was a history behind that. What I did notice early on because there was such—I mean, 98% African American at that time, because of "urban renewal." We called it, when we got to high school "urban renewal, negro removal." But up to that point of all the gentrification, I rarely ever saw European American people in the city unless it was around the Capitol, the White House, and the government buildings. You didn't see them anywhere else.

Thomson: Hmm – that's interesting.

1-00:04:08
Huggins: I didn't even talk to white people growing up because there were none to talk to except the very poor white kids, and this was disturbing too, who lived on the Maryland border. Southeast Washington borders some small little towns in Maryland. Very poor people, poor just like the people who lived up the hill from me in the projects, exact same – lack of clothing, looked hungry, this facial affect that was kind of despairing in adults, and kind of flat in the children. So those were the only white kids I ever saw, and they spit on us and called us "niggers". So I didn't know, I didn't know, that was how I grew up. Then when I got to high school, because I went to high school in Northwest, I got to meet and be around an international group of students. Not in my high school, however, but in the city.

Thomson: But your high school was all black?

1-00:05:24
Huggins: Primarily.

Thomson: Because I was reading, I think Brown vs. Board of Education was like—

1-00:05:29
Huggins: '54.

Thomson: '54, which was right when you were starting school right?

1-00:05:33
Huggins: Yes.

Thomson: But your high school was still segregated, essentially.

1-00:05:39
Huggins: It was essentially segregated, and I didn't realize that until I began to explore how it all works from a more adult perspective. My mother grew up in North Carolina on a farm, so she wasn't able to explain all the intertwining forces at play.

Thomson: How did your parents talk to you about class and race? Or was that talked about?

1-00:06:09
Huggins: Yes! There's a story I'll never forget hearing. A friend of mine, Dr. Joy Leary, told me a story and she also speaks about it. That in – and this is my way of getting to the answer to your question, if you don't mind.

Thomson: No.

1-00:06:34
Huggins: She said that routinely, the slave who was a mother would teach her daughter how to receive the slave master's sexual invasion. That, rather than have the child die fighting, she would show the child how to lie still and receive the slave master and how not to fight, or complain or scream out, out of protection for her child. Now that's very heartbreaking isn't it? Can you imagine?

Thomson: No.

1-00:07:15
Huggins: But that is the type of love that slave mothers had to have, because as you know, the law said the child's condition was that of the mother, so if the mother was a slave, the child was a slave at birth. That kind of protection of a child got passed on generation after generation without intervention, because it was a survival mechanism. It was not healthy, it was totally dysfunctional, but it was the way slaves survived, and you could imagine that this created a hyper-vigilance in the slaves and their descendants. My mother came out of that hyper-vigilance.

She's 89 now, and it was only, I think, six years ago that she ever sat down to dinner with white people. I was married to a man who is the father of my 20-year-old, and he and his sister invited us all over to her home in Bethesda, Maryland. My mother was still living in D.C. at the time, it was Christmas and I had gone to visit her. She was afraid to go. I mean really afraid, nervous about it, and I couldn't figure out why, because I hang with everybody. It didn't even dawn on me what was her reason? Did she not like Anne? She'd not met Anne before, so I thought she was fearful of meeting a new person, because my mother tends to be shy in a certain way in social settings, but that wasn't it. Finally she said, "Sugar! I've never ate with white people!" And I sat down in my chair and I thought about, "My – goodness! What must this be like for her?" Well, we talked about it for about a half an hour, and she wanted to go because in talking to Anne on the phone, though she'd never met her,

she liked her. Anne is just so loveable and friendly and hugs everybody and she's just a sweetheart, and she loved my ex-husband, he's like a son to her. As a matter of fact there's a funny, funny, funny, funny story. Don't forget to ask me about what my mother said when I told her I was going to marry Coulter.

Thomson: We'll get there.

1-00:10:08

Huggins: So my mother, she really had a difficult time, but got there and had the best time of her life. She still remembers. Her memory is lapsed, and she still remembers every moment of that dinner. She said to me afterwards, "Ericka they're just people like us." And I said, "Of course Mama, they're just people, like us." She said, "You know with my history, it's just so hard for me to trust." She grew up in the Deep South where the Ku Klux Klan – she was born in 1918 – they burned crosses everywhere.

She went to school—you know that the Eastman Kodak Company, probably what's providing our cameras today, Eastman Kodak Company… because of Jim Crow and obviously segregation, children in the Deep South couldn't even go near a school that white kids went to. So Eastman Kodak funded a small school, which at the time was a junior-high/high school, for my mother and her peers. It was one room. It's a full high school now, but it was one room, and that was where she went to school. One room, all those grades. And so the only white people she ever saw in her growing up, and before she moved to Washington, D.C. as well, in her 20's, were people who did not have her best interest in mind. Because she was lighter skinned than her sisters and brother however, she could skirt a lot of abuse that maybe another brother, or even her father, could not. She was quite aware of that. So she was hyper-vigilant. She taught me to regard every human being individually. And so did my father.

My father was quite the individualist. It was almost like a life path for him to be "the individual." He grew up in what I would call a middle class family in Washington, D.C. What do I mean by middle class? The Jenkins's owned property that after the slaves were freed they acquired over time. The Jenkins family acquired property over time in Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. The owning of the property allowed for them to have a greater income and live in Northwest Washington which, depending upon where you were there, you didn't see lots of poor people. Of course, my grandfather liked to be in the heart of everything so where he lived – the house that I called grand-papa's house – was at 15th and T Street. Down one road you could get to Howard University and down another road you could get to the area where all the bars and the prostitutes and the heroin dealers were.

Thomson: So he was right at the nexus.

1-00:13:53

Huggins: Yeah, and his block, however, were these beautiful three story houses. There's nothing like those houses in California, they're brick and really beautiful houses and he owned one. He also owned an apartment building not far away and another building a few minutes away. So being property owners what I mean by middle class, I don't mean that they had fantastic jobs and huge savings and so on. Middle income is all relative depending upon family history and so on.

My mother and my father really encouraged all of us to treat every human being with respect and we did, so when we got spat on by the little kids across the border of Maryland and D.C. who went to the same little corner-store we did to buy a soda or whatever, we were shocked. What is wrong with them? And I would come home, sometimes in tears, sometimes just pissed off. "Why? Why are they doing this?" Because I still didn't get that there were people who behaved in that way. I thought she meant the Ku Klux Klan and sort of, certain officials. Because she told me about the officials that didn't allow for school [de]segregation in North Carolina and Bull Connor in the South and the police that would bring their dogs out and hose people down with fire hoses. She told us about those things. But I didn't think she meant little children like us. Then she explained to me that parents teach their children those things and she said, "I can't teach you like that. But I can't let you go out there and think that it's not so". And that goes back to that history I told you about with the slave mother and the child. She had to tell me how to move in this world that wasn't particularly just. Of course it gave me knowledge that I needed to maneuver in the world.

I was really happy when I went to Northwest – well I was a happy kid even though the circumstances outside my house were not the most pleasant from what I could see. Because I could tell that the police operated in a different way in my neighborhood than they did around the Capitol and in downtown where we went shopping. My sister and I loved to shop so we would get on the bus and go to downtown and shop, just for the fun of it. The police didn't follow people around. Police didn't stop people. It was very interesting to watch. I did a lot of watching. My sister did a lot of talking, I did a lot of watching. But inside my house was crazy also, because my father was an alcoholic and the man that I just described to you: who wanted me to be very independent. So grew up with all kinds of paradox. Just, paradox everywhere. Which is what prompted me to start writing poetry when I was about ten or eleven. The bathroom in my house was the only sane place to go so I would go in there because it was OK to lock the door in the bathroom, so I would go in there with my little notebook and write poems. The paper, could receive whatever I had to say without a big fight.

Thomson: Did you show your poetry to anybody?

1-00:17:57
Huggins: Not at that age. No, there was nobody to show it to. I told my mother I wrote. I told my mother everything, up to a point, and I talked to my sister a lot. My sister knew that I wrote poetry but she didn't quite understand. She was three years younger than me and my brother, four years younger than me, so I was the big sister. She really looked up to me but she didn't understand what I would— I went to her one day, I'll never forget, when I was about eleven and I said, "I have this question Kyra!" And she said, "What is it?" And I said, "My question is: who am I?" She said "You're Ericka, stupid!" [Laughs]. I said "NO! Who am I? Who am I really?" And she said, "I don't know!" And then I just kept the question, you know. [Laughs].

Thomson: That introspection has stayed with you, they didn't get that out of you.

1-00:19:00
Huggins: Yeah it did, it was there. I can remember at age eight having that same question, but I never spoke about it. My sister and I shared a bedroom so sometimes I would try to talk with her, but it was kind of useless because she wasn't in that frame then, but also in her teenage, she wasn't in that frame. And the circumstances inside my house and outside my house made me very introspective.

Thomson: Going back for a second, you were talking about what you told your mom and what you didn't. I remember reading that you had to sneak out to go to the March on Washington.

1-00:19:36
Huggins: I didn't have to sneak but I had to tell her that I was going anyway.

Thomson: Oh.

1-00:19:41
Huggins: It's a funny story. In hindsight only. [laughs] I went to her and I said, "I'm going to the March on Washington."

She will tell you, if you were to ask her, "Who is your daughter Ericka?" She would say, "She's very strong-willed. She will nod and understand exactly what you're telling her, and she'll do what she wants anyway." And what she meant was, when I felt a strong pull to do something, I would do it. I don't care what the odds were. If I really believed – because I was also very obedient – if I really believed that what I was going to do would hurt or harm her or anybody else or myself I wouldn't do it. So quite often I lived sort of a held existence. But with the March on Washington, when I heard about it, I felt called to go. And there've been these places in my life where it's been that way, many, many places, and that was one of them.

So I went to her and I said, "I'm going," she said, "You know, that's no place for a fifteen year old," and I said, "Why not?" She said, "There'll be all those

people there, the police will be there. It's unsafe for you. I know it's a big day." And I said, "Well you're not going." She said, "I can't." I can't remember why she couldn't go, I can't remember, because often she went to – she was a curious enough person and an open-minded enough person – but I think there was something going on at home. And I knew my father wouldn't let her go. He was anti-social. And my sister and brother, I could never consider taking them with me like that. I knew that she wasn't going to agree to that.

I said, "But mama, you don't want me to go, you're afraid for me, but you taught me to love black people." And she said, "I know I did." "And you taught me to stand up for black people." She said, "I know I did, but I didn't mean you. I didn't mean I want you to do it." I said, "Well I am, and I'm going." And I went to my father and I told him I was going, and he was shocked and just was quiet, I don't know why. I told my mother and I walked out and I got on the bus and I went by myself.

Thomson: What do you think they imagined happening?

1-00:22:28

Huggins: They were afraid that I was going to be hurt by some persons in power, but I knew from what I had heard in the news and read about it that there were such great numbers of people coming, somehow in my heart I thought I'd be protected by numbers. I don't know why I didn't ask my friends down the street, my friends up the street to go with me. It was like this solo thing I knew I had to do. I just thought of that. Why didn't I ask Angela who lived at 91 55th Street, or Charlotte that lived at 77, or Jackie that lived next door? We hung together in the neighborhood all the time and partied together. But I just wanted to go on my own. So I assumed that there was – it was my singular destiny at that point in time in my life, I was supposed to do it alone.

I got there and it was the most amazing, amazing thing. It felt like millions of people to me, I'm sure there weren't millions of people but I was young and I'd never seen that many people gathered together in any one place, and especially not brown people! All gathered together like that. And not only that, white people were there. I can't remember if there were people of other cultures there. I can't remember because D.C. was very black and white, there wasn't any in between, which is another reason why I love California: all of the cultural diversity is so beautiful. But it was a long time before D.C. became diverse like it is now.

I got there and I was amazed at first, and I remember finding this – it was flat ground we were standing on – and I remember finding this mound of dirt. I guess there had been some construction going on before we got there—to level the field and put in portable toilets and all kinds of things to make it happen. So there's this huge mound of dirt and I remember standing on top of it. I was always a tall girl, but I wanted vantage, I wanted to see over the sea

of people, and I remember standing there on that mound by myself and watching speech after speech. I'm a people watcher so I kept watching the people. And they came in every conceivable mode of transportation, including on foot. I mean, there were people who actually walked from Maryland. Now, there're parts of Maryland that are very close by, but there were people who had walked for a whole day to get there. And people came in church buses, and yellow buses, and flat bed trucks and dump trucks. You could tell they were from Virginia and the Carolinas. And then there were people who came across the country in cars of every condition, size, and type. I'm sure there were people who flew in too, but I think, to that point, I'd only been on an airplane once so I don't remember thinking about that. But I kept thinking, "How did all these people get here? What drew them here? Did Martin Luther King draw them here?" Because again, I tell you, I was introspective. I was asking myself, "Well who am I in relationship to all this? What part do I want to play?" Because all the speeches were about uplifting humanity, not allowing for suffering and violence, because Martin Luther King's philosophy was non-violent.

I remembered understanding exactly what he meant, because we live in a violent country, why meet that violence with violence? And I do remember after that, wondering: How do you respond to a violent German shepherd? Because those were the dogs used against people. How do you stand there and allow for that? How do you allow for people being beaten for no reason – because my sister Kyra and I were constantly breaking up – "wrongful arrests" is what they're called under the law. We were constantly stopping as we would walk through the neighborhood and yelling at police for grabbing somebody on foot.

Thomson: You would yell at the police?

1-00:27:46

Huggins: Yeah, Kyra particularly, she was very forceful and fearless. Where I would talk about it, she would fight, sometimes physically. So sometimes I had to protect her, pull her back away from something that seemed like it was going to bring her greater harm than good. She had this ability to become quite angry and lose touch with reality about the situation she was in – she was very fearless.

I remember this one day walking to the DGS; there were many of them all over DC. That's an acronym for the District Grocery Store. Everybody knows the district grocery store. Here in Oakland the kids name them by the color they are: the blue store, the yellow store, the pink store, the Chinese store the Arab store. Same thing: DGS, they exist everywhere in every poor community and they never had quite enough of anything, but my mother would send us there to get condensed milk, because that's what she put in her coffee [laughs]. And then on the corner from there was the district carryout where you could get a bag of greasy french fries for 15 cents. So we were on one of

our DGS expeditions, and this man was walking down the street, and he was teeter-tottering a little bit, like he had too much to drink. It was daytime, and we were like, I don't know, eleven and fourteen, some age range like that. And the police jumped out of his car and grabbed the guy and started beating him. We were like, "No you won't! No!" It wasn't like we thought about it, it was like a response: "That's not right!" But we didn't yet understand the power that was behind that police officer. We saw him as an individually crazy guy, which he was of course, but again, paradox right? I never saw kind police officers to that point, not once – I cannot even remember once. Since that time, of course I have.

Thomson: Right. And I assume all the police officers you saw were white? Or were there black police?

1-00:30:19

Huggins: There were black and white, but mostly white because that's how the District of Columbia operated. It couldn't get state-hood, it wasn't a city, it was a district. And it was like a slave enclave. As I got to be older and looked back at it, particularly in my first year of college, I thought, "Well, okay, the White House is like a big house on a plantation, and there were all these parts of the plantation." It just didn't feel like a real place to live to me at that time, as a young girl and then as a young woman, and since that time other people have described it that way as well. It's just an odd, odd city. And it's way improved since then in a way.

At any rate, Kyra yelled and went over to the police officer and said, "Leave that man alone, he's not doing anything to you." She saw it kind of like a fight. And the police officer told her to back off because it wasn't her business. Then I could see that it was going to turn into something harmful to her. I pulled her away, or asked her to come away, and then the guy – my memory is – that the police officer started talking to the guy rather than beating him and we stood there and watched for a little while, and then we went on. It was instances like that that stayed with me.

So when I saw and heard Martin Luther King and all the other wonderful speakers—The ones that stood out to me were Harry Belafonte, Martin Luther King, Coretta Scott King, and Lena Horne. Those stood out to me. I can't remember the other speakers. I was standing there on that little mound, that day, and I made a vow to serve humanity for the rest of my life.

I got back home and I told my mother that I had made that vow and she said, "Well that's good, now you know you went without my permission?" I said, "Yes I did. It wasn't like that," is all I could tell her, "It wasn't that I could this time, do what you wanted me to do." Then the same thing occurred when I was on the Lincoln University campus, read the article about Huey Newton and called my mother and told her, in my junior year of college, that I was leaving to join the Black Panther Party. It was the same pull. Because there

wasn't anything in me that wanted to hurt my mother but I kept hurting her. Paradox – that I did not have that intention. But she had another idea about how her children's life should be. She didn't want to protect us from the truth. We lived right in the middle of it, and not only, in our house was totally crazy. So she wasn't trying to shelter us, but of course, no mother wants harm to come to their child. There are some harmful events and circumstances out there, so for me to tell her that I was going to join the Black Panther Party must have been horribly scary for her. And that I was leaving at that moment, and I was leaving from New York City and driving across the country but I did not stop in Washington, DC, I just talked to her on the phone – I'm sure that hurt her, she made it known later in life. But that was what I felt called to do. It left my mother sad, and my sister and brother were very resentful because they had felt like I had abandoned them because I was kind of the glue in the dysfunctional family so if I was gone what were they all going to do? But I had to go. I had to go. And the reason I didn't stop in DC is that I couldn't bear one more big argument or fight. I still don't do well in arguments. I can be in them, but I don't do well. But that's another story for another day.

Thomson: You talked about going to the March on Washington, you talked about deciding to go join the Party and that seems like part of a really linear journey, but I think for a lot of people, they would see a big difference between those two because of the difference in philosophy.

1-00:35:31
Huggins: Which lot of people?

Thomson: [laughs] Well, for myself, even, I see a difference between a purely non-violent philosophy and a self-defense philosophy. So I'm curious about your – Looking through this book, seeing your yearbook page and talking about JFK being one of your heroes.

1-00:35:52
Huggins: Yeah! He was one of my heroes.

Thomson: Right, which I can understand. So I'm curious about the transformation in those couple years between high school and college. Whether you felt it as a transformation or not, I don't know.

1-00:36:05
Huggins: I didn't, I felt as if it was a continuum. Let me use an example that might bring it true to you. Okay, so: we're lesbian women. Now there might have been a time when…choose anybody in your surroundings who's a lesbian woman also. There might have been a time when she was less verbal, vocal, visible about who she is. There might have been a time when she was just lesbian and had a lover, and dressed like she always did, whatever way that was and then there came a time when she became active. Maybe there even became a time when she didn't hang out with men anymore, at all,

whatsoever. Maybe there even came a time when she was directly opposed to men and anything that had to do with them. That's on a continuum. It's not like a straight line, it's like a swirl or something, it could even be a spiral, it could be a circle. Because eventually, that woman, when she reaches spiritual maturity, (I hope I don't need to explain what I mean by spiritual maturity,) when she reaches spiritual maturity she'll let go of some of that need to separate (is how I call it) and come back not to where she started necessarily, but come back to something that's in more balance. I'm making an analogy of the sort here, does that make sense to you?

Thomson: I follow you totally.

1-00:38:09

Huggins: Okay. So I loved Martin Luther King and still do. And then I remembered hearing about Malcolm X and I was like, "Whoa, he has a point, what are we waiting for?" Everybody told Martin, "Wait." Remember the book called *Why We Can't Wait*? Martin didn't write it, and neither did Malcolm. I love that title, *Why We Can't Wait*.

Everybody in the government used Martin Luther King. I'm using the word "used" in a particular way, and he was smart enough to be aware of his usefulness. It was part of his philosophy to listen to everyone and to take every side of the story, and he did, but meanwhile, he suffered when people were beaten and harmed and hosed and so on. He doubted his philosophy. There were people who were not non-violent, they didn't care that he was non-violent, they killed, they maimed, they lynched, they did all these things.

Now here I was, when I went to college I was – let's see, I graduated high school in '65 – I was a very young entering college person. I might have been 17 at the most, 16 and a half, something. I was like "Oh no, no, no, no, no! I am not turning the other cheek." I watched my mother do that – I am not turning the other cheek. I saw this all the time in Washington, D.C. I'm not going to pick a fight, but if somebody harms me, comes at me with harm in their heart, I am not going to stand there and let them beat me down. I don't get it." I never was a separatist of any kind, but I do remember being very angry about the history when I began to read it in books. See, its one thing to see it in Washington, D.C. on the street but then you read the history… I remember reading slave narratives and going, "Okay, how did this happen?" It's like the day the little kids spit on us and called us nigger and I went home and asked, "Okay, what's wrong with those children?" There was no logical explanation for it happening. What got me is that it continued to happen. "How does it stop?" I kept asking myself.

Women ask, we ask ourselves this too, when we hear statistics like, one in every four girls, one in every five boys is sexually abused. Every fifteen seconds or something ridiculous like that a woman is being beaten or raped. Come on. Then you ask yourself, "Why does this continue?" Is there

something wrong with women? No. Is there something wrong with men in general? What is it?" But if you don't know there's not something wrong with either side of the equation of human beings, then you assign blame.

It seemed to me that everywhere I looked in the world, I could find oppressive forces, especially oppressing poor people. Then I remember the pecking order in my house. We were little kids, and my mother was a smaller human being than my father. My father was angry. What caused him to be angry? At one point I didn't even care what caused him to be angry. Later I cared, but I didn't care then, I just wanted him to stop beating my mother. But you can't raise people in an environment of violence, and then say, "Turn the other cheek."

Martin did a great job though, he brought all kinds of craziness to balance in his philosophy of Ahimsa, and Gandhi, who I love, love, love, and studied, did the same thing – brought India together! When that craziness was happening between the Hindu and the Muslim people. His fast almost killed him, but brought India back to life in a certain way. Of course, as soon as Gandhi wasn't there, they went back to their behavior. Why? Is there something inherently wrong with human beings? I don't think so. But I do think we have systemic forces in place, so I started thinking about what is this systemic disease. I wouldn't have called it back then at age 17, "systemic disease," but I was thinking about it like, "What the hell is going on? Why? Slavery doesn't exist anymore as such." (And let me say this, just for the record: I didn't believe for one moment that the emancipation proclamation freed any slaves, no. But I did know that it was against the law now to have a slave. By the sixties and seventies there were still slaves in pockets and places, you know, the world is an amazing place.) However, I didn't believe that just turning the other cheek was going to work.

I did believe that Black people needed to be less violent with one another because we bought into a slave mentality, a tribal warring that came with us in the boats. We were actually put—our ancestors who were African— we were actually placed together on the boats as differing, sometimes conflicting tribes, to keep us from bonding. Then slavery was another disassociation from one another of a big sort. A very powerful system, slavery, it did what it intended to do. Then that carried forward, and so we didn't know how to treat one another. We still don't know how to talk to one another and be with one another and trust one another because we were trained in a different way, so that was one thing. But I didn't understand what to do, I didn't know how I would respond if someone came at me with a gun or a hose or a dog. I didn't think I could not fight back. I didn't know why I wouldn't. In my heart of hearts, [Tape stops].

1-00:45:26

Huggins: There's an essential non-violence about me that always has been there: my first response is not to fight. It was philosophical and political dilemma for

me. However, then I joined the Black Student Congress. There was no such thing as a Black Student Union by then because the Black Panther Party hadn't created it [laughs]. But there was a Black Student Congress on the Lincoln campus and I joined it, and there were a whole bunch of funny stories about that too, because they didn't want to let me join because my hair didn't have enough curls. And they were all men.

Thomson: Back up a second, I read, I think in Elaine Brown's book, she says you were in the first class of women?

1-00:46:20
Huggins: Oh yeah, I was in the first class of women at Lincoln University.

Thomson: So how many women were there?

1-00:46:25
Huggins: Fifteen. [laughs] It was an all male school.

Thomson: Talk about that [laughs].

1-00:46:31
Huggins: Oh my God, I'll never forget that.

The funniest story about going to Lincoln is that I had transferred from Cheyney State Teacher's College; we called it Cheyney High because all anybody did at Cheyney was party. In every class throughout the week it was, "Where's the party? Where's the party? Where's the party?" And that was fun for, like a semester, to just go to Philly and party every weekend, but I was like, "Wait a minute, that's not what I'm here for."

I really did want to be a teacher. I wanted to open a school for disabled children because my first boyfriend, Demetrius Granville Jackson III, who we called Jack, Jack had a brother who he would drive me out to Lawton, Maryland to see. His brother had some kind of neurological and metabolic disorder that left him mentally disabled, and they put him in a state home because his parents couldn't take care of him. When they put him in the state home he was like a twelve year old baby. They didn't have money, and his mother couldn't work full time and take care of him, and they couldn't afford child care so they put him in the state home. We would go out on weekends and visit "T" – Theophilis – they both had Greek names. And we would visit T and both of us would drive back crying, because T was always under cared for. His clothes weren't right, he was mixed in with kids who had different disabilities but certainly not the one he had. Everybody was all clumped together. It was like a jail for disabled kids, it didn't make any sense. And I said, "That's it, I'm going to start a school. It's okay Jack, when I get old, when I go to college I'm going to get my education I'm going to start a school. You can't put birth defective children and emotionally harmed children and mentally disabled children in the same dorm and give them the

same treatment." They don't need the same treatment; some of the children were just there because they couldn't walk. How could they be stimulated in the same environment with T? And T could walk, but he needed social contact to stimulate him. He wasn't getting it. The staff were overworked, there weren't enough of them. It went on and on, kids didn't get baths. I mean, it just was a disaster. T, his illness was such that he would die at an early age, and he did, but I still kept that idea, and it was part of my vow, actually. I wanted to go to college, but that was part of my vow to serve people – and children, I've always wanted to serve children. I always did, even my first volunteer job was working with children at the recreation center down the street from my house. Then there was my epiphany in seeing that school where T went – "Lawton School for The…" something, I don't even remember the name of this school, but I remember it was not far from us.

So I transferred from Cheyney State Teacher's College because it wasn't teaching anything and I wasn't becoming a teacher there. And I wanted to go to Lincoln University because I had heard that not only was it an all black college (which I really was enjoying). Cheyney was too for the most part but it was a commuter school. And Lincoln wasn't that far from Cheyney. They were both in Pennsylvania, not far from Philly. And again, Ku Klux Klan burning crosses on the lawn across from the school. There were all kinds of organizations, student organizations springing up everywhere. There was no women's movement springing up on the Lincoln campus. But I do know—

Thomson: The fifteen of you?

1-00:51:03

Huggins: Well, no I don't mean that. I don't remember the concept of women's movements being prominent in black colleges at that time because we all were already going toe to toe with men, always. It was just part of what we did; there wasn't a separate women's movement. But I do remember the Black Power movement having impact both on the Cheyney campus and then even stronger on the Lincoln Campus, and on the Temple University campus.

Thomson: I'm out of tape here.

1-00:51:49

Huggins: Okay [Tape Stops]

Thomson: Alright, can we talk about how you met John Huggins?

1-00:52:45

Huggins: Yes, we can. When I got to Lincoln University I joined the Black Student Congress, I told you about that, and I was also tutoring down the road from the University at a local elementary school, tutoring reading, and I realized I was at the wrong place at the wrong time because I was hearing everything going on in the world.

Thomson: What year would this be, about?

1-00:53:19
Huggins: ’67? School year of ’67, ’66-’67. Would that be right?

Thomson: Somewhere in there.

1-00:53:26
Huggins: Somewhere in there.

Thomson: And what are some of the things you were hearing about in the world?

1-00:53:30
Huggins: That the Vietnam War was happening and students were rising up all over the world and there had been a movement to say, "No" to the United States Government, a movement by young people. And part of it was what the media called the Black Power Movement. That’s certainly not what we called it.

Thomson: What did you call it?

1-00:54:04
Huggins: We talked about it later on as a movement for human rights, because we felt that that term "civil rights" was only a part of it. It wasn’t just our civil rights, it was our human rights: people deserve things by right of their birth, not because they live in America.

It was a time in the world for movements to occur. People were talking about greater health care back then, about medical rights for instance, about ending sterilizations and forced abortions when women would go in for treatment and then the move for women to have the right to make decisions about their own bodies was beginning. The Gay Liberation Movement was just in its fledgling stages. And so here I was on this campus, and also reading and studying about African history and African-American history as well as education, because I wanted to be a teacher who could tell the truth to her students, or encourage them to tell the truth about their own lives, or both.

I’ll never forget, I was in my room with my roommate Fro. Fro’s whole name is unbelievable: Frozina Kirkpatrick. She was from New York City. And somehow, a friend of a friend of Fro’s thought that I would like to meet these two guys that came in from Connecticut. One of them had just left the Navy, and the other one, I don’t know, he sold weed on campus and I had known him sporadically. I remember they came to our dorm window. We lived on the bottom floor, me and Fro. It was warm weather, because I remember the sun was shining and they knocked on our window, which was the way you communicated. People knocked on your window, because men couldn’t come in the women’s dorm, and we opened the window wide, and I remember leaning out of the window and there was this guy named John that I was introduced to, and I don’t remember the other guy’s name. But I can see the

whole scene. Frozina's leaning next to me and we had introduced, and I immediately disliked this John guy. I don't even know why, it made no sense, I was like "meh." One thing, I sold weed on campus too, and one thing that made me not like him was, his first question was, "You got any weed?"

"Who are you? I've never seen you before!" Presumptuous guy. Then as we continued chatting I realized that he was kind of a nice person, just a little bit arrogant, it seemed to me at that time, but a nice guy. Then I found out that he'd been on the ship when the church was bombed in Birmingham, when the four little girls were killed and it broke his heart and made him want to leave at that point, but he couldn't. He was in the Philippines or somewhere. And he sold weed on the ship.

Thomson: [Laughs]

1-00:58:09

Huggins: They were about to give him a dishonorable discharge and something happened and they decided not to do that, but at the next point when he could be discharged – I forgot what kind of discharge it's called, it's not good but it's not dishonorable – they let him off the ship and let him go. John was loveable, so I think that even his supervisors kind of loved him and said, "Crazy guy, just let him off the ship." And he was maverick. Everything about him was – you read Elaine Brown's book, right, so you read her description of first meeting him and what he was wearing?

Thomson: That frumpy outfit? [Laughs]

1-00:58:52

Huggins: Oh my God, he was like that all the time. He would wear a suit jacket, a shirt that he had worn so much and washed so often (he would never iron anything).

Thomson: Was this an intentional fashion statement? [Laughs]

1-00:59:27

Huggins: It was a mirror of his mind. He was very eclectic about everything. I told Roe and Amy the other day that he was the only man I'd ever met who took a bath with a rubber ducky. He was just a character! That's what it was – he was so cute and cutesy, kind of. And he was a little bit arrogant. He told me later that he knew we were going to be friends and that was the presumptuous thing that I felt like, "Who are you?!"

We became fast friends. We shared our weed stashes and he'd sell weed and I'd sell weed, that's how it started. And then we became really good friends because his heart was so pure. The best way I can describe it is that he gave total consent to his feminine, total consent. He did not hide it, he didn't pretend it wasn't there, and he also wasn't that big on other men who pretended it wasn't there. It's there. And he also appreciated my androgyny.

What you need to know is that at that time I don't think I had ever had a girlfriend. How old was I? I think I was 18. But I had all kinds of crushes on girls and women and John knew that, and he was fine with that. I just thought, this is going to be my best friend for life, because he's such a cool guy. But I wasn't really interested in men or women at the time I met him. I was just trying to figure out, "Who the hell am I and what am I going to do with this life? It seems like I'm supposed to do something important." I go through these periods of time in my life, throughout my life, where I'm just focused on what is the goal and let me meet my goal.

Anyway, we became really good friends and then we became lovers and we decided, and I'll tell you how in a minute, to drive to California to become a part of Huey Newton's Defense Committee.

What happened was, I don't know where John was on this particular day, but I was sitting in the Lincoln University student union building and someone gave me a Ramparts magazine. Ramparts was the first underground magazine that I read religiously because it wasn't full of hippie stuff, it was really serious writing about what was going on in the world: the War, with Black people, with Latin people. I didn't even know about the other movements of people of color until I picked up Ramparts magazine, and then I was getting a whole national view of what was going on. I knew more about what was going on in Africa than what was going on in the United States, but this magazine really helped. And it was a beautiful magazine, well written, well laid out, well put together but it was underground, I mean, you couldn't get it in your regular bookstore. I don't remember how I got it, I don't remember that. Anyway, I was reading and I saw this article on the murder of police officer Frey in Oakland, California and the shooting of Huey Newton and a picture of the police officer standing over the hospital gurney of Huey and looking into the camera. And I stared at the picture and thought, "Okay, that's it, I'm going to California."

I was sitting there and there were people playing bid whist all around me, shooting pool over here, some guy cruising some girl right in front of me and I looked up at that scene and I thought, "This is over, I'm gone."

I was taking a number of courses, but the one course I took just for the fun of it, which I wonder now what was I thinking, was a Swahili class. My teacher had bright red hair and very, very, very pale skin and green eyes and he spoke with a very thick German accent, and he was teaching Swahili. There was one moment in that class when I looked at the guy, kind of like I looked at the scene in the student union building, and I go, "Oh no, I'm gone." I looked up at him teaching Swahili and I looked around the classroom, and I was shocked at the place I was in that time. Then someone called me from the doorway— I forgot to tell you that Lincoln was a clearinghouse for African students. So when African students came to the United States that was one of the first campuses they came to, to sort of get integrated, especially if they wanted to

go on to a masters or doctoral degree, they would come there because it was an all black college and they could acclimate. I also failed to tell you that Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton where there writing the book *Black Power* at that time.

Thomson: Where they there when you were a student there?

1-01:05:08
Huggins: Oh yeah.

Thomson: Did you interact with them?

1-01:05:09
Huggins: Oh yeah, they used to do readings from the chapters in the books to a small group of us, there would be 25 or 30 of us. They would gather in this room at the Student Union building at night and listen to them read from the book. I had no idea what part in history I was playing, I just thought, "This is so cool, they're writing this book, I want to go hear them read." They were residents on the campus at the time.

Kwame Nkrumah went to Lincoln, Langston Hughes went to Lincoln, some very famous black actors and actresses went to Lincoln before they went on for later degrees – and poets as well. Gwendolyn Brooks used to read poetry at Lincoln. It was quite a hub, perhaps because of its proximity to Philly, but also that it was a small black college.

Thomson: Just to pause for a second, I'm curious because I'm sure we'll come back to Stokely Carmichael. Did you two have any social connections, or is it that you'd go to his readings?

1-01:06:22
Huggins: No, that was then. Later I got to meet him. Stokely was in SNCC and the Party. I didn't get to see him that often after a while.

Thomson: Got it, okay, go ahead.

1-01:06:36
Huggins: So anyway, I had that moment where I was sitting in that Swahili class and I heard this student, a friend of mine – I'll call him Joe, he was in exile from South Africa, he'd run for his life because he certainly wasn't in support of Apartheid, and he was on the Lincoln campus – he called me from the doorway of the classroom, "Ericka!"

I got to the doorway and I go, "Yeah? You called me out of class?" And I was already at that moment of like, "What the hell am I doing in here?" And he goes [South African accent], "Sista, what are you doing?" I said, "I'm in Swahili class," "No, what are you doing?! Look at this man!" He was the first person to tell me that Swahili was a slave language, a language of oppression.

It really wasn't the language that the people who speak it, it was not their original language; it was a language that was created to make it easier for the Europeans to engage and there are lots of languages like that. He said that to me and it was the first I'd ever heard, because that teacher didn't tell us where Swahili came from. I thought it was a real African language. I mean, it is, but it's not the language of the people who lived in that place when the language was created.

I said, "You're kidding," and he said, "No I'm not kidding! What are you doing?!" I said, "I don't know what I'm doing, that's the thing Joe, I don't know what I'm doing." It was like a message from God, you know what I mean? I went back in and I remember I had a pen that wrote red for whatever reason, and I wrote a note to John Huggins. I can still see the little piece of paper, I wish I still had it.

Thomson: Uh-huh.

1-01:08:45

Huggins: I wrote with the pen: "John, I am going to California, you comin'? - Ericka" And he wrote back, "Yes." And within two weeks we packed up all our stuff, I called my mother, I said, "I know this is not fun for you to hear, but I am leaving, I'm going to join the Black Panther Party." She goes, "What? What is the Black Panther Party?" I explained to her what I knew. I think at that time it was still being called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, I'm not sure because it changed its name pretty rapidly thereafter to just The Black Panther Party. I could tell she was hurt. She was silent. She said, "If that's what you feel you have to do, that's what you should do." But she was not a happy camper. But she sort of gave her blessing at the same time. What I said to her was that I felt called like some of her friends in church. I said, "You know how it is when you feel called to preach or a person feels called to lead people to Christ?" She said yes. I felt called to join the Black Panther Party. And she understood me, that I wasn't just bullshitting her or running off into the sunset with John. She didn't even know John, that wasn't even part of the thing. I loved John but that wasn't what was pulling me. One thing that I rarely talk about was that I was—

Thomson: You know, I'm sorry, I'm going to pause because I'm a little anxious that— [Tape stops].

Thomson: Alright, so you were talking about deciding to move to California.

1-01:11:54

Huggins: And telling my mother. I didn't talk to my father, he wasn't who—

Thomson: You weren't speaking at that point?

1-01:11:59

Huggins: No, no, no. It wasn't like I didn't speak to him; I didn't converse with him. If I wanted him to know something I told my mother. My mother was a conduit of information as far as I was concerned. Having a conversation with my father was like: he was so anti-social, if I got him on the phone he wouldn't respond and if I talked to him in person he wouldn't say anything. The only time he had something to say was when he was drunk and it was all negative. So I didn't have a relationship with him, it wasn't that I chose it to be like that – there was nothing I could do about it. And thank God I had some sense that he was an alcoholic as opposed to the fact that he just hated me for no good reason, because that's what I thought when I was a little girl. I thought he hated me.

Thomson: It seems like people didn't talk about alcoholism.

1-01:12:43

Huggins: Oh my God. It was such a vile secret for everybody and everybody tried to hide it. I remember confronting my mother one day, telling her, "You know, he's an alcoholic, mama." "No he's not, he just drinks." "Mama, he drinks everyday, and he's rageful when he drinks, and he beats you, OK. Can you just line those up right there? When he's not drinking he's not like that, and when he's not drinking he's very somber and withdrawn. Alcohol is affecting him and all of us." I didn't know a thing about AA. I just used my intuition and I would go to her. And that same day that I went to her like that I said, "Why do you stay?" and she said, "I stay because of you children." I said, "You know what? We will be fine. If you left him, we, I assure you, would be fine." But she couldn't leave because it was an abusive relationship, It was an addictive cycle. But I did try to talk to her about it. So we could talk about almost anything my mother and I.

Thomson: It seems like you had the ability to choose your partners differently than your mother. From what you said about John.

1-01:14:12

Huggins: Oh wait, John was absolutely different. What I was about to tell you before you stopped to check the tape recorder is that, I don't often say this, that the relationship I left before I met John, there was a reason why I was so distrusting of him. The guy I'd been with for the whole year I was at Lincoln from the summer transferring from Cheyney through to the next year, I had been with this guy who went to Lincoln. We called him L.A., because he was from Los Angeles and you didn't get to meet people from Los Angeles on the Lincoln campus, so everybody nick-named him L.A. Edwin Smith, I'll never forget him. He was very handsome, drove a red Porsche, very quiet guy, very kind – I thought. What I didn't know was that he was very possessive and controlling. He didn't drink, he smoked weed but he didn't drink. I never was around people who drank – it was just too sloppy and ridiculous and plus my childhood experiences of drinking were not— I didn't like to drink either.

So I was with L.A., and one night I didn't go home because I went to this party and decided to stay where I was because I was tired. And I come home, the sun is up, six in the morning, seven, something. He was supposed to be on his way to work. He was outside washing his car at six in the morning. I go, "Oh, oh." I could tell he had been worried because I didn't call. I mean, he wasn't my husband, I don't have to call him! I'm young and footloose and fancy free. And not only that, I come in, my hair's all farkakte [laughs] and I'm carrying my shoes in my hand. Nothing had happened, I just fell asleep on someone's couch and I go, "Hey! I'm going in." And he doesn't speak to me.

Finally he finishes washing the car and he comes into the bathroom where I had taken a shower and I was standing in front of the mirror doing something in the mirror and he walked up behind me and said, "Where were you?" And I said, I was at Frog's house (this buddy of mine, Frog, cause he had big eyes) "I was at Frog's house and I fell asleep." "No you didn't, I know you slept with him." "No I didn't, FROG?! No!?" You had to see Frog! So, No! So he goes, "Yeah you did." He took me by the shoulders and turned my round and slapped my face with all the force in his hand. He was not a big guy, we were the same height and he was thin, but it was a lot of force because he was so angry. And then he looked at me as if he was startled about what he had done.

I refused to cry. It hurt so much, he left a big handprint across my cheek. Like that [gestures]. I just refused to cry, that was the stoicism I learned in my family. And I made a plan. He went on to work, I made a plan that while he was at work the next day, not that day, I would go through the day, I would figure out what I needed to take with me and he would go to work the next morning, and I would be gone as soon after. And I was gone. That was it: he tore his drawers, as my mother would say. When I was a young kid I swore to my sister and my brother that I would never let a man lay hands on me. If they ever did, then that was it. I didn't fight back because I didn't see any purpose in slapping him back in that moment, I didn't even feel to. I just was gone. He sent messages to everyone he knew I knew to try to find me, and I told all my friends that I was not available to him. Then, I didn't know it, but he made up this illness about a month later. He said he had been diagnosed with cancer and would I come see him. I believed it so I went back to see him. He didn't have cancer. So I was through with him but I was glad he wasn't dying.

I said, "You hit me. You HIT me. No. I loved you, I do love you, you hit me. Bye." And then I left and then months and months later was when I met John. So I was on the heels of Edwin, of L.A. when I met John, but they were two completely different people. But there have been Johns in my life since that time and there have been Edwins in my life. And the worst of them all, of all the relationships, friends or intimate, the worst example of this abusive dynamic was Huey Newton.

We were never intentionally lovers. [Tape Stops].

Audio File 2

2-00:00:19
Huggins: We were best friends though, and then it turned. So no, I wasn't able to avoid— I hope that I've come to—

By the way, it doesn't matter if it's a man or a woman, let me assure you. I'm saying this on record, I want this to go down in history, it does not matter! Until a person rectifies or heals the tears or scars in their own heart, they're going to draw the same characters to them. Different names, different faces, different gender, even. But they're going keep drawing the same thing until they decide that's not what they deserve, or if they deserve something about that person that they have to stand on their own two feet. So I've had lots of people who've felt they can be in control of my life, because I'm kind of soft in a way with the people closest to me.

Again, I told you there's a part of me that doesn't know how to fight. I can probably hit somebody and knock them down; I'm not talking about that kind of fight. There's a part of me that doesn't know how to fight for myself. But if you tear your drawers, I'm gone. That's a pattern with me. You just step over a certain boundary and I'm gone. It used to take too long; it used to take way too long and now it doesn't anymore. A good example of that is being able to tell my brother that he's angry and rageful and I can't talk to him. So when I talked to him day before yesterday it was the most civil, humane, compassionate conversation we have had in about twenty years. I don't know why, I don't try to figure that stuff out anymore, but something is different inside me is what I claim. Something different inside me tells him that this has to be different. Which I did a month ago, that I could never talk to you again like you're talking to me, like he did a month ago. So when I talked to him the other day, he couldn't have at me in the same way.

Anyway, back to John Huggins, we were just meant to be together. It was just one of those – I didn't like him when I first saw him, it's so funny. But we were just the best of friends in addition to being lovers and then comrades. We drove across the country.

Thomson: Yeah, why L.A. instead of Oakland?

2-00:03:20
Huggins: Because we had a friend who wanted to drive to L.A. with us. He wanted to go to Hollywood and be found as a blues singer.

Thomson: [Laughs] How'd he fare?

2-00:03:41
Huggins: Well I don't know what happened to him. His name was Eddie; I don't know what happened to Eddie. However, he had more gas money for the trip than we did, so we went his way.

Thomson: So your fate was sealed by Eddie's gas money!

2-00:03:57
Huggins: That's right! He wanted to go to Santa Barbara because he had friends who would put him up until he would get to Hollywood. We dropped him off in Santa Barbara and then went L.A. We knew Oakland was the head of the Party, but we didn't have the stamina or the money to drive another 400 miles or so up to Oakland so we figured we would find the Black Panther Party in Los Angeles. What you need to know is that the Party had chapters in almost every major city. There were forty chapters or more of the Black Panther Party in that particular period of time. This was the end of '67. When we got to Los Angeles it was almost Thanksgiving, '67.

We went to Venice Beach were we lived in a little studio apartment with a Murphy bed then we moved to West L.A. We both got factory jobs at an auto-parts factory which was sex-segregated, by the way—they had a women's wing of the factory and a men's wing, they didn't put them together.

Thomson: Did you guys get jobs at factories because it was the job you could get or was it a political choice?

2-00:05:31
Huggins: It was the job we could get. Once we were there we made some political choices: I tried to become the steward of the union. All black and Latin women and the foreman was a white man who routinely forced the women to have sex with him. There were Latin women who – when I say Latin I mean they were from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, but mostly from Mexico. And there were women there who had children with this old, creepy, crone looking guy. I mean, it was really an older guy. When I first got there I couldn't figure out what the set up was, because all the women had cardboard in front of their workstations on the other side of the table at the level of their legs. He was such a creep he would come by and feel on their legs. They told me all this and I said, "Don't you guys know about unions?" The union rep had come by and said, "Do you guys want to be unionized?" I tried to unionize them under the guise of anything – Martin Luther King, he would want you to be unionized. Some of the black women kind of went for it, and then Mexican-American and other Latin women were afraid, because they said, "In Mexico we got paid 20 cents an hour, and we get paid minimum wage here in the United States. We're not going to blow it by becoming a part of the union." They didn't understand that the union would look out for them with this creepy guy.

I would go home at night and ask John, "What do you think?" And the men, hey, they were ready to unionize. But the women, we suffered—I couldn't wait to get it out of that place.

The way the women made it okay for themselves is they dropped pills, uppers and downers, or combinations of both. Nobody drank, nobody shot up at lunchtime, nobody smoked weed, but everybody dropped pills: Tuinols and Seconals.

Thomson: What about you?

2-00:07:50

Huggins: Mm-mm, I don't like pills. I tried it but I didn't like it. I didn't like that downer feeling and the uppers made me feel too agitated. No. After a little while I even stopped smoking weed.

What happened for me when I went to prison is that I taught myself to meditate. Once I began to meditate I recognized that there's no high that can compare to that, and I don't crash, I'm not going to be hung-over or dragged out the next day, or grumpy or cranky or snippy with somebody. Meditation just keeps you even and not only that, the inner joy is so endless and profound, once you recognize and have access to it. Actually, all the drugs just try to replicate those states. That was what our friend Timothy Leary was trying to tell everybody, that's part of what he was trying to do, except that he got addicted to everything he was taking. That's what he was trying, he was trying to have us all look at altered states of consciousness and what are they and where do they come from. How do we even know they're there if they weren't already there. So, anyway, I digress.

Thomson: How'd you guys find the Party?

2-00:09:17

Huggins: Well, we went searching around the community until we thought: we know there's a Party newspaper because we've seen it. We saw it in New York, because we left straight away from New York City, and we thought, "Somebody will be selling a Party newspaper somewhere." And sure enough we ran into this brother selling a Party newspaper and we bought it and we asked him where the Party office was and he told us, "It's in South Central in the Black Congress building." Within a week or so we got on the bus or whatever – I don't know if we still had John's old broke down car, we might have, because we drove his car across country – and we went to the office and went in and they said, "You can sign your name here and you can do some work." "What do we do?" "Well you can answer some telephones, you can sell Party newspapers, and you can come to PE classes." And that's what we started doing.

Thomson: PE?

2-00:10:19
Huggins: Political Education classes. But before we did any of that, before we found the Party office, we went to this rally that's in the big notebook here that Lisbet put together.

Thomson: This is the February 18, 1968, Free Huey.

2-00:10:36
Huggins: Mass rally at this sports arena in Los Angeles.

You can see here that Stokely Carmichael; Bobby Seale, who was a co-founder of the Black Panther Party and chairman of the Party; Betty Shabazz, Malcolm X's wife, who was one beautiful human being, just a wonderful, wonderful woman…

Thomson: Is she still living?

2-00:10:58
Huggins: No. Reies Tijerina, who represented the Mexican American movement, I forget which Mexican-American organization, and Maulana Ron Karenga, who ran an organization called US, which some people say is an acronym for "United Slaves." He was a professor, I think, even then, and was educated in England and created US organization as a nationalist organization. He believed that the best way to solve the problems of African American people would be just not to hang out with white people, just become African in the United States. But I didn't know any of that then.

Thomson: Okay, yeah. Right.

2-00:11:47
Huggins: I just knew his name. And I remember seeing him sitting on the dais when the speaker spoke, but I didn't know him.

Thomson: He must have looked pretty impressive with his— he had a look?

2-00:11:58
Huggins: He had a bald head and dark glasses, but he didn't look any more impressive than Stokely Carmichael or H. Rap Brown…

[tape stops]

2-00:12:07
Huggins: There was a simultaneous rally, not simultaneous, but the day before the 17th which was Huey's birthday, and his mother spoke at that rally, and my memory is that she spoke at this one as well. But, again, the thing that touched me weren't all these speakers. It was when Mrs. Newton stood up and she said [sweet, mom voice], "I want to thank everybody for coming out on my baby's birthday, and all I have to say is just please free my baby." And I was like

"Okay, I'm here now. I'm here. This is it. That was all I needed to hear," because she was so present.

The sports arena was packed with thousands of people and John and I didn't have any money so we had to sneak in under a turnstile to get in, and the brother at the door, he was supposed to collect money from us but we told him we didn't have any money and that we really were going to work with the Black Panther Party. He said, "I'm going to pretend I don't see this," and he turned his head and we went under the turnstile, where the tickets were supposed to be placed or something, and we went in and sat down.

It was the most amazing thing, as big a thing for me as the March on Washington, and quite different because what Stokely Carmichael and Bobby Seale were saying, and Betty Shabazz, is that we don't have to accept brutality, we don't have to let the police come in and knock down our doors, and beat us all up, and take us to jail for no good reason, and hold us up in court, and put all our money into legal bills for no reason. We don't have to be called names. We don't have to suffer in squalid conditions of housing and have our children go hungry. We don't have to accept that. That the Black Panther Party had a ten point program, and I think Bobby read the Ten Point Program. It was shortly thereafter that we found the Party office then we joined the Party and that was how it all began. Of course, then, a year later, a year and a month later, I guess, John was killed on the UCLA campus in broad daylight by people who were working with the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Counter-Intelligence Program.

Thomson: Do you want to talk about that today, or should we take a break?

2-00:14:45
Huggins: Well, I don't know how much time we have on tape. Either way.

Thomson: I think we can probably finish LA.

2-00:14:50
Huggins: OK, so what happened was – I told you that I ran into this woman.

Thomson: Yeah.

2-00:14:55
Huggins: And I never told you this story.

Thomson: No.

2-00:14:57
Huggins: Because I thought we could save it for tape.

Thomson: Yeah.

2-00:14:59
Huggins: I'll tell the story she told me.

Thomson: OK.

2-00:15:03
Huggins: That's her story. Elaine [Brown] tells her story in her book. I'm going to tell you my story and this women's story. I'm not giving you her name intentionally.

On January 17th, in the morning, I was at home with—I never said that I was pregnant shortly, almost right away.

Thomson: Yeah, um, actually, if we want to back up a minute, I do have questions about LA.

2-00:15:34
Huggins: Go on.

Thomson: Because obviously there is something between just discovering the Party and John's death.

2-00:15:41
Huggins: A whole lot of something, yes.

Thomson: [Laughs] It seems like you both got really involved very quickly.

2-00:15:48
Huggins: Very quickly.

Thomson: And how—?

2-00:15:49
Huggins: John became Captain of the chapter of the Party and that meant that he was an assistant to the Deputy Minister of Defense, who was Alprentice Carter. Some say that Alprentice, or as we called him, Bunchy, that Bunchy mentored John, but I think that they worked on an equal footing, although Bunchy was three years older than John. When they were killed, Bunchy was twenty-six and John was twenty-three.

Thomson: Do you remember when you met Bunchy?

2-00:16:22
Huggins: Oh, yeah.

Thomson: What did he look like?

2-00:16:25
Huggins: [I felt] that I was in the presence of royalty.

Thomson: Wow.

2-00:16:28
Huggins: That I had just met a king. Literally. He walked into a room and everybody: men and women were just, it was like, he was just so beautiful. He was physically beautiful, but it wasn't just that, he exuded beauty and integrity, and power. I never once got from Bunchy that he was egoistic, it was just how he happened to be. He was just a king. I asked his mother once, "Was he a prince when he was a child?" and she said, "Yeah, yeah." I think he was her favorite. Some moms have favorites, and I think so. She was totally distraught when he was killed and so was Mrs. Huggins when John was killed. So, if Bunchy was like a king, then John would be, who's in the court of a king? What do you call them? Court jester would be what he was sometimes. [Laughs]

Thomson: [Laughs]

2-00:17:50
Huggins: He was advisor of a certain sort, but they were also peers.

Bunchy had a way of wearing clothing, totally unlike John Huggins who threw it all together depending on his mood. Bunchy was always clean, always put together, every hair of his beautiful fro was in place. He had this beautiful mustache that sort of draped over his top lip, around his top lip, and he had big, bright, dark eyes and a beautiful face. He walked with a swagger but it didn't seem to be contrived at all – there was a lot of that swaggering during that time – but he just walked that. He always wore his black leather jacket kind of draped across his shoulder as opposed to wearing it, and his pants were always impeccably creased. He always had on a nice shirt, his shoes were always beautiful, he just came in and he was an example of the greatness that we are.

The other thing that I remember about meeting him is that right away he made eye contact with everybody. How do you get to be this old in your early twenties? I don't know. You used that word in your blog, "charismatic people." And I thought about that. Do you seek them out, or do they just exist everywhere and you have the great good fortune of meeting them at some point in your life? I felt I had the great good fortune of meeting him, and many other really wonderful people, but Bunchy just really stood out to me.

Then he would talk about the world we lived in. He spent a lot of time in gang activity and, as a result, a lot of time in jail, so he was very well read. You know, most African American men in that time, you might know this from Malcolm X's story, got their education in prison because that was the only time they could sit still and read anything or the only time where somebody, either from inside or outside, would care enough to give them books, or help them to learn to read, so Bunchy was very well read about African history in

addition to African American history. And why did I know this? Because I had tried to study on my own. He would stand and talk to us about how great we were, but not from that nationalistic, hateful standpoint. Here he was talking to people who joined the Black Panther Party who were ex-drug dealers, people who had gotten home from Vietnam, ex-police officers some of them, ex-prostitutes, street people, including I guess some people who were homeless, and people like me who'd come from being a student. And he would talk to us about the beautiful history of Africa, and the not so beautiful history of slavery, and that we needed to reclaim our greatness. It was all very uplifting. None of it had any hate of white people in it. Now see, the media portrayed us as people who hated white people. That wasn't even our frame. We did say we hated the police, but what we were talking about is the behavior.

Thomson: Right.

2-0021-56
Huggins: And the behavior was vile. But it was totally not nationalistic at all.

Thomson: Right.

2-00:22:02
Huggins: Bunchy also talked about the love we needed to have for one another, and that was what I needed to hear – that we needed to work together in community. So that was one of my first meetings with him.

John and Bunchy became friends almost immediately, because there's something so maverick and fearless about John that Bunchy really liked it. And Bunchy loved me, he always looked out for me. He looked out in an old-fashioned, chivalrous way for the women around him, but he didn't consider us to be less capable of taking care of ourselves, it was just the way his mother raised him, I guess. He was really respectful. By that time I think Bunchy already had children, by the way.

Thomson: I never knew that.

2-00:22:53
Huggins: Yeah, and he has a son, Osceola, exactly my daughter's age. Evonne, who I wish I could locate, and I were very good friends at one point, but after Bunchy's death she became less and less visible and then she kind of disappeared. That whole period was so traumatic for everybody. But Osceola and Mai are born maybe a couple months apart.

Thomson: Have you seen Osceola, or..?

2-00:23:29
Huggins: Yeah, I saw him. The last time I saw Osceola, he was a little boy. I don't know where he is. And his sister is the child that Evonne had prior to being with Bunchy, and I think Bunchy had another child, but I'm not sure.

At some point I became, obviously counting nine months backwards, I became pregnant with Mai. And so—

Thomson: How'd you find out you were pregnant? Do you remember that day?

2-00:23:59
Huggins: How did I find out? I was nauseous. And I just knew I was pregnant. I remember going to the county hospital because we, the Party members, we didn't get money for what we did. We did everything volunteer, and those of us who could get on welfare got on welfare so we could have food and healthcare. So in that way, the government supported us to do what we were doing. It's kind of funny, isn't it? Again, a paradox. But that was the only money we could get because if you were poor and a woman of color it was a thing you knew you could do.

I think that my little welfare check put groceries in the whole house. We lived collectively, I think there were about six of us living in the same house and all of us ate off of my welfare check, not including the food that John stole. He would just steal it and then later he stopped stealing because we had this wonderful cashier at the local Safeway where we lived on Century Boulevard who would, when we'd go to get groceries, she's see me with my big belly and she'd see John, and we came there often and sometimes we came with other people, and we would buy like $150 worth of food and try to pay with food stamps which would feed everybody, right?

Thomson: Right?

2-00:25:29
Huggins: And she'd ring us up for like five dollars.

Thomson: [Laughs]

2-00:25:33
Huggins: [Laughs] So John didn't have to steal food anymore. But he was famous for walking around in a grocery store and eating. He wanted to make sure that I ate, he was very concerned. We shared food all the time because we didn't have any money and we worked really hard, so he would do that to make sure that I would eat something, because it wasn't my way to routinely steal food. But he figured nobody should have to pay for food.

Thomson: Mm-hm.

2-00:26:00
Huggins: "Nobody should go hungry. Eat this. Safeway's not going to struggle if you eat this food." So that's what we'd do. John was such a buddy. And he also was a teacher for me. He was so fearless. I had grown up in so much fear that there wasn't—nothing seemed to make him afraid. The only thing that I think made him afraid is if he would think that his child would have to suffer.

So we sold newspapers, we spoke on behalf of the Black Panther Party, we raised funds for the Black Panther Party by speaking at very elegant houses in Beverly Hills and Hollywood. We made all kinds of friends with people in the movie industry because they liked us.

Thomson: Anybody whose names you want to share?

2-00:26:59
Huggins: Not particularly.

Thomson: [Laughs]

2-00:27:01
Huggins: There were so many of them.

Thomson: Right.

What would be a typical day if were going to wake up in the morning in your collective house?

2-00:27:09
Huggins: Well, we'd wake up in the morning and decide, like, what time are we going to the Party office, because the first thing we did after eating some breakfast was go to the Party office and do whatever work it took. That could be anything from selling newspapers to trying to get somebody out of jail. We spent a lot of time talking to people in the neighborhood. Everybody in the neighborhood of the Party offices, wherever we were, knew us and loved us, and fed us and took care of us, especially me, because I was pregnant. There wasn't a café in the neighborhood I couldn't go in and some older lady would say, "Sit down honey. You want some eggs and toast and some sausages?" and feed me. And we would speak, if that was what we needed to do. We would go to rallies in support of whatever was needing our support. It was in the evenings when we would go to these fancy events at people's homes and speak to raise money. We made lots of friends. As a matter of fact, the way I got a crib for my daughter was one of the wealthy Hollywood actresses, who I've never forgotten for this, sent a crib filled with baby clothing and things because she knew we couldn't afford to buy them. Then Mai was born December 27, 1968. And then I turned, 21? I can't remember what age I turned, January 5, 1969. And then John was killed January 17th.

Thomson: Oh, wow.

Do you want to stop? The tape is out.

2-00:29:19

Huggins: So that was quite a period of time in there. John turned 23 on February 11th, Huey Newton's birthday is February 17th. So John didn't see his next birthday. It was quite a time in there, but right up to the moment, John lived a very full life. Before he was killed, I had a dream. Did I tell— no I didn't tell you this. I tell this story a lot because it's an Ericka story, it's not an Elaine story. It's not the story of the woman who was there that day.

Two weeks before John was killed I had a dream. I went to sleep in the middle of the day. I took a nap because the baby was sleeping, and you know about that, when you have a little kid, you nap when they nap, if you've got any sense.

Thomson: [Laughs] You'd better!

2-00:30:46

Huggins: So I took a nap.

For many, many years I hated going to sleep in the middle of the day because of this dream. John was in the dream, and he was walking. He walked to the door in the dream, that's kind of how the dream began, and he entered the door and two men in black suits with [wide?] brimmed black hats and white shirts and black ties nodded at him, like, it's time to go. In the dream I remembered watching them and knowing they were going to take him away. He turned to look at me in the dream, he, John, and he nodded at me like, "It's time for me to go." And these men flanked him on either side and began to walk away with him.

In the dream I yelled out, "John! Where are you going?" And he just turned around and smiled, and kept walking. It was one of those dreams— you ever had a dream where when you wake up you don't know if you dreamed it or if it was real? I woke up like that. And simultaneously someone was knocking on the door. I jumped up sort of disoriented. The baby was still asleep, thank goodness, and I was disoriented, I jumped up, I ran to the door hoping it was John, and it was. He saw me looking all startled and disoriented and I fell into his arms and I said, "You're here! You're here! You're here! But they took you away. I saw it. They took you away." I held on to him and he kind of peeled my arms off of him and held me and looked me in the eye and he said, "I'm here now. Where's the baby?" In the way that he said that to me, if it had been a stupid statement, he would have said, "Oh Ericka, come on." If it had been a hilarious statement, he would have laughed, because he thought I was kind of funny sometimes, in the way that I saw the world. But it wasn't funny, and it wasn't stupid. So his response let me know that he knew also that he was going to die soon. It was in the air all around him. And I pointed to where the baby was sleeping, because she was in another room sleeping, and he went

in the room and he closed the door behind him and he stayed in the room with the baby, just sitting with her for a couple of hours.

I didn't mention the dream to him again, he didn't mention it to me, but we both knew that he would die soon. I didn't tell anybody other than John the dream. Elaine didn't know the dream, Joan didn't know the dream, none of the people that lived in the house knew the dream, but it was in my heart.

We had planned to name the baby something. We didn't name her. We chose to wait to see who she was and I didn't know it then, but many cultures do that, they don't name the baby. In India the baby isn't named for 11 days, but I didn't know that, I just knew that it wasn't fair to plunk some name on a child that you don't even know who she is, she doesn't know who she is. There were all these funny names on her bassinet, the little crib she slept in like, "Hueyina" and "Eldridgette" and "Huggy Girl" and "Johnetta" and all kinds of silly names people would stick on the crib just for fun.

Thomson: [Laughs]

2-00:35:25
Huggins: So she had all these Post-it names, although Post-it's didn't exist then.

Thomson: Right.

2-00:35:37
Huggins: But names were pinned onto the crib. And she had no name, she was "Girl Huggins" on her birth certificate because John and I couldn't come to terms with what we wanted to name her.

We just loved her, everybody loved her. She was the Party baby, she was the Los Angeles Chapter baby. She was just like, totally… never cried, because somebody was always picking her up and carrying her around and loving her. She was just loved by everybody. Bunchy just loved her, and he became even more protective of me.

I remember I was feeling, because of that dream that I hadn't told anybody about, on my birthday I was just feeling really fragile and upset all the time, for the whole day. Everybody came to the house: Bunchy, Elaine, Janice, Joan, John, everybody was at the house and they brought me this birthday cake for my birthday. Mai's like a week old, right? So I'm already post-partum whatever's going on, too. All the hormones are… Elaine still tells this story. She says, they brought me the cake and they were about to sing Happy Birthday and I said, "I don't want this fucking cake." And Bunchy said, "Comrade, what do you want?" And I said that "I want…" the police chief's name, I cannot remember his name. Redding? Was that his name? Anyway, I said, "I want the police chief's head on a platter." Bunchy looked at me like I needed medication and Elaine looked at me like, "You insensitive Bitch. We went out of our way to get you this cake." That was the look she gave me.

Then I just burst into tears. I'll never forget this part, because Elaine, [laughs] and now we can laugh at it, but she was so pissed at me she didn't know what to do. Bunchy turned to her and he said, [Bunchy's voice] "Elaine, Elaine! Sister Ericka may never cry again. She's not supposed to cry. OK? You got it? She's not supposed to cry." [laughs] I was just there sniffling and I looked at Elaine. She was pissed off!

Thomson: [Laughs]

2-00:37:53

Huggins: Because how can she keep me from crying? But he didn't know how to handle it. I wasn't supposed to be sad or cry – nothing, nothing. I was supposed to be protected and cared for and happy, especially now, that's all he meant. We have laughed about that so many times since that time, but she was pissed off. Can you imagine if somebody tells you that? That's like your father telling you you're supposed to look out for your little knucklehead baby brother that gets on your nerves, that's what it was like. Then two weeks later I got a call.

**Interview 2: September 21, 2007**

Audio File 3

**T**homson: Okay, we should be rolling.

You were going to tell me a story about Lincoln, but let's put a header on here: it is September 21st, and I am Fiona Thomson and I am here with Ericka Huggins and this is the second tape of the interview series.

3-00:3-00:22

Huggins: Going back to our first discussion, I realized I forgot to tell you the funny story I said I was going to tell you. You asked me if I was one of the first women at Lincoln University, and I said I was one of the first 15. I was majoring in education; I wanted to open a school so I was in an introductory level education class taught by one of the Deans of Students. (A reminder that this is the first year of Lincoln becoming co-ed.) This Dean was mid-aged at the time, African American, man. I remember walking into his class in the second class session looking for a seat to sit down. I'm at the back and I decide: I don't want to sit in the back, I don't like to do that, I like to sit in the front and engage with the instructor and the rest of the class. So I am moving toward the front and I hear him say, "Brazen hussy," and I am looking around for the brazen hussy, right?! I have on jeans, not tight, just some jeans and a T-shirt, and my signature big hoop earrings. I look around, and I'm startled, and I said, "What did you say?" And he said – it was a full classroom and the whole class fell silent – and he said "Brazen hussy, I don't want you in my class room dressed like that." Well, because of my awe at his ignorance, I sat down right in the front of his class and acted like: I don't care what you said, I pay to be here, I'm going to be here.

Thomson: Right.

3-00:02:32

Huggins: And I sat. He went on to teach the class, he mumbled something else under his breath, taught the class. At the end one male student came over to me and kind of looked at me and shook his head and said, "I'm so sorry."

I went to him. I waited for the class room to clear, I went to this guy and said, "I am going to talk to your boss." The funny part about the story isn't what he said or how I felt, the funny part is that at a very young age I always knew that there was a recourse. "Who is your boss?" I asked him. I didn't know titles or anything like that; I just knew that he had a boss, that he did not run the school. He didn't want to tell me and I said, "I'll find out on my own, you have no right to say that to me." And, "Would you allow somebody to talk to your wife in that way?" Because I knew he was married, that is all I knew about him, I knew he was married.

He just starred at me and said, "You could have come dressed in a skirt and a something." A what? This is 1968, or ’67 it was ’67, I can dress how I want to dress. I wasn’t being disrespectful to him, I just didn’t know what planet he had landed from or on to. Then I walked out and left him standing there, and the kind of hilarious, but not funny "ha-ha" sequel to this story is, I found out later that he was suffering with a big issue and that is that his wife, who also lived on campus with him, had a nervous breakdown and streaked buck-naked through the men’s dorm. So, that's the backdrop for why he was talking to me like that! [laughing] He just had to work it out!

Thomson: [laughing]

3-00:05:04

Huggins: I felt bad for his wife and I felt bad for him but that didn’t mean he could talk to me that way! It was one of the men who told me that story, he was having a problem because his wife streaked buck-naked through the men’s dorm, and the men had presence of mind to know to call the campus security or something, to get some help for her. They felt bad.

Thomson: They could tell there was something wrong.

3-00:05:29

Huggins: Yeah. I had never been called a brazen hussy in my life, and it was sad – it is an arcane way for describing anyone, right? That was my one month into an introduction to Lincoln University. What I did love about the place is like, unlike men I've encountered in all-male settings elsewhere, because this was a historically black college, the men loved having the women on the campus. They were happy, with the exception of some of the gay men (who wouldn’t have called themselves gay). They felt invaded or intruded upon, but they weren’t obnoxious, they just had attitude. And then there were some other administrators or professors who didn’t feel good about – they thought it would be distracting to the men – you know all reasons people have for continuing to be inbred mentally. It’s just human nature: the other is always seen as a threat.

It is an important story, if we took that one story and dismantle it to look at a microcosmic story about life, it is an excellent story because there we have African American men with African American women; you can’t say that race, necessarily, had something to do with [it]—or class, because the women and men were from the poorest to the wealthiest. It didn’t have to do with intelligence either because that wasn’t what was at issue, because to get into Lincoln you had to do something to get there. So that was such an introduction, and I made such good friends as a result of having that kind of experience there.

Lincoln was one of the favorite points on the timeline of my life. I learned a lot at Lincoln about almost everything you can imagine – about being an

independent woman. I did, by the way, go to his boss, who would be the President of the college, and talk to him about that. He was appalled and embarrassed and he did talk to this professor, who was also a dean.

Thomson: Ah, right.

3-00:08:11

Huggins: That's what made it so embarrassing for him is that he was a dean, and prior to the class that was the only way I had known that professor. You know, I think that was part of the shock when he first made his highly ignorant statement.

Thomson: So did that, did he leave you alone after that?

3-00:08:28

Huggins: Oh, he left me alone. I also made the president ensure that my grade would not be affected, and that he would not be allowed to talk to any other woman in that way, or man for that matter. But, you know, when I look back on my life, I have always had a certain… to your original question, which made me remember this story: did I feel the interviews were complete? As I was watching a part of it at a friend's house in Los Angeles, I was thinking: it is interesting that we all come to the planet with an essential nature, which is very deep and abiding and expansive, and life experiences make us turn down various places on our path, just walking along in life. However people often ask me, isn't that a change? Didn't you become something different? Well, of course, I am always becoming, but I think this story when I really looked back to it, makes me know that there wasn't a point in which I was a shy flower, in a certain way. I certainly wasn't a spokesperson of anything at that time, I had no idea that my life would become what it has become but I did know that certain things were respectful and just, and certain things were unjust, and I have always known that from childhood. And I never – if it was unjust – I never bit my lip to speak about it. I always felt like it was important for me to speak up. Of course, I think that that something kept leading me in a certain direction in my life. Not to mention, I'd already made my vow to serve people for the rest of my life.

I thought this story was kind of funny and also an important one in that turning point. That was where I would really say, that was where I became a feminist – at Lincoln. Because before I went to Lincoln, I thought, you know, it's cool, we are going to be some of the first women at Lincoln. I didn't see that as historically important or anything, just fun, all those guys you know? And then this dean, you know, my consciousness just raised itself 90 decibels immediately.

Thomson: Uh huh.

3-00:11:14

Huggins: So it is just really interesting how life as taken me to all these places that I have been willing to go, that is the other thing, that I have been willing to go there.

Thomson: Right.

Huggins: And not always kicking and screaming, not always with a smile on my face, but willing to see where I am being directed. And I did actually have compassion for that dean after I learned the story about his wife. I mean, how must that have felt? What recourse does a man have for healing hurts in the way our gendered society is set up? Can a man, is it okay for him to burst into tears? Is it easier to attack or spew or whatever?

Thomson: Right.

3-00:12:08

Huggins: So yeah, that's that story. So I wanted to make sure to tell you that.

Thomson: That's a good story. I see how it also illustrates a kind of a bigger theme for your life too.

A small segment of that story reminded me— I wanted to ask you about the Party, or about Party theory. I don't know why it reminded me but the issue of single gender institutions and introducing gender there—one thing I have been thinking about the Party is how it was specifically not a nationalist group, and how you worked in coalition with other Third World groups or with white activists or—

Huggins: And from every ideological discipline and philosophical backdrop – everybody.

Thomson: Which is amazing, so I wondered if you would talk about why, given that, the Black Panther Party was specifically located in the black community, rather than being a multi-racial organization.

3-00:13:17

Huggins: Because we were black!

Thomson: Like rather than having a multi-racial organization that was organizing within a bunch of different communities, why…

Huggins: See that book right there? I've got your question, finally. That book is called *The Vanguard*. We knew that the decedents of slaves were, for them to rise up, was the high leverage for everything else.

` If, if we stood up, we knew everybody else would stand up. If we stood up and we brought people with us, we knew we'd have great coalition and we

did. It was wise on Huey Newton's part. Yes, we could have had a multicultural organization, but where would there be any forum for the black community, for instance, to finally say "No! We can't wait. No, this isn't right. No, the incidence of police brutality is higher in our community than any other in the nation. We are filling the jails." Now this was 1966—look at the prison industrial complex now: we have a fast track from elementary school to prison for young black men, and the numbers for young black women are rising. We also knew that if we spoke up, Latin American, Central American people would begin to speak up. If we spoke up, we knew that Asian people, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, and Vietnamese at the time would find a voice to speak in. We knew that Native Americans were already speaking up, and would feel so strongly supported about us from our vantage, speaking on their behalf. And so that is what we did – we stood in our own backyard and yelled out. And that is what we thought everybody had to do to and to bring the forces together to coalesce. Because when you start as a multi-cultural or multi-anything, there isn't definition quite yet, if it is the first time for everybody. So, if we started with great definition, the coalescing would be stronger, and it was.

Thomson: Yes.

3-00:15:42

Huggins: Otherwise what would have happened, and I am bluntly putting this out because we watched it, the white organizations would take over. And every time there was multi-cultural anything, that's what happened.

As a friend of mine once said to me as we were setting up diversity trainings at one of the AIDS projects that I worked for – we were having lunch, (and we laugh about this now) and I said to her, "So here's the deal, this is why that occurs and historically this…" and we were just having a chat. And she looked at me in some part of the conversation and said, "I'm pissed." And I go, "Why?" "Why don't I already know this stuff?" I go, "You think because you're white you should know everything?" And she goes "Yeah!" She was really pissed and thereby so honest in this moment, and then she thought about what she had just said, and then we unpacked that. White children are taught that the world is theirs so they operate from that vantage. Black children, Native American children, Asian children in this country, Latino children, are not taught that this world, especially in the United States, is theirs. So they defer, they acquiesce, they back-peddle. And I watched this happen over and again. I watched when Cesar Chavez first started the farm workers movement, young white students came in and *tried to tell him how to run it*. I watched it. I was appalled at the naiveté and arrogance running side by side. And so finally, in his own kind way, he said, "No, no we've got this." Those weren't his words, I'm sure, but that's what he meant! And we had to do that all the time.

For instance, here is a good example of this, coalescing, coalition building, standing in your own backyard and function from there and then come

together and talk about what can be done. I think that is what made our coalition so strong, that everybody was rooted in their own community.

So there was a group of young white radicals, we called them. (We called ourselves revolutionaries and we called them white radicals. [slight laugh] At that time it was Bobby Seale's way of describing them and it kind of fit and they always appreciated it.) In Chicago there was this strong radical movement that didn't have to do necessarily with a student movement or an anti-war movement, they were in support of it but they were like, "Okay, let's support people of color, and let's support our own poor communities." And they wanted to join, to become a part of the Black Panther Party, which would have been fine, but what was said to them was this and it was so profound, and I remember Fred Hampton talking about this, speaking about it… Oh, by the way this organization, this group of young, white radicals didn't have a name.

Thomson: Mmm-hm.

3-00:19:03

Huggins: They worked in the Appalachian Mountains – now you know the demographics – we're talking abject poverty, and all of the illness and disease that goes with it. Kind of like the poverty of black folks in the deep Deep South. And the ignorance that goes with poverty due to the lack of education about…anything, including a bigger world view. These were people who had never seen black folks, they were mountain people, some of the people this organization worked with. So they came to Fred and said, "Can we join forces with you?" and he said, "Sure, but first, go serve your people, and not only that, go door to door in your neighborhoods to end racism."

Well, whenever young white people were told to do that, and you may have some feelings about this yourself, it's like, "Oh, no don't make me talk to those racists." Well, who's going to talk to them? Us? We're brown. Who can talk to them? Who will talk to them? Don't they need to be spoken to? Isn't that important for white people to be the allies of people of color? An ally is someone who has your back and not only that, is willing to take action wherever necessary. And that's where it was, they were young and progressive, they didn't have long hair and beards, they were kind of clean-cut looking. They could talk to people and make sense of it, so they formed the White Panther Party.

When people hear that, they think it was a retaliatory organization. When they hear the name, they think, "Oh were they Ku-Kluxers? Were they Birchers? Were they early skin heads?" No! They were these very wonderful people who decided they were going to speak out against racism. There was also something called the John Brown Society, named after the great abolitionist. I just thought that this was—I loved them! I felt so secure that they existed and when they introduced us to the people—I happened to be in Chicago at one

point where I met the head of the White Panther Party – I've forgotten his name – tall, thin guy, really quiet and kind and compassionate and serious, so serious about what he was doing, so focused. When he introduced me to the families that he was working with in the mountains, because they would come down for meetings, some of the leaders, they truly had never seen black people before, they would just stare. It wasn't the kind of staring that had anything intimidating. It was like looking at a new plant species or an animal you've never seen, or a color you didn't know existed in the spectrum. It was just kind of pure. That is where I met the child, did I ever tell you this story? The child that touched my face? He said, "Can I touch your face?" and I said, "Sure!" and he said, "Okay" and he touched my face and then he said, "I just wanted to see because I was told that if I touched your face the brown would rub off on my figures and it didn't." And I go, "No, the brown doesn't rub off, can I touch your face?" and he let me touch his face. It's just ignorance, it's not stupidity, and the White Panther Party knew that, and there were many other organizations that knew that.

But what if they never went? What if we were all like, multicultural, whatever the heck that means.

Thomson: [Laughs]

3-00:23:12

Huggins: Nobody would have definition. There would be this attempt at one voice but until individuals have a voice, that one voice isn't strong and doesn't have depth and timber and all those other beautiful things that a choir has because there is definition in every part of the choir. That's why it was very intentional because as you can see, if you read part of history, you'll see that Huey Newton was like, "Okay let's go to Vietnam. Okay let's speak out on behalf of gay people. Okay lets…"

What if we just started an organization that joined all those forces together? It would be one big argument at the meeting table. Just one huge gigantic argument about which way we were moving. It would be like that hold TV show from the fifties or sixties, F Troop: a motley band of soldiers that when their leader would say, "Move forward" they were all moving in different directions. It would be like that! They were all bumping into one another. And we did see socialist organizations that called themselves the Blah-ba-da-blah-blah Socialist Party. They fought all the time, they never took action. They just sat there and talked. We were not talkers, we were doers and all the organizations we coalesced with were doers and we took action. We just couldn't sit and talk about it, too many people were suffering or starving or in need. Does that answer your question?

Thomson: It does.

3-00:24:59
Huggins: Okay.

Thomson: One thing you said earlier on when you were answering that was about the idea that because of the unique experience of the African American people and the legacy of slavery and so forth, that you were sort of positioned to be a leader, to be a community in leadership towards revolution or revolutionary change, right?

3-00:25:22
Huggins: That's right, because all these progressive organizations and individuals knew that slavery had never ever been acknowledged, apologized for or healed. There wasn't a group on the planet but much less in the United States that didn't know that. And these organizations were willing to talk about it, but who needed to talk about it first? We needed to say that. Now we didn't say it just like that, I am saying it like that today, but we needed to say, "No more police brutality."

What if the Communist Party, being primarily white at the time, and Angela Davis could surely explain all of this to you, it was primarily white, it had an African American caucus, I forgot the name of it. They had to have one because nobody saw race as an issue to be clearly worked with simultaneous with the class issues… They're all intertwined! Later on Bettina [Aptheker] and Angela had to struggle with the sexism in the Communist Party. Not that the Black Panther Party didn't struggle with sexism, we did. But the point was that it would have been such that if we hadn't built starting from the Black Panther Party, from our own stance, because we were all young black people who came together, we wouldn't have been able to really clearly define the intertwining, intercepting nature of all these oppressive forces.

Thomson: Right.

3-00:27:16
Huggins: I was going to say, what would it be like if someone from the Communist Party, not Angela, but let's say even Bettina, who is such an incredible woman, she would never do this, what if Bettina stood up and said, "We feel there should be an end of police brutality against the black community"? Well, how many years had that been being said by white people? Well, many years. But for young black men to say it, and look fierce about it, which they did look fierce, and be willing to say it on national TV, and be willing to be arrested for it, and not be praying at the same time? Well, that is some scary shit for America. Because that meant, Uh Oh! They are not going to take what we have been dishing out. It did not mean to us that we were going to do to people what had been done to us – that's abuser fear. Isn't it?

Thomson: Right.

Huggins: And there was abuser fear. It lived in the hearts and minds of people like J. Edgar Hoover, who was afraid that black people would turn around and lynch and rape—

Thomson: Right. That it would come back…

3-00:28:33

Huggins: …and kill and maim. Yeah. Rather than just thinking, why aren't we just? Why don't we just quit? Why don't we just stop this? But these were not well people, these were not, when I say 'well' they were not awake, had no spiritual maturity, and no desire to change. And that is not a judgment, that is clearly what it was. Because I met police officers as time went on, especially when I was incarcerated, who were kind, who were compassionate, who were willing to change. And I'll tell you some funny stories about that later when I start telling you about my time in prison. So it isn't just some headless glump of people.

The government is made of individuals with a certain way of thinking, and the Black Panther Party started, slowly but surely, turning that thinking around, changing the thinking of people. Especially, first, black people, who had been so used to being slaves generation after generation after generation that we didn't need the threat of a lynching, we didn't need the threat of a beating, we didn't need to have the police riding our backs, we didn't need chains. We were already so enslaved in a certain way that it didn't take much to keep us in line.

There is a country that someone told me about, a small country, I forgot the name of the country, but they did this experiment – the United States – did an experiment with submission, and they took the religion from the people, they took the culture from the people, (this was in Europe somewhere), they took parts of the language and gave them a new language, you know literally suppressed, repressed and oppressed them, colonized them. And this was in time of war, and then started passing laws, started setting up systems that further kept them in check, and wouldn't you know it, they acquiesced. Even if the laws meant a certain kind of death of the quality of life for themselves and their children, because they were so beaten down, they had nothing in them to respond

Thomson: Mmhm.

3-00:31:23

Huggins: Now, thinking about that kind of traumatic experience in that experimental country or town (I can't remember which), think about the decades and decades, and generations and generations of slaves. Think about the laws. And then look at the Jena 6 today – isn't that a direct link, I mean straight away, don't stop anywhere on the Monopoly board, link, to slavery? That's the residue of it, you can't twist it around, you know? And there were all kinds of

slavery, and I am not speaking of just one kind. But I am thinking about the general thing we call the enslavement of African people. It is just so remarkable that that can live. And it does live until it is stopped. And it doesn't mean that all black people have that mentality, or that all white people have an enslaving mentality. It doesn't mean that. But it does mean that if we are awake and aware, we need to step up and not sit at our desks and talk about it. Which is why, for instance, I didn't understand blogs at first. I thought all these progressive people are writing, but what are they doing? Are they just…what are they doing? Are they doing something else? Are they taking action elsewhere? And then someone said to me, "That is their action." And I go "Okay." But I didn't get it. I still don't on some level because I am so used to like, you got something to say? Go say it to the person that matters rather than just sitting there and chatting about it with your buddies, you know? Or like-minded people. Do that *and*, not do that *instead*, do that *and*. But I realized that this is not my generation, and this is generational thing. However, I do think that writing is such a powerful tool for change. And I think that if writing can reach, rather than hundreds of people, thousands and millions of people, it is an action worthy of a lot focus and deserves a lot of high regard.

I guess I am thinking of people like W.E.B. DuBois –yes he did start an organization like the NAACP, but his books, my god, you mention his name and pretty much people are going to know who you are talking about and what he did. How did he do it? He just kept writing and writing and writing.

We remember people like Martin Luther King for other reasons, we remember Huey Newton for other reasons, we remember Rosa Parks for other reasons. They didn't necessarily write books, but they took action. But we remember Alice Walker. What did she do? She took action. She wrote, she writes, she speaks, she probably blogs also! She probably does everything she can think to do and then some! So I just feel that it is very important, especially right now, to take action and so, I know I got off your question, but it felt connected to it.

There is such high leverage in the history of the United States with black people, and it did turn out in that time of great movement in the sixties that people were just waiting for one person to stand up, and then the next one stood up, and then the next one and the next one and the next one. And there were some instances where, if all the organizations… there were a number of coalition meetings and then huge conferences like the revolutionary conference to combat fascism. That is not its real name but that's what it was. It was like looking at the people gathered, it was like a slice of the United States.

Thomson: Are you talking about the conference in Chicago? Where was it?

3-00:36:12

Huggins: I was in jail at the time when this happened, but I believe I wrote something that was sent there. I can't quite remember – I would have to look at dates and timelines and stuff. But where would you put all these people together, except from their varying communities and stances? That was why the Black Panther Party was loved in the community. In the media, it was a different, different story.

Thomson: Well let's come back to that in just a minute. You had just started to talk about meeting prison guards and so forth in jail that helped you see people as individuals rather than seeing the government as this bad force. So I wondered if we could come back to the story, you were going to finish talking about John's death and then going to New Haven and then we can sort of reconnect with that thread.

3-00:37:32

Huggins: I told you about the dream that I had that the FBI came and took John away, and then I think I told you that of course, two weeks later John did die. I am not sure if I told you the story of that day, did I?

I woke up on January 17, 1969. My daughter Mai was three weeks old, so I was with her, I didn't travel very much at that time. The Los Angeles chapter of the Party assigned a person to stay with me because we were constantly being followed, we were under surveillance, our phones were bugged, notes were left by the FBI on our doors, the police harassed us all the time.

Thomson: Like what kind of notes?

3-00:38:29

Huggins: "Hi John, Hi Ericka, we're watching. We know where you are, we know where you're going." You know, like when you come back to your car and you have a flyer under your windshield-wiper? Like that. When we left the Party office in the evenings after dark we would walk out and flood lights would be turned on us. That was every evening. We never knew what any day would bring.

In addition, on the UCLA campus, there was quite a lot of friction between the US organization and the Black Panther Party brought about by the FBI. You saw the document that Lisbet found, with the picture that the FBI drew of Karenga and mailed to Karenga claiming it was from us. We would never do such a thing. I mean, we had our own feelings about cultural nationalism, we didn't think it took anybody anywhere, but we weren't out to harm anyone. We just laughed at it. We thought wearing your hair natural or shaving your head is not going to free anybody. Wearing a dashiki is pretty, but it is not going to get men and women out of jail. Speaking Swahili might be okay, I personally didn't like it because I knew from my Lincoln University experience that it was a slave language. So, you know, I just thought it was

amusing and that the whole performance environment of US organization's meetings were hilarious.

And I really didn't agree with polygamy. And neither did the women in the Party who were in the LA chapter who were former prostitutes. They were like "Mm-hmm, that is not gonna work. I know that from my pimp." One said to me. "No, mm-hmm, no five wives." So, that is the level of hilarity, we just held it as hilarious, but we didn't have any animosity.

Thomson: Backing up on that one second, did you ever meet Ron Karenga?

3-00:40:42
Huggins: Yeah.

Thomson: Did you go to meetings with him?

3-00:40:45
Huggins: No, but I met him because our offices were in the same building – the Black Congress building in South Central. The Black Panther Party's office was on one hallway, and then down that same hallway, I believe on the same side, was the US Organization's office. Again, that coalition thing – the Black Congress building was created for a coalition of black organizations. I think the NAACP was in there, the SCLC might I have been there, I'm not sure.

So we didn't really care, and we knew it was the FBI, because local law enforcement wouldn't have been smart enough to do it. (We just knew, LAPD, they weren't going to take time to write letters that were spelled correctly.) They started sending ugly letters to Bunchy Carter and ugly letters to Ron Karenga, and at one point Karenga sent a message that they were tired of being threatened and that made Bunchy aware that something was really wrong. I remember he went to Karenga's house and apologized and pulled us together in a meeting and said, "No more laughing at them. No more asking them 'How does it work to have five wives?'" We were just joking with them.

You have to realize Party members were from the streets, or like me, some out-of-the-box students from a campus. We weren't polished. The US Organization members tended to be middle-class, mostly students, and we were like the lumpen proletariat! And then some!

I remember this former prostitute went over to one of the US organization members and she said, [saucy voice:] "Hi," and the woman turned and looked at her like, "What is coming now?" because we would pass each other in the hallways. She was trying to be nice – the former prostitute was trying to be nice – she said, "Can I just tell you something?" And she goes, "Yes." And she said, "Your bald head sure is nice." [laughs] And the woman flinched and didn't know how to take it. It was her way of, like, messing with her, but she was trying to be nice and she was trying to let go about how odd they were – it was hilarious. I said, "Come on, come on, come on, this is a slippery slope

right here," and "Come on, come on!" So then we went in the office and we laughed, and laughed, and laughed. But that was the extent [of], you wouldn't call it harassment, but like, she didn't know what to make of it…

Thomson: Sorry, before we go on, do you mind…

3-00:43:41

Huggins: Oh, take the bracelets off. [Because they are making noise as she gestures.]

So it was like that. And then Bunchy called us all together and he said, "No more laughing, no more jokes. Certainly, we're not going to engage in anything insulting. They're upset, they think we are doing something. I explained we are getting the same kind of letters. Leave it alone." This was Bunchy, three of four weeks before he was killed.

Thomson: Wow.

3-00:44:09

Huggins: Meanwhile, on the UCLA campus, and I knew this only because I was married to John, on the UCLA campus there was a discussion going on with the UCLA Black Student Union, and that discussion was about who would head up the EOP kind of program that the campus had at the time – it was called the High Potential Program. There was a guy (whose last name was Thomas) from the community who was vying for this spot, and also Ron Karenga was vying for this spot. Well, the students didn't like Ron Karenga, they didn't want him to have the spot. He was arrogant, he wanted things to go his way, and plus he wanted it for the money that the spot came with – it was an administrative position. So they asked John and Bunchy's help in mediating this student dispute about who should have that position. John and Bunchy were on the side of the students making their own decisions and determining who would head up this program, because it was the right of the students as well as the administration to do so.

All that backdrop to say that there was a meeting, scheduled for January 17th in the morning, of all people interested in this High Potential Program position. So the students showed up, John and Bunchy and a couple of other members of the Black Panther Party showed up, members of the US Organization showed up. What I'm told is that the members of the US Organization showed up: Men were there, men who weren't students were there, women who weren't students were there, and the women were carrying weapons for the US Organization in their purses.

When I first heard that piece of information I knew that it wasn't just the US organization; there was something else going on. We knew by this time that the FBI infiltration was very steep. Within the Black Panther Party, I would say that one out of every five people was an informant, and I had no doubt that it was the same way with US Organization. We found out since that time that that was true. So I don't have blame for US Organization, I do feel that

the United States government through the FBI's Cointelopro, I've always felt this set up the circumstances for John Huggins and Alprentice Carter to be killed and for innocent men to be sent to jail for their murder.

Thomson: And we know that—

3-00:47:19

Huggins: That's documented. But I knew it then. So did members of the Party know it then. However, what we didn't know was how not to blame the US Organization at first because members of the US Organization had killed John and Bunchy – not the two brothers who were charged but another guy who still has not been found, which is par for the course.

Thomson: You were telling me you woke up that day—

Huggins: I woke up that morning, with this as a backdrop, knowing that John and Bunchy were going to a meeting on the UCLA campus. They left to go there—

Thomson: Would they have been carrying guns at that point?

3-00:48:3-00

Huggins: John and Bunchy? I don't know. They might have been. I wasn't involved in what they carried or didn't, I just know that sometimes they did, sometimes they didn't. They might have been, because our lives were always on the line, I don't mean with US organization, I mean in general.

I didn't have a gun and I never did have one come to think of it. I was never trained to use one like most other members of the Party, I don't know why, it was not like I said, "No no no, I refuse." For whatever reasons it didn't happen.

So they left for campus, and I knew that Elaine Brown and Joan Kelly would be there and I think—well, some of our other friends were there too. Long John, that was his nickname, stayed with me.

When I awakened and looked out—I opened the blinds in front of the house—(We lived in this house that had a stairway, the bottom entrance led you into a bedroom area but if you took the stairway inside the house, up the stairs, that was the living area and other bedrooms. I don't know what to call that. Not quite a townhouse, but something like that; a two story house that had been divided into various apartments and we lived in all of it. By we, I mean there was a collective of all of us, there were about 4 or 5 of us that lived in the same house. There was only one child, Mai.) So when I opened the blinds on the front of the house and looked out, the house across the street had a fumigation tarp on it, and I thought, "There is something wrong," "Long John, come look at this, this house has been uninhabited since we've lived here.

What's going on?" He said, "I don't know, I'm going to go check it out." Well, he went to go check it out and he never returned. I didn't see him until later that day when he was spread eagle on the ground in front of the apartment. I think they'd had held him all day. Our notion was that the police were doing something, and we were right.

Later that morning I'm by myself with Mai, the phone rang, and ever since the dream, I'd had the feeling that John would die soon, as I told you last time, I had just never said much about it to others. John knew what I was feeling and John knew what he was feeling, I'm sure. I believe that Alprentice, Bunchy, knew that he was going to die soon too in my chats with his wife, Evonne, later, after they were both killed. By the way, Evonne has a son named Osceola, named after the very wonderful African king. Mai and Osceola are the same age.

At any rate, I got a phone call from the Party office in South Central, and the man on the phone said, "Ericka, two men have been shot on the UCLA campus," and then he remained quiet. I knew who he meant and he knew who he meant, and I said, "And are they dead?" He said, "They've been shot," and I said, "Are they dead?" And he said, "Yes." There was a long silence on the phone and I said, "Thank you, goodbye," and he hung up. We never talked at length on the phone because we were always under surveillance—unless we wanted to mess with the people who were recording and have conversations about the good sex we were having or something like that! Just to mess with them, but we never talked about anything meaningful on the phone.

Then we hung up and I just waited because I knew that if that was so, within an hour Elaine and Joan and "Geronimo" Pratt and some of the other people would come to the house. (We did have guns at the house that belonged to Party members.) I knew they would be coming, not to do anything, but to get me, the baby, and themselves out of the house because they knew that the police – for no good reason – were going to come to look for us and arrest us for ridiculous things. Lisbet for instance, yesterday in some of her research work, found a log of arrests of Party members, I wish you could see it. I was arrested for something like "aggravated assault" on that day. Just anything to—

Thomson: With a three-week-old baby in your arms…

3-00:53:21

Huggins: Right. And a bail that was ridiculous at that time. Then, of course, the charges were dropped; it was just to have a reason to arrest us. Aggravated assault.

At any rate, all the people came to the house, they were all very sad. The only focused person among them was Geronimo who was saying, "Let's pack up, let's get out of here." He'd been a Vietnam War vet, so he was used to that kind of violent episode in a day. And we were moving to get out of there and

it dawned on me—oh and they told me what happened, that John and Bunchy—that someone walked up to Elaine and kind of threatened her, Elaine told John and Bunchy that she had been threatened, John and Bunchy went to talk to the guy, John was shot in the back, Bunchy was shot in the chest, they both died instantly. This was in Campbell Hall at UCLA. There is a movement afoot to rename Campbell Hall the Carter-Huggins Hall, and I just got in the mail this morning, "Where's your letter?" But, life goes on.

At any rate, the police came shortly thereafter, but before they did I did ridiculous things, because I just couldn't cry, I didn't want to allow myself to be that vulnerable. I figured I have to get from point A to point B – if I cry now I will be absolutely wide open to any and everything because I was hurting a lot. It was almost like I put the hurt somewhere so I could take care of Mai and, I thought, everybody else.

Elaine laughs about this now, she says, "You must have made 39 cups of coffee. You just pulled every cup out of the cabinet, I watched you, and you made coffee, you made more coffee, you made coffee for everyone and then you went outside and you hung up baby clothes." I said, "Yeah, that is the only thing I could think to do that made any sense. The baby clothes were wet, they needed to be hung up."

Thomson: You were in shock.

3-00:55:59

Huggins: Yes. And then I came back in and then I thought, "They could kill us. They want to kill us. They're going to come. If they kill me, they won't kill my daughter." So I went to a closet and I found a coat that was the color of those pillows. It was a coat I had brought from the east coast; it was not a California coat. It was a serious coat. It was so heavy that it was like a heavy, wool blanket. It had that lamb's wool effect. I loved this coat. And I got Mai out of her bassinet and I wrapped her in the coat. Not so that she was too warm or uncomfortable, I swaddled her in a certain way and I remember talking to her and saying, "It's okay, it's okay," and I remember seeing her little eyes looking at me. And I thought, "If I die, you are going to live." And I wrapped her and rolled her under the bed really lightly, so if they came in in storm trooper fashion, which often they did, that is how they came in everywhere, SWAT had already been created: Special Weapons and Tactical Force. They're like a Vietnam force in the inner city. I mean, this is colonialism in action. So I just rolled her under the bed and minutes later the police came and they came in storm trooping like: bull horns, "Put your hands in the air, put your guns down, exit." Well, we didn't have any guns, we had some bag, but we were not wanting to shoot anybody. That wasn't in our minds, all of us were too sad, we just wanted to get out to protect ourselves by getting out of the house.

I remember looking out of the window after I heard the bullhorns – police were everywhere! It was like, have you ever been in a house with roaches? At night and you turn the light on? What do they do?

Thomson: They all scurry away.

3-00:58:10

Huggins: They swarm, and scurry. That is what it looked like. They were coming out of the house with the tarp over it, they were coming from behind the house – there was only a small stairway behind the house. They were coming from the sides of the house. The house had two stories but also it had a wide, apartment-like parking lot in the front, the house was set off the street. And thank goodness, neighbors from everywhere were standing in the parking lot watching, that was our protection because the police are notorious in the black community, everybody knows what they do. It's not a secret, it is just the media doesn't cover it so Americans, being so media-driven, don't believe it when somebody says they were attacked because all these nice excuses are made for why it was okay to do so. Newspapers the next day: "Rival Factions Fight and Kill One Another." Uh-uh.

So I looked out there and already some of the Party members from the office, plus Long John, were all spread eagled in the parking lot. The men on their bellies with their hands handcuffed behind them, with the police officers – some of them were stepping on the backs of them just to hold them down. Then they took Geronimo, and there might have been one other man with us but I can't remember, but most of us were women. They spread-eagled Geronimo and then they took Elaine and Joan and Janice (I don't know where she is now), and one other person was with us, all down and handcuffed them and sat them in cars, and I was the last to come down. This guy, a crazy police officer, held a gun on us, on them, the whole way down the steps. And I was so grateful at that time, because I did think I was going to die, that I had rolled Mai under the bed. Then this other police officer walked up as the women were walking down the stairs and he subtly turned his gun on this crazy guy. "Go on," I heard him say it, "leave them alone. Go on, do something else."

"Well, you know, we gotta—" he started cussing about it, you know, "They're dangerous, they're armed and dangerous." He said, "Look at them, a bunch of women, go on." And then he said to me, "Is there a baby in here?" I said, "Yes."

That let us know how closely we were being watched, but also I was grateful that he said it because he said it with a certain amount of compassion. I really always do believe in individual human beings. I'm scared of human beings *en masse*, when there is a crisis situation with violent repercussions. I love being around groups of people when there is a peaceful environment or a happy environment. But I know that even in that happy environment there are individuals who aren't happy, do you know what I mean? In that violent

environment I know there are individuals who can be peaceful. This man was one of them. I remember making eye contact with him, he was at the bottom of the stairs he didn't have his gun trained on us, he just said, "Get the baby and come down slowly." And I rushed and I got Mai, and I got her out of the big coat, and I left the big coat, I don't know what happened to it [laughs].

It was dusk in LA. It was January, it was cool, but it wasn't cold. She had on a little pajama jumper, you know what I mean? I don't quite know what time it was when we got arrested but I am sure there is a record that shows it. And I walked slowly down the stairs because I didn't totally trust him – my intuition trusted him, but I wasn't taking any chances – he had a gun. And I didn't know who else was out there, even that crazy guy was somewhere. I mean he was card carrying crazy, the kind of crazy where you've got a whole lot of adrenaline pumping, and a gun, and you're a police officer, and you're white in a black inner-city, and you're dealing with the Black Panther Party. That was a crazy combination and I was very hyper-vigilant about that. But this [other] guy seemed to have my back – literally.

I came down with Mai and I was holding her like a mother holds her child – close to me. And I walked out onto this parking lot with this whole scene of people spread eagled on the ground, the women in the cars, there's police cars everywhere, the police vans, there's motorcycles, there's people standing there, there's sirens, there's lights and… I'm in shock already. I remember standing and looking at the whole scene like, "Woah."

But the only thing on my mind was Mai. Well, the only sane thing on my mind other than, "It's cold out here," and, "Where am I? Am I in Auschwitz? Is this South Africa?" I remember thinking those thoughts. "Where am I? Is this America?" Because I knew we hadn't done anything. None of us had done a thing and at any moment I could have been killed and it would have been justified: in courts, in papers and in history. And I remember thinking again about Mai and that she wasn't dressed very warmly and I held her close.

Then the crazy police officer came over and said, "Hold her up so we can search her for guns." I said, "She has on a onesy." "I don't give a fuck," he said. So I held her up under her little arms just so that there would be no danger of him harming her. He didn't have a gun turned on her anymore, you know? They just did not see us as human beings—we were not human beings to them. I can't imagine him doing that to any niece or daughter or sister, or any child in his own life, I can't even imagine him doing that. Then the not-crazy cop walked over and said, "Get the fuck out of here, leave her alone! Go!" That is when he became very aggressive about it and I remember relaxing and he said to me, "I am so sorry." Then they put me in a car by myself with this woman police officer, and I sat in the back seat with her and I don't remember what police officers drove us but they drove to the morgue. I thought they wanted me to identify John's body but they didn't ask me to get out and identify John's body, they just went and they turned to me in the back

seat and said, "We just wanted to make sure they were really dead—like dead good."

I remember the woman police officer just sat there like a zombie, she was just silent the whole time. She sat next to me and I remember asking her if I could breastfeed because I wanted Mai to feel comfortable and safe and she said, "Okay." They knew I didn't have any weapons.

Thomson: Was Mai crying?

3-01:06:18

Huggins: No, she didn't cry the whole time. She was so peaceful. I think my nature is peaceful so partly it was that, but also she was near me. I remember thinking about what a little being she was during that whole period of time.

Then they came out of the morgue and then they turned to me in the back seat and said, "So whose baby is that – Mao Tse-Tung? She looks kind of Chinese." I didn't have anything to say to that. "Or she could be Fidel Castro's." Then they took us to the 77th Street Police Precinct Station where there was a sign on the wall that said, "Pigs 11, Panthers 0" on a bulletin board, like they were keeping score. Is that adolescent behavior? What kind of behavior is that? I don't know. I mean, it's inhumane, but is it grown man behavior? I don't think so. They wrote out arrest records for all of us, they wrote one out for Mai: Baby Huggins, 3 weeks old, arrested for— I said, "You're kidding? You are writing out an arrest record for my child?" "Well, we have to have kind of like an inventory, we have to have a record of everybody who was brought in."

Then I remember asking again, "Can I breastfeed my child?" Because a couple of hours had gone by. She was new, she was little— a few weeks old. The police officers were talking, the two of them, a bad-guy, good-guy team. I wasn't saying anything, I don't care what they asked me, other than my name, I didn't have an answer—I had no tears and no answers. I decided that on my way after the morgue visit that I had no tears that I was going to show them at all.

Then the one playing the bad-guy role said to me, "Breastfeed? Well you should have thought about that shit before you fucked." In other words, now you have a baby, so what? Then the good-guy cop and the woman police officer said, "Leave her alone," and they took me to a little cubicle area, kind of like somebody's little work station that had a screen around it, and I could sit by myself. I could see Elaine and Joan from where I was, and Elaine was totally distraught and I believe she was blaming herself for the whole thing because she had told John and Bunchy that this guy had accosted her, so she was already in blame mode, which didn't take much for her. Joan was just like I was: No words, no tears, no nothing. Elaine wasn't crying, none of us, we refused to cry. Janice was nervous, I remember that, but there was nothing that

anybody could say that would harm us because we hadn't done anything, so I wasn't worried about her being nervous, I felt badly for her. I remember feeling like I had to take care of everyone.

This comes from my upbringing of seeing my father beat my mother and feeling like I had to take care of my mother, my sister, my brother – that was the mode I was in. That was default mode – in any crisis, Ericka, put yourself second and take care of everybody else.

A few hours passed before they took us in. Walter Bremond, head of the Black Congress building, from a huge, really well-known black family – the Bremonds are really known all over California. Matter of fact, one of the Bremonds' sons is married to a woman, they live in Oakland here, who I knew from the Black Panther Party, so I told him this story one day. Walter Bremond came to meet with me specifically because he came to ask me if he could take my daughter overnight. Thank goodness! I was so happy. I didn't know anything about where he lived, anything about his house, I didn't really care, I trusted him well enough that my daughter would have a place to sleep overnight. And no such thing as pumping breasts, none of that. I don't know what she ate, to tell you honestly, probably formula. He asked me how I was doing and while I was talking to Walter Bremond, two people who I knew to be members of the US organization came into the police precinct station, dressed in dashikis, and started shaking hands with the police. I remember looking at Elaine and Joan and we just shook our heads – we knew it. They were just hanging out in the police precinct station. I don't remember their names…

Thomson: Hmm.

3-01:11:49

Huggins: It was that clear. I said, "Walter, something funky went down here. There is a collusion between the police department, the FBI, and who knows who else, do you know about it? Can you find out about it?" And he started backpedaling, "I don't want to get involved in that, that's some sticky stuff." I said, "Well two people are now dead. But thank you for taking my daughter." Nothing. That was that.

Shortly thereafter they put Elaine and Joan and myself and I think Janice all in the same car, and took us to Sybil Brand Women's Prison where, I don't know where Joan, Elaine and Janice slept, but I slept in a room with a woman who had been arrested for prostitution, another woman who was arrested for drugs. It was so crowded I remember I had to sleep under the bunk on a mat. And this woman came over, I'll never forget her, her name was something like "Cookie." She came over to me, it was late, late, late, and she said, "What have you been arrested for?" And I said, "I don't even know." She said, "Well, why are you here?" I said, "My husband was killed and they arrested us." She goes, "Shit, that's deep." And when she said that, she touched my shoulder,

and that is the first time I cried. And I cried, and I cried, and I cried. [Pause] And she sat there and let me cry. [Crying]

The next morning, Evan Walker, playwright, sort of the peer of Ed Bullins and that genre of playwrights in New York, well he was on his way flying out that morning. He was married to Joan Huggins, John's younger sister; it was John, Carolyn and Joan. John was the baby, Joan in the middle and Carolyn the oldest.

He flew out from New York to get me and Mai, and I was released to Evan's care on bail. The next day the charges were all dropped and the bail money replaced and all that, but he came out to get me. Evan and I got on a train with Mai and John's body and rode three days across the country to New Haven, Connecticut. I'm glad I was on the train because it gave me time to be with myself and decompose – or – whatever a good word, decompose sounds weird, but to recompose…recompose because I didn't really decay! I was able to be half-way sane by the time I got to Connecticut.

I remember when we got there, we took a cab from the train station and John's mother ran out of the door, I can still see her: ran out of the door of the house, down the steps, to the cab, and grabbed Mai out of my arms and just held her and wept, and I thought, "The baby, that's what this is about," because I really didn't want to live, and I felt useless and inconsequential. I think I felt that way for the first whole year after John's death. There was something about my relationship to John that transcended the Earth plane [crying].

John's sister Joan was just totally distraught because Johnny, as they called him, was her little brother. She walked him to school, got him out of trouble, he got her in trouble – I mean it was like, they were closer in age. Carolyn was the big sister like I had been in my family and she's the one who would come to talk to me late at night or see how I was doing in the morning because John's mother was—I remember being there and waking up in the morning and hearing her taking a shower and just bawling, just crying, and crying and crying. I thought, "I'm not his mother, what must that be like?" And I would look at Mai and think, "What if I'd lost my child?" I can't even imagine. So I had this natural introspection that was really helpful. So I could relocate myself into my body and among people. But I was pretty checked out and it was Carolyn who helped me a lot. She is still my friend to this day. Carolyn is about ten years older than me and that was helpful because she was already a mature woman, she was always kind, and John's father was very kind to me too. He made it so that I could get veteran's money— widow's money, through Social Security. I remember him taking me down to do that. But my whole stay in New Haven was, like, a fog.

Three months later of course Alex Rackley was murdered. Tortured, murdered –kidnapped, tortured, murdered – and I was arrested for his murder, and really it did matter who fed Mai because I had to dry up my milk. Mai went to live

with my mother-in-law, where she stayed until I was released. When I went in to prison Mai was three months old and when I came out she was three and a half, so there is a way in which our relationship, my daughter and I, are really more like big-sister/little-sister. She is healthy and she's fine and she has two beautiful children, but she does not have a daddy. She will never have a daddy.

We were talking about that yesterday. We were talking about how with all of these things I am trying to do, that she can't see anybody making money out of any of it – because the "it" is that she doesn't have a father. So she doesn't understand the people who make thousands of dollars for speaking engagements and the people who are hoping to do films or so on, to position themselves to make money. People who do things just to make money and she gave the example of the Smith family and the Goldman family with OJ, the death of OJ's wife and how the Goldman family decided to sell the book called *If I Did It*—

Audio File 4

4-00:00:00

Huggins: Because they had to reimburse themselves for all the court costs, to reimburse themselves for the death of their beloved person and to keep OJ from printing it.

So her encouragement to me that I wanted you to hear is, "Mommy, just go forward. Just go beyond all the bullshit and the ignorant, crazy competitive people, and just do it better; do it right." She was saying that because there are people who have re-written history, I think Lisbet and I mentioned some of that to you.

For instance, the piece of information that you had that Elaine Brown went with me to New Haven? No! She intentionally stayed in LA to make sure that Bunchy's funeral, which was put together by his family, happened properly. As a matter of fact, she sang at Bunchy's funeral, so who said that she went with me? I don't know where that came from, but that's on your part an honest misrepresentation. But there are also some dishonest misrepresentations and Mai's point was, "Don't get involved in who's misrepresentating. Tell your own story." Which was what I told her I was going to do. There's no money in any of this, not really. I don't want to do it for money. But I do want to start a school, because I think that one of the things that redeems me and the Black Panther Party and a whole lot of young human beings at the time, and still to this day, is the fact that we did create an educational environment that mitigates the impact of slavery. That sounds like a really cut and dry statement right there but if you think about it, as I do often, if we all think about what does that mean, we gave people a sense of themselves and their place in history, and their indispensable purpose on this Earth. There is no end to what can be done, what they can do personally.

That's what Carolyn was trying to tell me: "You belong on this Earth or you wouldn't be here. Don't feel inconsequential." When I worked at the school, it was the happiest almost ten years of my life because I felt useful in a way that I had intended way back when I was with Jack and saw that horrible school his brother, T, had to go to.

Now this story gets me to jail and I skipped over what it was like to be asked to start a chapter of the Party by the New Haven black community and the Yale students. I didn't skip over that intentionally, I want to say that that's how I stayed there, and I called David Hilliard and said should I do it? And he said yes.

But I'm intentionally skipping over all of that part about Alex Rackley because I think whatever I could say about it, other than I'm really sorry that it happened, and I mean I am really, deeply, the bottom-of-my-heart sorry that that man died [tearful] – and I didn't kill him, and I didn't ask that he be killed, and I didn't ask the government to set it up so that a really sadistic, crazy informant would kidnap him, torture him, and keep us all hostage while doing so— Another one of those situations that for years kept me from writing my story, because I didn't want to tell a story that would further hurt his family or sound like I had a halo or something. I often wish I could rewind history and speak up, certainly not to the police. I was going to call up the police and tell them? No, they already knew, and the FBI informant came forward to say they knew exactly what was happening in that house. But for many, many years that was another reason why I felt inconsequential and purposeless on the face of the Earth so thank god that when I was in prison I taught myself to meditate, because that soothed this feeling of being essentially bad with a glimpse of the possibility of being a good woman. It flipped that I felt essentially good, and had this possibility of doing, its paradox, of doing something that isn't good and of making mistakes, and that all human beings are like that.

My whole two-year period in prison was of deep introspection. I don't want anybody to be arrested so they can do self-inquiry, but that's how I used it, it was like a monastery, and I'm glad that I had that experience so early in my life. I'm not glad that my husband died shortly after Mai was born, that I got arrested, then rearrested three month later because Alex Rackley died, and then spent two years in prison – I'm not happy about any of that – but I used it to move forward. Just like my daughter said, "Just keeping moving forward Mommy," and that's what I've always done.

[Tearful] Some days, I tell this story and it's fine, and some days I tell it and it's not. You know, I'm fine but this story is so—the whole period of time is so—amazing. And if there were any edges in my heart, and I'm making a gesture of a heart, then that period of two years in prison took all the edges off, all of them. There are no edges left. I'm grateful for that because I didn't need them anyway; we never need them. We need to be able to respond to

something with passion, anger if it's necessary, annoyance if it's necessary, hurt, sadness, whatever, but we don't need to walk around with an edge, and I think that when I was pregnant with Mai I was 19 – I was 20 when she was born, and John was 23 when he was killed…

I knew I didn't need to hold a grudge against anyone, that's what I'm trying to get at. For a long time I blamed Karenga, not necessarily for killing John, he didn't, he didn't pull any trigger, but for allowing situations to occur because he was so egoic. Bunchy was not egoic like that and neither was John, neither was Huey or David or any of those people – we just kind of did what we could at the time. Huey certainly became egoic but not at that time, it was more about a transcending ego, using ego mind to get some things done, but Karenga was so egoic that I was pissed at him, but he didn't pull the trigger. He, by the way, the day after, and this has always interested me and I always wanted to find out what this was about: January 18th, the day after John was killed, he disappeared to Canada. I don't know how that happened, who let him in, how he got away—not findable for quite a long time. This made Elaine and other people feel like, okay, yeah he works for the FBI, but we don't know that and I don't think that anymore. I don't really have any blame for him. I don't have any blame for anybody.

I brought back with me, and you can read it, an article from the *L.A. Weekly*, written two weeks ago, that Alden Kimbrough gave Lisbet and I while we were down there, about the Steiner brothers and the one who returned to stand trial, he's at San Quentin, and his version of the story is in there.

Now, I didn't tell you Marilyn's version of the story, I don't want to say her last name, because I'm still a little hesitant to say it on tape, what I want to do with Marilyn, the woman that I met at the ATM (because I haven't forgotten that you asked me that), what I want to do with her is interview her, just me and her, and let me listen to it, because I want to make sure that she's comfortable with me telling people about her by name, utilizing her story, because I mean, I'm 59, she's 58 now, she's not 18. I don't know what this means to her. I knew she wanted to tell me the whole story, she spent an hour with me in front of the bank, but I want to make certain that it is okay for me to use her story. Her story is different from Elaine's, it's certainly different from mine because I wasn't there. It's different from Joan's. She was in another place on campus where she got to see them just before they died. Just before they died. Isn't that amazing? We always thought they went straight away from Elaine to the room where they were killed, but there was a point where they stopped to chat, and she was one of the people they stopped to chat with. And then, out of nowhere I meet this woman. It's just unbelievable to me.

Some days I'm just with this whole beautiful tapestry of my life, and some days, I stop and I think about, this is what made me cry, what would it be like if Mai had a dad— a dad? A d*ad* she could talk to like she talks to me, and a

grandfather for her children [pause]. That doesn't get replaced. And the government hasn't replaced anything.

There was a class action suit filed for all of the survivors of the violence of the United States; about half the Party filed a suit, you could probably find out about it if you did a bit of research. Mrs. Huggins went to Washington D.C. I think, to testify on behalf of her family. What a day that was. That suit didn't go forward because it costs so much money to bring a suit like that to fruition, but there was a local suit in New Haven that was won, a class action for all of the families who were wrongly treated and under surveillance and so on. I think each of us got maybe two thousand dollars. That doesn't solve anything. Mai is not in need of money, I'm not in need of money. So that's that story. Then I stood trial for—

4-00:12:48

Thomson: We have about a half hour left on the tape. Are you comfortable with me asking a little bit about New Haven before the trial and what happened with Alex Rackley or do you want to—

Huggins: If you tell me why you need to know it and I know why we need to know it for the story, yes, but I'm kind of tired of talking about it.

4-00:13:15

Thomson: I'm not interested in just picking, and I'm not interested in— part of what I am trying to understand is the context of the Party at that point, and what was happening in terms of the effect of the ongoing police infiltration and the effect of discipline in general and—

Huggins: I think it made us pretty crazy. I think it made us pretty paranoid. I think it made us very distracted and unconscious. Here we were, these people who intended to do all these beautiful community survival programs, but instead what we were doing was fighting court cases and trying to protect ourselves from FBI surveillance. We really thought there were police among our midst. And that was what George Sams came from New York to say to us about Alex Rackley, that Alex Rackley worked for the police.

4-00:14:11

Thomson: Did you at that moment, having lost your husband, having a small baby, seeing the violence around you, did you believe that Alex Rackley was an agent?

Huggins: No, I didn't. You know, I can look at a person and I can sort of size them up. I believed that something was up because a lot of the informants were people who had been in a drug bust or been in jail before or they had been on the street and they were afraid of going back to jail. I believed that he could be somebody they planted because there are people just like them who were planted, and that continued, that wasn't just for that period of time. When I got out of jail, one of my best friends turned out to be an informant in the

Oakland chapter. I remember the day he came to me and said, he called me this really sweet name I can't remember it now, but basically he said, "Ericka, I'm getting in the red truck and I'm leaving; I gotta go. I can't do this anymore." And I knew exactly what he meant; he didn't have to explain that he had been working for the police, it was how he looked at me and how it interchanged. I'll never forget him, his nickname was Mojo. And the Party knew. We didn't harm Mojo, we just sent him on his way, he was honest, we sent him right on his way. But Mojo had been a heroin addict and he didn't want to go back to jail. So I thought Alex Rackley was in that genre of people. He was this soft-spoken young guy from the country. He didn't look like an FBI informant.

Furthermore, George Sams was a crazy fool. He was a fool. I knew it from the first day I looked at him. And I remember making a phone call to what we called headquarters in Oakland saying, "Who is George Sams? He is crazy."

6-00:16:05

Thomson: How was he able to insert himself into the chapter?

Huggins: Because he traveled with the more military-like men and he inserted himself there where they all talked about cleaning guns and self-defense— all this stuff. That wasn't my group of people to hang with; I was more about where are we going to speak, how are we going to organize this, what about this group of people who have been wrongly treated, what kind of defense will we provide them – it was like that. And then George Sams kind of came out of nowhere.

We found out later that the FBI had asked him to do everything that he did. I don't know that they asked him to actually have someone take Alex Rackley out and kill him, but they knew he was going to do it. He was their informant. Charles Garry and Catherine Roraback, our lawyers, dug in deeply enough to find out what the contract was they made with him, what they paid him, and so on.

He was a deeply disturbed human being and anybody, including myself, who spoke up against him, he would give us the wrong end of a gun butt. You know, he was like that, he was sadistic and violent. That doesn't mean that other people weren't and that other people weren't a part of it, I'm just trying to tell you that that's how he was and he was running the show. How he got to be running the show, I think was because the other men who were traveling with him across the country left and went back to San Francisco.

I remember trying to talk sense into George Sams; that was ridiculous. I mean, he never laid a hand on me, but he had no space, he just wasn't going to listen to doing anything differently. I told him, "You're going to get us all killed or jailed," not realizing at the time that he worked for the FBI, but shortly thereafter I realized that he must have. But we all suspected each other. I don't

mean that the women suspected each other, there were no women there that I suspected, although, later in time, there were women who were utilized as FBI agents. So it was like living in war, it was like living on the battlefield, if you can follow me, and we were traumatized like that and paranoid like that. I don't mean clinical paranoia, episodic paranoia I guess is what you would call it. So we allowed for things that went on in that house and participated in things that went on in that house that any sane person, especially me, would not go along with. But I was so busy trying to take care of all the women and keep them from getting hit in the head or raped or whatever by George – not by any other man – by George Sams. He was like, we were all hyper-vigilant around him and not hyper-vigilant about Alex Rackley.

4-00:19:22
Thomson: Had you guys had time to set up any programs or was that still—

Huggins: Breakfast programs, healthcare programs, and I can't remember what else because I was arrested so quickly, but those things did occur. We have some documents that Lisbet brought back from LA that show the John Huggins-Bunchy Carter Free Clinic and the free breakfast program and I think there was a liberation school. I hope I'm not mixing that up with another city but there were lots of things created.

4-00:19:55
Thomson: And at that time, before Rackley's death, what was the chapter's relationship to the national office? Were you fairly independent?

Huggins: Like any other chapter. We reported to the main chapter but because I was there, David didn't worry about the New Haven chapter. He knew I was there and that things would make some relative sense; I'm sure he had some feelings about that afterwards. There were weekly reports and so on. There was no way for me to call David at this time to tell him what was happening.

4-00:20:38
Thomson: Because everything was bugged.

Huggins: Oh my god. I didn't know what to do.

4-00:20:43
Thomson: I understand that the charges were bogus and I understand they were intentionally an effort to destroy the leadership of the Party; I understand it. But I wonder, as somebody who self-reflects in a way that a lot of people don't, when you look back on that, what do you think about your role in the last few days of Alex Rackley's life?

Huggins: That's what I was telling you about before. Maybe, you didn't hear me.

4-00:21:14
Thomson: Well, you talked some about spending time in jail.

Huggins: No. In those days, I also felt like I knew exactly what was going on, I didn't know he was going to be killed, that's for sure, but I knew that the way he was being treated was horrific and didn't want that treatment to occur and didn't know what to do to stop it. I couldn't think my way out of a paper bag in that period of time anyway, but I couldn't think what to do to stop it. I couldn't think who to talk to; I felt lost. I remember at one point that two of the women who were there, they were like kids, they picked at the guy and made fun of him and I was able to stop them from doing that. I said, "If he is a hostage of war," because that's how we kind of looked at him at that time, which is crazy in and of itself, but we thought that perhaps there could be some truth to him being an informant, not an FBI officer, they are two different things. Then they just hold him there until the next step.

I have nothing but poor feelings for myself about that, and it wasn't until I went to prison I started thinking about, "Well, you could have done this, you could have done that," But while it was all happening, I wish the clock could have been rewound so that at the door I would say, "Get him out of here." Not that someone would have turned him around and sent him away, not George, he probably wouldn't have, I probably would have been just saying something. But I wish I had said something at the beginning. I just wish that there had been something that I could do different and there just wasn't. And I think we all were under the spell of this paranoic thing. I'm not blaming George Sams for that, I'm saying it was like – remember, I told you about that country somewhere where they kept removing things, and emotionally torturing the people, and they started going along with things they ordinarily wouldn't? That's what I feel about it. But it took me years to see myself as a good person because I blamed myself for all of it. I don't care who pulled the trigger, I blamed myself because I live with me, and it kept me from functioning as a full human being for many years.

So that's what I think about it. If you want to ask me more, maybe I'm missing something, but that's how I think about it. I felt totally to blame for all of it, and it took years before I could even hear that, "Ericka, did you kill him?" "No." "Did you ask him to be killed?" "No." [phone ringing/interruption].

4-00:24:43

Thomson: We are recording.

Huggins: One of the things that I did a lot when I was in prison that I wasn't able to do on those couple of days before I was arrested, right away I started to think about what I could have done. During that period of time that I learned to meditate and was better able to take care myself from the inside out I reviewed my whole life as a setting for crazy things being okay. That's what I had been trained to believe, and I realized that I needed to root out of me whatever that old training was in order to fully live and take right action.

Nobody was prompting me to review my life or think about it, it was what I was meant to do while I was there. One of the things I believe about imprisonment that I think could be a new way of treating people who need to be imprisoned is to recognize that every human being has within them the ability to forgive and be forgiven and that you don't need to kill people in the electric chair or gas them to punish them. You don't need to beat them to punish them. It's all occurring from inside, given the slightest bit of prompt. I had my own internal prompt, but I believe that if prisons had some sort of counseling that was mandatory a lot would be different and people would return to their homes and their communities as the so-called better citizens that everybody thinks prisons will make of them. Prisons don't create shit, except trauma and I could tell you story after story about how traumatizing it was and how I avoided it. Thank god, whatever in me, or whatever forces in the universe coalesced to have it that I taught myself to meditate and practice Hatha Yoga, it was all an internal prompt and that's how my life has been more often than not with the exception of that period of time in that house in New Haven. Internal prompts not working, other than trying to talk sense into George Sams, which was hopeless or hoping that Bobby would help. You know, as a little girl I didn't have anyone – when I talked to my mother she couldn't help me with my father, I couldn't help her with my father, so it was like, okay, I give up.

Meditation makes you stronger, it doesn't make you softer. It takes edges off but it makes you stronger; it makes you more capable of seeing what you need to see and working with what you see. That's what happened. I started seeing the dark crevices in which all kinds of wrong understanding lived about people, about myself, about the world, and so it's a very poignant period of time, especially the month and a half I spent in solitary because there wasn't any excuse for not looking myself straight away in the face. I was already in administrative segregation, that meant that us four women were in a wing all by ourselves, no one could talk to us. Other women would be put in the hole for talking to us. Then I was put in solitary confinement simply because the charges against Rose and Maude and Frances and Peggy were dropped.

There were four more and me, and Rose and Maude were minors, so the charges against them were dropped almost immediately, and then Peggy, Frances, and I remained in. Peggy and Frances were sisters. And we remained in prison and then the charges against them were dropped, and when it was just me they put me in solitary because they couldn't afford to leave me in the big wing. So it was good for me in the sense that I was able to continue this introspection, and look at what I needed to do in the next step of serving people for the rest of my life, because I certainly wasn't in service to Alex Rackley or anyone else in that house, or myself, or my child.

After I got out of prison I still didn't feel like I was worthy of anything. I felt like I could do Party work and serve people, but I felt that there was this blight on my heart that could never be removed, that I was just not a very good

person. That coincided with the feelings of myself as a child, as not a very good person. I didn't understand paradox at that time; you could be a very good person and make a vile mistake, I didn't understand that, but I came to understand it by watching other people. And ten years later, I came to understand it in high relief when I met my spiritual master in 1979 on my birthday, right around the time that John Huggins had been killed ten years before that.

I understand we're all paradoxical, there isn't a person walking on two that hasn't made some mistakes. Why did I think that I was the only person who had ever made a mistake? Then I looked at the government and I had to laugh. They kill thousands of people all the time and go to sleep at night. Thank god Ericka, you have some introspection about it. That didn't make me feel absolved of anything, it was just that I could put it in perspective.

Then it was through a more directed meditation practice and spiritual path that I really began to ask forgiveness not just for the murder of Alex Rackley, (that I did not cause, didn't stop it, but didn't cause it, didn't do it, I have to keep telling myself that) that I was able to ask forgiveness of myself and that's where forgiveness begins. Because if I hit you with this microphone, I can ask forgiveness of you, but if I walk around for the rest of my life in pain because I hit you, intentionally or accidentally, how good am I in service to anyone?

I remember that shortly after I got that thing about forgiveness that all my relationships with all the people in my life began to improve, especially with my children. It almost felt magical, it wasn't, but it was so immediate that I feel like I had cataracts over my eyes or something and I could see. Everything changed. And the feelings of unworthiness still crop up, but not like that.

Also, one of the things about my meditation practice that I felt really relieved about is that the wounded feeling of John's death finally went away through this practice. This grief I had been carrying for so many years was physically located in me. I mean, every year around the month of January I would have pneumonia. Isn't that interesting? I had this one huge bout of pneumonia after I met my spiritual master and then that grief was gone – that kind of grief was gone. So instead of being this human being that was walking around on Earth with little flecks of joy here and there and a whole big pile of suffering underneath, it turned upside down and shook itself out and I was a human being with lots of joy underneath and these few flecks of suffering that crop up every now and then.

I still wish there was something I could do to rearrange, repair, or rebuild my relationship with my daughter, I feel like something happened there that I didn't do, circumstances did it, that's irreparable almost, because our mother-daughter bond was broken, but I do know that I can't go back and do anything in time. I can't reach back and change that, but I can keep loving her in a very

active way and when I feel that guilty feeling, *isn't there something I could have done*, then I drop that and stay in the moment with her and my grandchildren. Self-forgiveness, that is how I have handled it. Big forgiveness. Deep, abiding forgiveness, that I can think of Alex Rackley's mother and when I do I can say to myself, "I am so sorry." [tearful pause] And that's not a light thing to say. I'm not saying— you know, like get in a fight on the play yard and say, [childish voice] "Sorry." It's not like that at all because all these years of facing it directly in a very harsh kind of way have allowed for me to say that, so if I ever ran into her, I could say it and take anything she had to say. Anything. That's how I feel. Perhaps one day that will happen, and I'm ready.

I believe that in life things must be faced. There are certain battles that must be fought. There's no way around it. And I don't know what happens when you do this in life and I don't know what happens after life, or in the next life, but I do know that that's the way I hold it now. And I'm ready to write about it now, whereas for years and years, I was stuck, didn't know what to say.

I'm also tired of it being misrepresented as in the book *Murder in the Model City*, the author says I was cross between Mata Hari and an angel. What does that mean? Who is he talking about? Is that me? I mean, I do understand what he is trying to say, but does he know me? No, he doesn't. Has he ever spoken to me? Well, for ten minutes on the phone.

I hope that answers that question and I guess the next time we'll talk more about the trial and prison and get me back into Oakland. Does that answer your question?

400:37:06
Thomson: Definitely.

**Interview 3: September 28, 2007**

Audio File 5

Thomson: It's September—I'm having a block about that.

5-00:01:06
Huggins: 28th.

Thomson: And this is tape 3 of the Ericka Huggins interview and we're here in Oakland, CA.

I wanted to start by asking you about how much you were in touch with people on the outside when you were in jail to know about the organizing and protests that were going on about your trial.

5-00:01:28
Huggins: My lawyers brought me information but I would say that more information went to Bobby Seale. It's just the way people think and hierarchy, or whatever, more information went to him. Both of us knew about the rally on the New Haven Green. I got to hear about The Lumpen singing through one of my lawyers, David, but also quite often, members of the New Haven chapter of the Party would write us or send us notes, or people in the community would bake us cookies and things like that. Also, a writer for the *New York Times*, Jan Von Flatern, you might have read some of her stuff, she came to the trial every day that the trial was in session and she wrote me letter after letter after letter, so she let me know some things that were going on. And then there were people involved in the organizations themselves that wrote to us or wrote to us through our lawyers if we couldn't receive their letters. But I didn't have a moment-by-moment account of anything. We were really isolated.

Thomson: Did you feel like, there's a lot of people out there supporting me? I'm in the movement still?

5-00:03:08
Huggins: Oh yes. Yes, there were so many people. There were thousands of people supporting us and we knew it and I personally felt it. My response to it was that I wished that all of the women in the prison had that kind of support and they did not. Many of them didn't even have lawyers, because a public defender is not a lawyer, let me be clear.

Thomson: I've read that you did some organizing while you were in jail.

5-00:03:33
Huggins: I created something called the Sister Love Collective. We just called it Sister Love, and it happened through doing one another's hair. The white women wanted their hair to be curly or wavy, so we would braid it wet and then take

the braids out and they'd have crimpy hair. It was popular then. And the black women wanted their hair to be straight or braided so we did a lot of straightening combs and wrapping hair around the head to make it straighter or braiding. So in the process of doing hair, taking care of one another, a lot of political education went on. It wasn't about some particular ideology so much as it was, "So, how many prostitutes does your pimp have? Who gets the money, where does the money go? How are you treated? Is this the life you want?" Same with the women who dealt drugs or ran some kind of hustle that got them arrested for fraud, like checks, or cards or something. Women who were arrested for aggravated assault or even manslaughter, often for beating an abuser or trying to kill an abuser.

We talked candidly about the current issues affecting us and sometimes that led us to history, sometimes it didn't, it almost didn't matter. That women could feel whole and complete and beautiful was the point. We never did anything to harm any prison guards or matrons, and this is New England so the women prison guards were called matrons. Isn't that a funny term? Of course there was a woman director of the prison, she was not a nice person at all. Closeted butch, you know? Women were given special permission to go to her house and clean. I always wondered what they were cleaning.

Thomson: It's like the classic stereotype prison guard. (laughing)

5-00:06:02

Huggins: No, but she was it! I think that that's where that kind of stereotype formed.

If you think about the gendered society in which we live, a woman like her could feel okay in that male dominant environment. She could feel like she could fit in, blend in, and on some level, be who she was, except that her sexuality in action had to be still closeted, but everybody was aware of who she was. You just needed to see her take two steps in those high heels to know that was just not her!

But there were lots of lovely people who worked there also, so our actions were very low key. For instance, it was very New England, a very constipated environment in which the prison sat, and I was in the jail part of the prison for part of the time and in the prison part of the prison part of the time. One thing we did was they told us we couldn't wear make up at all, so we found make up and markers and somehow we got body paint of some kind, so we didn't wear any makeup as such, but everybody painted their faces kind of like kids do and in whatever beautiful, flowery, butterflyish fashion they could come up with and then I said, "Okay, when we go to dinner today, we can wear whatever we're wearing and just be silent." So we walked in with our faces painted and we were silent. Guards were called. Extra police were called in. They thought we were planning something. They didn't do anything but it did disorient them and it was a great joke for us because, no make up, well we can

think out of the box. So it was fun. It was fun and on some level, that small activity was so empowering.

Thomson: It sounds like turning that environment that's meant to dehumanize people into making it kind of more human.

5-00:08:47
Huggins: Yes. We did more serious things as well.

When a woman was brought in for selling drugs, if she was also addicted to heroin or some other stronger drug, she was put in an isolation room to kick without any medical intervention. She was just left there. Routinely, where my room was, I could hear the screams and yells of the women because your entire body goes through horrific pain, not to mention the emotional agony, but physiologically and physically, the body goes through a lot in withdrawal.

I decided that what we would do is smuggle cigarettes and candy, if the women smoked, but definitely candy or anything sweet in to ease the muscle pain and the agony of it all. We would smuggle it in and we would just say, "This is from Sister Love," and when they would come out of that isolation room they were so thankful and grateful because it helped them. It got found out, but it was the way in which the prison began to think about, "How do we treat women who come in who are kicking drugs? Do we let them just sit there?" Because one woman died.

I'll never forget that day. She screamed and screamed and screamed and her screams were not just, her muscles hurt – that would be bad enough. No, her screams were agony. I kept banging on my cell door and yelling out for somebody to come and help her and no one did. I remember, then there was silence. Then I remember seeing lights outside the window and there was an ambulance that came. Like an ambulance, something like that. I remember that I could hear sounds downstairs, I'm sure her body was taken away. The next day we found out. Those of us who were right near her room all knew she had died. In the morning, we all knew. This was after I got out of solitary confinement, by the way— I was released into the mainstream population after that. But at breakfast, we were all sure that she had died. We asked one of the friendly matrons what had happened. "Oh, she had a bad withdrawal. We took her to hospital." And we were like, "Come on. She died." And we found out that she died of peritonitis, because there was some puncture of the lining of her intestines and other complications as a result of that.

Then the prison authorities decided to do the same kinds of things that Sister Love was doing only with some intention. They received medical help if they needed it. They didn't ever get psychological counseling, you wouldn't see that in prisons until maybe the 1990s. Programs to help people recover from addiction because of course, they withdraw from drugs inside the prison and

then go back out and use again and come back in and go back out and come back in.

That was quite an experience.

One of the reasons why Sister Love worked is because it was needed. Another reason why it worked is because people were watching my trial and thought that I was something special. I assured them that I wasn't anything special, that we were all special and that we were all capable of making change. What change can you make in your life and in lives of people around you? So we had conversations about our children, and what we wanted to do different, addiction and recovery, abusive relationships, you name it, we talked about it when we could. The prison guards and matrons didn't have a clue what was going on while all that hairstyling was happening. They just figured, "Okay, they're occupied. We're fine." But amazing conversations went on. I wish I had captured them in writing, in a journal. I did write about them. I don't know where those journals are now, I think they may be in New Haven in storage. But it was really an amazing time.

We were all young. I mean, I was 20 when I went in. Was I 22 when I came out? Yeah. Everybody was about my age with the exception of a few older women who were the mentors for the younger women by the way. Older addicts who had that – come in, get clean, go out, use, come back, for years and years and years. I remember this one woman who was mentoring, she wouldn't have called it mentor, but she was trying to convince this young, hot-headed woman that drugs were not cute and that her life was not a pretty picture from there on if she didn't wake up. The woman nearly cussed her out and was unwilling to listen, and she said, "I want you to see something. You think I wear long sleeves because I'm cold?" She pulled up her sleeves and I have never forgotten this, she showed all of us all these tracks that had keloided. Keloid is that the tissue of the skin just keeps scarring trying to heal itself. Her arms were like she'd been tortured but she'd done that to herself, so she could find a new vein to put the needle in. This arrogant young woman began to cry, because her arrogance was fear and she knew what her life was heading toward and didn't think she could kick, but that was the day that she began to go into her fear and talk about it. How do I do this? I forgot why the older woman was there that time, she had kicked heroin but there were other things going on in her life, but I'll never forget that moment. By older I mean she was maybe 40, and this had been her whole life since she was that girl's age, and that girl was about 19.

So there were a number of older women who helped a lot but it was a beautiful experience and as a result of that experience, after I left prison, I always wanted to go back and take something meaningful, and I did. In the 80s and 90s I taught meditation in prisons and jails and juvenile facilities on the East Coast and the West Coast of the United States, and it was really an amazing number of years where I felt like it didn't matter what I did, I gave

information about something that the women could keep for themselves like I did when I taught myself to meditate.

Thomson: That's really cool.

I wanted to ask about Charles Garry. When did you first meet him? What did he look like?

5-00:17:31

Huggins: I don't remember when I first met Charlie. Do you know the Mill Valley Film Festival is happening soon, and my friend Hrag Yedalian did a film on the life of Charles Garry and it is showing October 6th and 8th. It is an unbelievable film and I am interviewed in it. I don't know if I showed it to you.

What I said about Charlie is that it wasn't as if he was just our lawyer, he was our friend. I don't remember when I met Charles. I certainly don't remember meeting him before I went to jail, however, I might have. When I was first introduced to him I realized that he was part of our lawyer team and that he was primarily Bobby's lawyer, then we decided intentionally to keep him as Bobby's lawyer and have Catherine Roraback, who had at one point been the president of the National Lawyers Guild, and was part of the ACLU in its red-baiting years. But Charlie was the head of our team.

You have to understand that Charlie always dressed like, you know those stereotypical films about the Italian Mafia? Charlie would come to court with a big sapphire ring on his wedding finger, and he did a comb-over with his grey and black hair, this beautiful face, he commonly would wear a black shirt and a white tie, sharkskin suits. I mean, you name it. Charles was clean, but not in the blue-suit, New England way. And not only was he out the box in his fashion sense, he was so in every other way.

Charlie set the precedent for jury voir dire, the way jurors are selected which is, in this country, unfair to people of color. You cannot get a jury of your peers. You still can't, but then, it was unheard of, all because it was on the voting rolls. Because it comes from the voting rolls so they were notoriously all white. But Charles, our trial was one of the trials where he put a new way of questioning jurors on the legal map. It took three months to pick our jury because he used every tack he could to have who they really were show up. For instance, he said, "Mr. Johnson, these are my defendants, Bobby Seale and Ericka Huggins. The judge has instructed you that they are innocent until proven guilty. Do you agree with that, Mr. Johnson?" Mr. Johnson, from Bridgeport with a crew cut, farmer guy, probably of German, English, Irish descent, right? Clean-cut guy, you could tell he takes care of his family. The guy says, "Yes, I could do what the judge has instructed." He goes, "So Mr. Johnson, do you have any friends who are black?" "Well yes sir, Mr. Garry, my gardener is a Negro." "Okay, Mr. Johnson." And then the whole courtroom, because all these activists and friends in the court room, not to

mention Black Panthers in the courtroom, would just guffaw at Mr. Johnson, and Mr. Johnson wouldn't even know what they were laughing about. Charlie would turn to the spectators and go [gesture] and people would fall silent.

I'm telling you, Charles Garry commanded the entire courtroom. Even the judge was in awe of him. Sometimes when it got too outrageous, when people were laughing too loud, or on the verge of booing somebody, he would hit his gavel. But other than that Charles knew what he was doing.

My favorite line of questioning was this one: "So Mr. Smith, you're from Hartford, Connecticut?" "Yes I am." "And that's the capital of Connecticut, isn't it?" "Yes it is. That's where the capital is." "So how's your family, Mr. Smith?" "They're fine. I have two children. One is a teenager and one is in elementary school." "Oh, great." "How's your wife?" And he would go on like this and then he'd say, "So Mr. Smith, as you can see, my defendants are Bobby Seale and Ericka Huggins and the judge has instructed you that they are innocent until proven guilty. Do you think you can give my defendants a fair trial, Mr. Smith?" "Sure." "Have you read about them in the newspapers?" (And he's getting at their bias.) "No, I haven't, really. I don't spend that much time reading the newspapers." And [Garry] goes, "Okay, well do you feel you can give them a fair trial? They are connected with an organization called the Black Panthers. Are you familiar with them?" And he goes, "Yeah." "Tell us what you understand, Mr. Smith." "Well, I guess they're just as good as any other motorcycle gang." The courtroom is like a zoo! Everybody, all the reporters from the local papers, from the *New York Times*, the court stenographer, all the spectators, the rest of the lawyer team, Bobby and I, and the sheriffs standing there are falling over and laughing and the judge hits his gavel two or three times but it doesn't help. Finally the judge yells, "Get him out of here! Get him out of here! He can't be a juror. Get him out of here!" And the guy, Mr. Smith, is like, "What did I say wrong?" Which made us continue to laugh even more. It was hysterical.

I remember that day I said to David Rosen, who was a young lawyer, not very much older than me—David Rosen says to me, "Ericka, I cannot believe what I am hearing." I said, "David, don't you understand? This is not the trial of Bobby and Ericka. America is on trial. Are you watching this?"

I remember the next day, David came – There's a picture, The Free Ericka/Free Bobby picture with me in a turtleneck sweater? David came the next day, because I was cold all the time because it was horrible. Not only am I thin and cold because of that, but it was cement floors and cement walls. It was just cold and it was Connecticut not California so in the winter, it was really cold and we had these little cotton dresses. So he brought me that sweater out of his closet and said, "Here, wear this." And I put it on and someone snapped a photograph of it when I was wearing it later – but David said to me, "I've got to say something." And I go, "What is it?" "This is not what they told me in law school." This was like his first big case. "They lied

to me. I thought there was justice in America. I thought the law made it possible for people to have a fair trial. It's a lie." And he burst into tears.

I said, "Oh David, don't cry." Here I am, I'm locked away and I'm taking care of this guy. We laughed about that later. Our children are way older, his daughter and son I think are my daughter's age. So by the time we were laughing about it, he already had gray hair and so on. I said, "David, do you remember when you came in there and told me how messed up the prison system and the court system were and you cried and cried?" And he said, "Yes, I was so embarrassed. I was supposed to be your lawyer. You weren't supposed to be taking care of me." I said, "Yes, but I'm so glad your heart opened because it gave you a view of what really goes on." He said, "Yes, that was a turning point in my legal life. That trial, I'll never forget it."

There was just so much wrong with what went on. Certainly, as I said in tape two, Alex Rackley did die, he was murdered, but the way that we were treated was murderous as well. It was completely illegal at the level of the introduction of materials and so on. I'm not talking about materials from the house where Rackley had been held. I'm talking about the way that they culled information. It was a very interesting trial.

Back to Charles Garry. When he questioned a witness there was nothing like it, he was relentless. He was compassionate but he was very dramatic, so if somebody said something that was bullshit, he would call it, but he would do it in such a funny way, that again, you had to laugh. Some police officer came in all suited up to say how, when they raided the house, they found drugs. There were no drugs in that house, it was just a bunch of women with their children – and Warren Kimbro. He said, "Are you sure officer, that you found drugs?" or something to this effect. And he said, "Yes." As the testimony went on, the guy continued to lie. It was lying. I knew it. Bobby knew it. Anybody with two grains of sense would know it also, he was just contriving things. At one point, Garry looked at him like, "I can't believe you're lying expecting anybody to believe it." He looked at him with this incredulous look and then he said, "Liar, liar, pants on fire!" We all fell out. It was like that every day. It was hilarious, just hilarious. I don't know where Charlie got all these things. You know, Charlie meditated everyday and he did Hatha Yoga everyday. It wasn't Charlie that convinced me to do it, but once I found out that he did it, I felt so grateful. He would go in the back room where the lawyers met and stand on his head routinely to center himself.

Thomson: I had read that he stood on his head and I just assumed it was this showy display, not a spiritual practice.

5-00:31:29

Huggins: He had a daily practice of Hatha yoga and he did handstands and headstands and he was really fit his entire life until Bobby's trial when he had gall stones

or gall bladder attack or something and couldn't defend Bobby. That's another story for another interview.

Thomson: Just talking about the craziness of the trial: at one point, wasn't David Hilliard arrested for just – he took a piece of paper or something?

5-00:32:03

Huggins: I don't remember quite, but David was arrested so many times. David was arrested also I think for speaking out in the courtroom. You know, the first time I saw Huey Newton was in that courtroom as well.

Thomson: Did you guys talk to each other?

5-00:32:21

Huggins: No, David brought him in. It was 1970 when Huey was released from prison. I went in in May of '69. He brought him into the courtroom. I'll tell you that when I saw Huey, I had the same feeling that I had when I first met Alprentice Carter, that I was in the presence of royalty.

I believe that there are some people that are placed on this Earth to do something big, and then when they are done with that thing, the energy needed for it leaves them. Either they die, or they take on some other, something. Bunchy was killed very quickly. Huey went to another place in his life. But I think that what he did in creating the Black Panther Party, only he could do, I think that was why he was on the Earth. Everybody has a purpose on the Earth. He changed the whole culture of the United States – isn't that amazing – in a particular way. And quite the visionary, and I knew it the moment I met him – I met him only with my eyes. I didn't get to meet him until later, to talk to him. We were seated next to our lawyers, separated by a little gate from everybody else in the courtroom, but I was happy to see David and I was really happy to lay my eyes on Huey at the time. I felt very supported by the both of them and up to a point in my life, I continued to feel very supported by both of them, and David's still a really good friend of mind.

So, anyway, Charlie just created such comic relief in the courtroom and truly, America was on trial. The DA was your stereotypical Napoleon. He was short. I mean short. It seemed like he was 5'4", 5'5", [short] for a man, and he had a lax eye muscle, which when you looked at him, you weren't sure. He was really conservative and angry all the time. He even walked around with his hand inside his jacket, so we called him Little Napoleon amongst ourselves. He would say the most bizarre, hateful things in the courtroom. Charlie would challenge him and he would call him and by his first name, "Oh, Arnold. You don't really mean that," which would make me feel really good because I loved all of the hilarity of it. It was like a circus or a zoo or something, I don't know, a zoo wouldn't be appropriate but a circus. Finally when the jury was selected, and a great jury was selected from the pool that we had to work with, six or seven women saved us I know for sure, and the men who were selected,

they were all pretty conservative. I can't remember if there was one black juror or not. They were truly Connecticut people. But the women, I found out later, they talked to the lawyers, were the ones who fought for us.

There was one woman, I don't remember her name, but when the deliberation was happening – and there really wasn't any proof that we, Bobby and I, had kidnapped anybody, conspired to murder anyone or murdered anyone, and those were the charges – there was this one really hard-right guy who just held to the point and he said it in jury voir dire, "If they're here, I'll try to follow the judge's instruction that they're innocent until proven guilty, but if they're here, they must have done something wrong." He held to that until the end and he hung the jury the first time. Then when they went back in there, I was told later that this woman said, she was a nurse, he was arguing with everyone about how guilty we were and he was hanging the jury again and she picked up a chair and she said, "You will not hang this jury one more time. I will hit you with this chair. You are – " And she named all the different things he was. She put the chair down, she didn't hit him or harm him. I just thought that was pretty hysterical for a New England girl to do, but everybody was through with him. She was speaking for all the other eleven people. He was just a jerk. But the jury hung again. He hung the jury again.

Then the judge said, "Okay, okay, okay, no. We're not doing this again. We're not putting these defendants through this. We're not going to ask the Connecticut taxpayers to do this again. Charges are dismissed." Which to this day I feel is a miracle. I feel that there was something so big looking out for Bobby and I, because we could have ended up like Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, if you know who they are and if you don't, you ought to, or all the other people who have been wrongfully tried and convicted and spent years upon years upon years in jail with no recourse.

I think it was a miracle and I think it had to do with Charles Garry and Catherine Roraback. I haven't talked about Catherine much but Catherine was, how do I describe Catherine, like a baby bear, that's how she was. She kind of moved like a bear moves, kind of lumbered around, and she was kind of gentle and everything unless you got in her way and her growl was so big. She used to argue with Charlie too, and that was not as funny as what happened in the courtroom, but it was funny when we would be in our legal meetings and she would butt up against Charlie and she would call him a sexist pig or something. He wasn't really, but that was her way of coming back because sometimes he didn't want to listen to her, and I wasn't sure if it was because she was a woman or a less experienced lawyer, which she really was not. I wasn't sure what was going on in Charlie's mind, but she certainly stood up to him. She was an excellent lawyer and she became one of my dearest friends and I've lost contact with her. I want to be back in contact with her. Every few years I'll just call her and I'm sure that she must be, how old would she be? Is she still alive? I'll be 60 in January. How old must she be,

because I was twenty something and she was in her forties. I really ought to find out.

She was the person who supported me in being able to tell the story of my husband's death on the stand, which I did do, because the media and Arnold Markle had betrayed me. Arnold Markle talked like this. [brusque, unfriendly voice:] Whenever he got one of us on the stand, he'd talk like this and he would look at the jury like, "Do you see these horrible, violent monsters, Black Panthers?" That's how he talked. So Katie and Charles thought it would be a good idea that when I took the stand, and it was important for me to take the stand as opposed to being completely silent so that the jury had no sense of me, she said, "You are who you are, being charged with what you're being charged with. Evidence puts you in that house in those circumstances that the court claims." And there was even the introduction of a tape recording. "But who are you? They need to know who you are and where you were before you got to Connecticut, and you'll tell that."

I remember feeling so uncomfortable to tell that in that courtroom, tell that story, because I didn't want Arnold to step on it, or the sheriffs, or anybody else. I was right too, because when I did take the stand and began to tell the story of John's death, when it was time, Katie questioned me and that was fine. She was gentle and she told me exactly how she was going to do it and she told me what Arnold's comeback was going to be. Still, there's no way you can prepare yourself for meanness, not really. He said, "Well, Huggins—" He never called me Ms. Huggins or anything like that. [phone rings.]

Thomson: Did you want to finish up talking about the trial? Was there something more you were saying when your phone rang? You had been talking about being cross-examined after talking about John's death, so do you want to finish that story?

5-00:42:39

Huggins: I don't remember exactly what else I wanted to say.

Markle said, "Huggins, don't you realize you're just a disgrace to your husband? You sit here and talk about his death, and look at what you've done. You're a disgrace." Katie was on her feet in big bear mode. "Okay, okay, Markle. You just have to shut up and sit down and leave my defendant alone!" The judge was hysterical and the courtroom was in an uproar and the judge hits his gavel and said, "We'll take a recess." I was in tears and it wasn't because I was afraid of Markle, I just couldn't believe anybody would be— I said to Katie, "In his chest, is there an empty space where his heart would be? I realize what he thinks I've done but does it help for him to do this?" And my daughter is sitting in the— of course she didn't understand really what was happening because she was just two, but she would sit there every day, and his mother was there.

There are just some mean-spirited people in the world and I don't know that talking to him privately would change his mind. I'm thinking about what we were talking about earlier, about if you can sit through a conversation with a person, they will change. I have hope that anyone can change, but I lost hope in him that day. Of course, a D.A. does a lot of dramatic showcasing, but that's how he was all the time; whenever I would see him, he was angry. Katie and I had a good laugh because she said to me, "Oh Ericka, don't cry. Well, finish crying but then don't cry anymore. He's just a short fucker." In other words, "You're a tall woman and he's jealous or he's intimidated by you," and it probably was true. It was probably true because human beings, we are so interesting in terms of our fears and our inability to sit with our fear. It could have just been that I'm tall. Not to mention, Black Panther. Black, and Black Panther, and tall and a woman! Maybe he didn't like women. Who knows what was going on? I don't know but his assistants weren't mean like that. I was just, it was him. Maybe he got picked on in the play yard because he had a stray eye muscle and he was tiny. Who knows what his story was? But Katie kept saying, "Ericka, it's not your purpose to figure out what his story is. He's just a mean fuck. Right now, take care of yourself."

That was one thing about Charles Garry – he would never stoop that low. I mean, when he said, "Liar liar, pants on fire," we were all pissed at the guy who lied like that but we could all laugh. I don't know that the guy could laugh but everybody else was in laughter. We could all kind of be with him rather than against him, because the guy knew he was lying, that was for sure.

The thing was, I wasn't lying when I told that story. I was telling a story to the best of my ability that was true, and I don't remember lying about anything. I said exactly who George Sams was when I was on the stand. I said exactly what hold he had over everyone including myself. I explained why and I was as honest as I could be, and I think that impacted the jury. I mean, we're human beings, and like I said to you in our interview number two, I don't know anybody that can say that they've never made a mistake. I really don't know anybody. Well maybe— no. I don't know anybody, come to think of it. I was getting ready to say, maybe a little tiny baby, but we don't know what their lives hold. But the whole trial experience, to end the whole story about the trial, it taught me that deaths are forgiveness. That's what I learned. The whole prison experience, the trial experience, Markle, COINTELPRO, the police, the news reporters, the spectators, the hecklers: forgiveness. My mother-in-law and father-in-law: forgiveness. And for myself, and I think I said something of that before, but that's where I want to end this segment.

After I was released, and that was a beautiful day, only because I was able to look at the sun without being told, "And now you have to go back in," or, "Now get in the police car, we're going back to jail," or "We're going to the courthouse." I didn't have any of that, "Here, Ericka, here's what you're going to do now." I was free, on a level. It was a beautiful moment, and I remember going to the Huggins' house and being with my daughter for the first time in

two and a half years, almost. I'll never forget that moment because when I got there to see her, in her home, she had her hair combed exactly like mine, it was almost my length and she was trying to be like her mommy and it was so touching.

I think I stayed in New Haven about a month, three or four weeks, and then I flew to California with Mai and stayed in a Party house with David Hilliard, you know one of the collective houses we all lived in. I'll never forget the morning I woke up in California, in that house – I remember David walking around the room that I was sleeping in, and he opened the curtains in the room and walked out and downstairs at some point. There was a stereo system that had speakers upstairs and he was playing, "Here Comes the Sun," the Ritchie Havens version, and it was so beautiful. I always remember that. I don't know if you know the lyrics of the song but it's really a beautiful song. I was just so glad to be back home in California.

What I'm not happy with is that I wasn't able to mother my child in the way that I wanted to. I was still too disoriented and I don't know what else to call it, sad, from everything that I had been through, and it took a while for me to ease back into real life because being in prison is not real life. I was uncomfortable with time and timing and sometimes with being with other people, because I'd been isolated for so long with the exception of the few women I was in prison with, so big crowds and/or big social gatherings were, not uncomfortable, but just different for me. There was always a way in which I wanted to retreat after a little while at first. Some of that filtered over into my relationship with my daughter.

Thomson: I'm curious about how Mai, I don't know if you know or if you're comfortable saying, but how Mai talks about that time in her story about her life.

5-00:51:22

Huggins: She doesn't and I would like her to. She doesn't talk about it on tape. She doesn't like interviews, she doesn't like being on video. She doesn't mind being recorded audio but I don't think she likes talking about it, and if I were her, I wouldn't either. But I think she lost both parents during that time that I was away.

I remember her, at her very young age, saying things to me that indicated that she was thinking about it at age two. I remember one visit she made to me, and I will tell you, the reason I taught myself to meditate is so that I could not only face myself, but face my child for an hour each Saturday, because there was really a way in which I did not want to see her and then leave her like that. You are a mom so you can understand what I mean. It felt worse to be with her for an hour than not at all, but I did it because meditation helped me to do it.

This is an interesting point, a point in which I want to say something. I remember when I first read your blog and you were curious about what would attract me to a spiritual path with quite a famous following and famous history. People don't make decisions based on famous, at least I don't. I knew by the time that I had found my spiritual teacher that meditation is something everyone needs in their life. Whether people do it or not is their business, but I can't imagine how I would have made it through that two years without resting my mind and my heart. I can't imagine how people do it, in this life, just get up and go through the day and go to sleep and get up and go through the day and go to sleep and where's the rest? I mean, there's sleep, but is there rest? We would not sleep deprive ourselves because we would be crazy human beings right? Sleep deprivation is no fun. It's no joke either. But yet, we are mentally rest-deprived, and the larger public, although it is getting better and better in the 2000's, has a lot to say about meditation, as if there is something weird or wrong about it. It's been proven for thousands and thousands of years outside the West and within the West, the Christian mystics and the Catholic mystics, that meditation is the central way of achieving wholeness. The doctors, the mind-body doctors, even proved it scientifically, yet we still wonder why people have spiritual teachers – and then we have all kinds of rooty-toots that we listen to in our lives and vote for, pay money to! It's just unbelievable to me. I had to insert that. I've never spoken to you candidly about it because it wasn't the right time, but it just continues to be mind-boggling to me how, what is it in society that sets it up that it's not okay for us to have a spiritual teacher? What is that about?

Thomson: I definitely want to talk more about the –

5-00:55:25

Huggins: We will. But anyway, back to Mai. I'm sure she felt like her dad was killed and then she lost me before she was even conscious that she didn't have us. Her grandmother and grandfather and her two aunts did a wonderful job of raising her while I was in jail. I know that because I know how well cared for she was and how clear minded she was.

I'll never forget one Saturday when she came and that was how I got on meditation. Thank goodness for meditation. I made sure that I meditated even longer on Saturdays so that I could be very present with her. That particular day, our visit was about over, which was horrific because there wasn't glass between us, but there was this big horrible table between us, long table, from wall to wall so I couldn't climb over, she couldn't climb over. But there were these nice guards who would let her come around and hug me. This particular day she looked at me and I said, "What is it, sweetie?" and she said, "Now will you go back to your little dark room?" and I wondered, "Is this how she thinks I live? That is kind of how I live. How would she come to that at age two?" And again, we often minimize the ability of little ones to recognize their world but that told me a lot about how much she must have thought about me, how much she must have missed me.

Then there was another similar period of time when I got out of prison and we were back in Oakland and she was staying sometimes at the children's house overnight and I was staying sometimes in this other house because I was just so out of it; she didn't stay with me everyday. I went to visit her at the children's house and she was three, and I went to visit her, and she said, "Will you be picking me up Mommy, and will I be staying with you?" She wasn't going to be and it broke my heart. I don't remember why she couldn't stay with me, I had to go speak somewhere or do something.

So I feel that there must be a part of her that is, what is the word, bitter wouldn't be the right word but as I said before, our relationship is more like a big sister and a little sister. [Tearful] When I was with her in Los Angeles the other day, I don't know if I told you this, she was talking about all the things I'm trying to do to pull the documentary film together, the book, these interviews, my thesis, all these things, and someone that was sitting with us said something like, "Yeah, and there are all these people who misrepresent the Oakland Community School and what Ericka did." And Mai's response was an interesting one, it was an articulation of the very way that I feel. We're very similar in the way that we feel about the world, although she's more fiery when she speaks. She said, "Mom, you don't need to be interested in all the people who do all these ridiculous, idiotic, backward things. You just need to keep moving forward. Don't worry about what they're doing. Do it better than that. Just do what you have to do. I don't like the idea that anybody gets money out of anything connected with any of this because, because of all of this, I don't have a father." If we weren't sitting at lunch in the middle of the LA sunshine with people around us, I don't know what I would have said, but it wouldn't have been the silence I did. I just left the silence there because I felt like it needed that rather than anything I could say. But it made me want to go back to that conversation and have a deeper one with her.

Every now and again, she'll say something like that and I only know that what she does tell me is that she often would get so pissed at kids who hated their fathers, who would squawk and whine and do all that, including Rasa, her brother, squawking about his father. She would say to people, "Shit! You have a father. I wish I had one." She never understood what that would be like and that's a child's experience of family. Not that a father is a necessity. It wasn't like that for her. But she knew that her father was there and was killed – it wasn't like he was an absent dad.

She wanted to know him and she spent a lot of time when she was little asking me questions about him. "What was he like? What did he look like? What did he wear?" Her aunts tell her beautiful stories of him because he was like a rebel from an early kid, like your children's age. He tried to redo his classroom in elementary school, like make things better for the students when he was about six or seven. Really, he was always like that. One of his relatives, I think it was his mother, remembered to me that one Thanksgiving she got home from wherever she was. It was after Thanksgiving. You know

how when we used to make a turkey in those days and you ate it for five days after Thanksgiving? It was one of those days after Thanksgiving and they still had a huge turkey. John was coming home with some kid from school and he asked him about Thanksgiving and the guy said, "I didn't have one. We didn't have any food." They lived up the hill in New Haven from the lower income community, but John went to school with all of the kids. John took the kid, he said, "Wait right here." He went in, he took the turkey out of the fridge wrapped it up and gave it to the kid and said, "Take this home." His mom gets home. "What, John! What have you done?" He said, "The kid didn't have any food at his house. What was I supposed to do?" That would be John Huggins and he remained like that. He was always like that, always. He was that way with me, he was that way with everyone. The solution is to give, the solution is love. So they always told Mai, they continued to tell Mai, funny stories about him and poignant stories about him.

He also helped a lot of people in personal crises in life and I didn't find this out until after he was killed. People would come to me wherever I was and say, "Did you know that John saved me from committing suicide?" Elaine Brown tells a story of how John Huggins got her to stop taking Thorazine because she was so depressed. Story after story after story like that. And he did it quietly; he didn't want any fame for it, he just did it because kindness is the way to live. Mai is quite like her dad in that way. She is very kind, very generous hearted, and very direct. She has his sense of humor. He was hysterically funny and quite the prankster and so is Mai. But about her dad, I think it's a very tender and empty place for her, and I think that for her as a little child, my disappearance, I don't know what that would mean to her. Black Panther, no Black Panther. She was a child. So thank you for asking about that because it's on my mind this morning.

Thomson: What year did you come to Oakland?

5-01:04:40
Huggins: '71.

Thomson: Can you talk about what was happening in the Party by that point?

5-01:04:45
Huggins: Everything. The programs were in full swing. There were 40 survival programs, no maybe not 40, maybe 30 survival programs by that time. There were chapters all over the country, Oakland being the headquarters.

Thomson: Had Huey already started asking people to come to Oakland at that point?

5-01:05:09
Huggins: Not in '71; shortly thereafter. I don't remember what time or year or anything, but I'm sure it's in the documents for instance, at Stanford. It will be in the Black Panther newspapers as well. There's a Black Panther chronology

somewhere that I read – Lisbet found it. I don't know, you can ask Lisbet about that, if she knows where it is.

What I did was I came back, I got oriented, and I started almost immediately just doing whatever I could in the Party office, but also, I was made one of the feature writers for the Black Panther newspaper so I wrote both local and international stories. By the way, for the record, the Black Panther Party was never nationalist, it was never insular, and if you look at the Black Panther Intercommunal News Service, you'll see as many articles about what was going on in Vietnam, in China, all over Africa, because there was quite a movement throughout Africa during the seventies and eighties – sixties, seventies, and eighties – also in Latin America. We wrote stories about people who were wrongfully arrested, wrongfully imprisoned, and the issues that face the African-American and other poor people's communities, like poor housing, inadequate healthcare, and poor education. Those were three big topics that the paper focused on. I wrote and in addition to that I started teaching the children in the Intercommunal Youth Institute.

Thomson: At that time it was just Party children?

5-01:07:07

Huggins: In the early days, yes. And a few kids from whatever local neighborhood we were sitting in.

Then I became the editor of the Intercommunal News Service, the Party newspaper. After that, around the time that Brenda Bay who was the director of the Intercommunal Youth Institute left the Party, Huey asked me if I would direct the Intercommunal Youth Institute. It opened in 1973 in the school building at 61st and East 14th, now International Boulevard in Oakland. I became the director of the Oakland Community School and I remained the director of the Oakland Community School from 1973 to 1981 when I left the Party because there was nothing left for me to be there for.

Thomson: Do you want to talk about the school now? When you became the director in '73, and you said it was in the building on International, how many students would there have been?

5-01:08:29

Huggins: When we opened the doors we had 90 students, five-year-olds through twelve-year-olds, and we had a child development center already for two to four-and-a-half year olds. Then within a couple of months we had 150 students, which was our cap. We always had a huge waiting list and unborn children on that waiting list. People loved this school so much.

The children came from Oakland, they came from Berkeley, they came from San Francisco, they came from Richmond, they came from down the street in the housing projects at Havenscourt and also farther East Oakland like Brookfield Village. A huge portion of them as a matter of fact came from East

Oakland, and the other ones came from other parts of the East Bay with our school vans. Then there was a teacher, Rodney, who lived in San Francisco, and he would go to two houses in San Francisco and pick up two sets of children and bring them to school and then take them all the way back home every day for years. It was like a family.

The seminar I'm taking this quarter at school is called *Family and Intimate Relationships*, and last night in the first class session I was thinking about the family, the kinship formed of the children and the staff and the teachers and the parents through the Oakland Community School. There was nothing like it. It really was like this gigantic family and I've never experienced anything quite like that since in a school setting. The Party had that sense of family too. I would say that the comrades I had in the Party were more like sisters and brothers for me in a certain way than my own biological sisters and brothers. And the children at the Oakland Community School were just as dear to me as Mai and Rasa. There's no end to my love for Mai and Rasa, but I never considered those children someone else's children, they were all mine. When I left there to go home, they went with me in my heart.

It was an amazing, amazing almost ten years, because I taught them before I became director and I've watched them grow and now many of them have their own children. All of them say, the ones I've talked to, that that experience transformed their understanding of family, of community, also of education and its purpose. So it was a phenomenal learning experience for me. It was the most phenomenal teaching experience I've ever had and to be able to facilitate parents from poor communities especially communities of color without blame, shame, or judgment was a wonderful experience also.

It was just entirely unique and I would like to see it happen again because it was a model that could be replicated anywhere, anytime, by anybody. It wasn't that you had to be black or you had to be connected with an organization. The organization made it so that we didn't have to originally raise a lot of money. We didn't charge tuition. We didn't pay ourselves. I was on welfare most of the time that I was the director of the school until later on in time when we started some grant writing.

Thomson: Did you get any income from the Party to live on?

5-01:12:46

Huggins: The Party subsidized our living facilities and our food.

Thomson: The house was actually rented by the Party, that you lived in?

5-01:12:54

Huggins: Yeah, and when we could no longer subsidize those houses, Huey had me sell them all. When I say Huey had me sell them all, I mean it exactly that way because I was one of the last leading members of the Party to stay around and that was because of the children, the school. I just kept thinking, "Something

will change." But of course, when you grow up with an alcoholic father, you always think, "It will be better tomorrow." But it wasn't better tomorrow. When we were selling all the houses I knew it was the end, and the reason we were having to sell all the houses is because Huey was so addicted that the money was now going into his drug needs, rather than the Party's real expenses.

When I say that the Party subsidized, I don't mean the Party paid everything because I was on welfare, so I paid my rent. But whatever I couldn't do the Party would pay for and it was that way for all of us. But most of the women were on welfare. The quality of work that we gave was not a joke at all. I could have been paid a five-digit salary quite easily somewhere else, but that's not why we did what we did. We never thought about money, except do we have enough money to eat, do our children have enough to have some clothes, like that.

Later in time I lived with Elaine Brown in an apartment and everything was subsidized by the Party. I got off of welfare and I believe I received a small salary for being at Oakland Community School but it was never top-heavy.

Thomson: I'm torn because I want to talk about where you were going with Huey but I want to hear a little more about the school. Did the school always have a residential kind of component? Kids did end up spending the night there later on?

5-01:15:18
Huggins: No.

Thomson: No, there was no sleep over?

5-01:15:20
Huggins: Yes, there was, but it's something in between and I want to clarify. The school building was on East 14th Street, now International Boulevard. Early on in the school's incarnation, (when it was Intercommunal Youth Institute and before that it was called the Children's Houses, because that's all it was, two houses in North Oakland where the children were home schooled, then we moved to a big house on 29th Avenue in the Fruitvale area of Oakland, not far from La Clinica de la Raza,) the children were educated there and they slept there. This is when they were still primarily the children of the Black Panther Party members. When we opened as Intercommunal Youth Institute and then renamed it Oakland Community School, the children from the community were the primary enrolled students. The Party members' children still slept at the 29th Avenue facility when they needed to, when their parents were traveling, or like me, when I went out to speak for long periods of time. They lived communally because we thought that was a good thing for them, to have one another, because things were so changeable with us. But the school children themselves, the ones enrolled, they went home to their homes. So it

was the Party members' children that lived at 29th Avenue sometimes, part of the week.

Thomson: Who stayed with them? It was just a rotating task?

5-01:17:06

Huggins: A rotating staff of Party members, some of them were teachers, some of the teachers stayed there. Many of them did. It was a beautiful house, you wanted to stay there, it was better than all of the apartments. We didn't spoil the children but we gave them everything they deserved that we could think of, everything that we could think to give them, they had. We did not want them to suffer in any way, but they weren't spoiled. They didn't have gadgets and new things just to have new things and toys just to have toys, but they didn't suffer.

Thomson: Back at the school, you did serve meals though, right?

5-01:17:52

Huggins: We started by serving breakfast. Then we found out that the children, not our biological children, but the children who came from the local community were starving, and so we served lunch. Then we realized that they were so happy with that that they would hang around, hoping that they would get more food, or they would stuff their pockets from lunch with food. Then we thought, "Something is wrong here."

I remember going to Melvin one day, the chief cook in the kitchen, a Party member, and I said, "You know what? The children really need dinner. Can you do dinner?" All he said was, "Yes, we can do that." That's how we ended up with three meals a day.

The Party always functioned on need. What do the people need? That was the consistent question. How can we serve the people? With the children, they were hungry. That wasn't okay. That just wasn't going to serve the purpose of this school.

When Rodney would drive the children in, his day would start at seven in the morning with those children from San Francisco and when he would get them home at night it was sometimes seven or eight, understanding San Francisco traffic in both directions.

The day started with breakfast and then there was community meeting in the morning where we all stood together and kind of did a check-in. We did ten minutes of exercise and then we went to class. We had breakfast, went to class. Breakfast, check-in, class, then lunch was at noon time, and the meals were wonderful. Another thing about the meals is we stopped serving, we really didn't serve pork for too long because there were too many children there whose parents didn't like the idea of it, just as many who did but we just decided, "Okay, no pork."

Audio File 6

Huggins: Because we just knew that physiologically it makes people more sluggish, especially after lunch. It's difficult to digest. I mean, we're not cows. We also took care of special dietary needs if children had dairy allergies and this is very common in black communities, lactose intolerance. We would do something about that. I remember that as we developed, the diet of the children developed. I became vegetarian in early '79, well, late '78, early '79, but I did not impose that at all. I'm not talking about being vegetarian but we just tried to have fresh everything, we were very meticulous in the kitchen, we weren't interested in giving them junk because they'd had too much of that and I think that's why the children loved it so much. The children just felt completely cared for.

I was interviewing one of the students the other day who said, "Ericka, don't you remember we had Project Seed?" And I go, "Yeah! I remember Project Seed and I had forgotten all about it." Project Seed was this innovative math tutorial but the innovative part was they came into the elementary schools that would allow them in and taught algebra, algebraic thinking, problem solving, to third, fourth, and fifth graders. Then one of the young men I interviewed said that he remembered being given calculus problems in fifth grade by Project Seed and it was the most exciting part of his day. He just loved it, that he could think like that. They were just these happy young guys who created this program. They had been Berkeley students or something and one had a long bright red ponytail and the other one was African-American with a big Afro, and they would come in and the kids would cheer when they saw them.

Their whole premise was just like ours. You teach a child how to think, not what. They would come in and they knew that if the children could learn how to think in an abstract way and do these problems, that they would be able to do many other things in their academic lives as well as their own daily lives, and they were right. None of the kids forgot it.

My daughter was remembering to me week before last that the school taught the children how to do this Korean finger-counting called Chisenbop. You learn how to count your tens, hundreds digits, and ones on your fingers, but it's a rhythmic, almost beat way of doing it. I had totally forgotten about Chisenbop and then I taught poetry writing to the children. After I began working with my spiritual teacher, he encouraged me to teach the children meditation. He said, "Just ten minutes a day." So the whole school meditated everyday for ten minutes after lunch. The whole school, from the baby kindergarteners all the way up, and the staff, just a blanket of the silence would fall over the multi-purpose room when we did that and then we would get up and go on with our day. It was so beautiful. So the school culture created itself through our intention to love the children, to teach them how to think, and to have them become global citizens.

We had a really, really bad attitude about Americans thinking that America is the center of the world. It is not. We taught the children Spanish. This was before bilingual education was a big deal. I am glad to say it was before bilingual education became a no-no.

The curriculum was, in a way, a traditional elementary school curriculum except that we were doing the teaching. We wrote the curriculum. We wanted them to learn math, and to read and to write, but about what and for what? What was the math for? Reading what? Some antique old history book that left out the true history of the United States or other things?

Were we Afro-centric? No, but we were primarily African-American people teaching African-American and Latino students. Then, after a while, [unclear] we had Latino staff and Asian staff. But it was amazing. And many of the teachers were men, which was something else you did not see in the public school classrooms, nor did you see a lot of fathers at home. So that was very, very, very important and we intentionally did it.

I had an open door policy: children and even parents and staff could come into my office and talk to me about anything at any time of day provided I was in there when I wasn't teaching or walking around.

The favorite part of my day, if something was not going quite right or if I was through with adults because adults are a problem for me sometimes, is that I would just find my way to whatever classroom and sit there and then I would feel better and then I would come back and be adult. I say that kind of tongue in cheek because when adults are loved as children, they don't behave poorly as adults and that was what we were hoping for for each of these children, that they would believe for the rest of their lives the operating principle of the school, that the world is our classroom.

Thomson: It's so inspiring to hear about it. It's really sweet.

6-00:07:00

Huggins: Yeah, it's beautiful. I'm telling you, I want to do it again.

Thomson: Were there particular theorists or particular schools through history that you were looking towards as models?

6-00:07:17

Huggins: Well I became a part of the National Association of Alternative Schools, so there were lots of schools, there wasn't one in particular. We took our cues from the really progressive schools in the United States when we could find out about them, any of them. I don't remember all of their names so I can't tell you specifically, but this Association of Alternative Schools was just the most amazing community schools and alternative schools and socialist schools and sometimes communist schools for children. I don't mean they taught them communism or taught them socialism. They were run from the other

standpoint. We didn't know about the spiritually-based schools at that time, there are many of those as well that teach compassion and kindness and love of nature, love of the Earth, love of one's self and others, there are many of those schools now. There was no such thing as charter schools then. We were the great-great-grandma of charter schools.

I would say that we got a big cue from China when Elaine returned from the People's Republic. She told us all about the schools she visited. There were huge numbers of children in the schools but there were all these operating principles. One is, "Spoil all the children, not just one." They didn't mean spoil them in an American sense, just give them a bunch of gadgets and walk off and leave them in front of the TV. They meant shower them with love and with all of the expressions of love.

She described to us this daycare center at one of the factories where there was staff in the daycare center, a huge staff, with a large number of babies. What they did was they made this long cradle with a lot of little cribs in it and the cribs were all strung together with one long pole and on either end, there were two people who sat there and rocked the cradles. When she told us that, we were like, "Aww, that is so sweet. What's wrong with us? We don't even have daycares in factories." There weren't any in America but yet we ridicule the Chinese for being communist. Certainly there were horrible, horrific things that went on in the history of the People's Republic, but you never hear about the schools.

She said all of the children were given the opportunity to learn to dance, to learn to sing, to perform instruments, to recite poetry, to do whatever they would do and the whole community would come out and sit there for the little children's shows. We did that at Oakland Community School anyway, but we felt so affirmed. We didn't think it was dumb to show up for a children's performance or just cutesy. We knew that this was how they were learning to be in the world. It was a certain kind of empowerment. You didn't have little Jane taking ballet lessons and little Tanesha not. Jane and Tanesha and everybody else had ballet if that's what they wanted to do, and the boys could have ballet and the girls could build things and the boys could cook things – some dismantling of gender roles too. It was so inspiring because we were trying to do that but we didn't have any reference point for it. We didn't have any precedent set for us.

Thomson: That is part of what is so amazing hearing about it. It just feels like you're creating out of nothing.

6-00:11:17

Huggins: Yeah, we did create it straight up out of nothing. I didn't have a degree to run a school, I hadn't even finished college yet! Some of the teachers who came like Rodney, he was a first year teacher when he came to Oakland Community School. Vivette, another teacher, had many more years experience of teaching

but she was not an administrator. Elaine didn't have any administrative background in schools. We just knew: You love them, you hug them, you share what you know. Don't give them your bullshit and your horrific experiences in life, but tell them the truth, and talk to them, don't have secrets that are unnecessary. Talk to them. These underlying principles expressed through the curriculum. For instance, what happened with the Native Americans in the United States? How many adults know the truth, adult Americans? Not many. Why? Because the history books just wrote it out or decontaminated them as I would call it. We told the children what happened and we did it in groups. We told the story without a lot of bias and blame to individuals. We just said, "There was ignorance and this is what the settlers did."

We talked about slavery. We simulated the slave ships so that children would understand what it felt like to be packed in there, head to groin, arm to arm with people, like in a sardine can. The children would ask, "So how did they pee, Ericka? Where'd they poop?" And they could answer their own questions couldn't they? "Did they get sick? Did they throw up? How did they have babies? Do you think they wanted to live?" We didn't know a public school setting or a private school setting where children were allowed to think in this way, think things through. We didn't have them sit there and agonize over the history of slavery for days on end, but we didn't hide it from them.

There comes a time in every parent's life where the truth of the world they live in needs to be shared, and now we have all of these private schools that shelter children from conditions of poverty, other children who do not have a lot, and from quote "bad neighborhoods". We always told the children, "You're from neighborhoods that are considered bad. We don't agree with that. Your parents love you, don't they?" And they would go, "Yeah." "Your parents love one another, don't they?" "Yeah, for the most part." [laughter] Good things happen in the projects too. So we affirmed where they lived. We never told them, "Get your education and get out." We told them, "Once you become that person, you live the life of your dreams, you make sure to come back to Havenscourt projects and offer—" Do you know that many of them have done that? They always have held their communities in high regard. If they didn't do that, whatever community they became a part of or created for themselves – they support that community.

One of the students I interviewed recently told me a story of a woman friend of his, not an intimate relationship but intimate at the truest level, she is a dear friend of his and she is a single mom and she is putting herself through a doctoral program, and she has a young child. He's a single man, no children, good income. Sometimes she doesn't have enough and he says, "Here, take this money. You need it." She goes, "What's wrong with you? You know I'm not gonna give up nothing." He goes, "I'm not talking about that. I was raised to believe that if somebody's in my community, that I am going to support them and they will support me. That's how I was raised." When he told me

this story, that's where he learned it, at Oakland Community School, I was so touched. Especially for a young man. You could hear in the young woman, his friend, that she had been burnt time and time again.

What is society telling our young men that their responsibility is? We live in this sort of individualistic relationship [pause] comedy. I want to call it the comedy, where we think we can do everything by ourselves, and we cannot. That doesn't mean that we cannot also be independent. I call it interdependent. So when he told me that he learned that kind of relationship to community, it was very strong and he said if somebody's harming someone else, he steps in. If someone's saying something harmful to him, he patiently waits to see where the person is coming from and then if the boundary is crossed, he says, "Okay, you don't want to go there, unless we're going to have another kind of conversation." But he doesn't just react. It was one of the more beautiful interviews I've done regarding former students in the school. [break in interview]

Thomson: What I'd like to ask you about is the early seventies and what was happening in the Party. You were saying that when you got back there were all the community programs. There were chapters all over the country. You talked about the Party houses that Party members lived in. I guess I'll just launch into talking about Huey. What was your relationship with Huey when you first came back? Did you become friends with him?

6-00:18:11

Huggins: Yeah, I became friends with him. He liked me because I meditated in prison. He liked me because I wrote poetry. He liked me because I could think on my own. I wasn't sort of a carbon copy whatever whatever. I didn't know that's what he liked about me until I really reflected on it.

When I first came to Oakland, on those first days I was there, Huey came to meet with me—had I told you this story before? Someone in the Party, unknown to me, had written to him and to David that I should be kicked out of the Party because I meditated and because I was a hippie and a lot of things. Of course she says she never did that but I don't know, I was told she did, Huey told me she did and I didn't feel that he had a reason to lie. It's possible that he exaggerated it but it didn't sound that way. He was just sort of making a statement, "I hear that you meditate. I hear you write poetry. Some people think you don't need to be here." "Alright, well what do you think?" And he liked that I asked him that question. He said, "So when you meditate, what do you do?" I told him and he said, "I meditated too when I was in the hole." He said, "That was how I got through it. It's a wise thing to do." Then we talked about some other things and he asked me how I wanted my Party work to be or something like that. I think he just wanted to know, what was I thinking now that I was home and was I going to stay with the Party. He did ask me that eventually, "Are you going to stay with the Party?" And I go, "Yeah." He was quite sane. He wasn't using. He wasn't over-the-top crazy. He was Huey,

which meant that he was operating at 90 decibels at all times, but that was my first meeting with him. Then when he was done talking to me he said, "I like you and I'll see you later." And that was the end of the conversation. I liked him too.

I thought that he was really a different kind of human being and that I could talk to him about just about anything and he wouldn't have a judgment, and I found out that that was true. That remained true until the drugs were speaking and Huey was not there anymore.

It was almost like a possession. I know that there are people who were raised in my mother's Pentecostal church who talk about possession and demons; I'm not talking about it from that standpoint. I just remember at one point at the very end of my life in the Party, in 1980, '81, where I would look into Huey's eyes and there was no Huey there anymore. I didn't know what was in there, but it was not Huey. I assumed it to be partially the drugs but I also believe, energetically, that people can succumb to dark forces, that you open yourself to light or you open yourself to dark. It may sound mystical and in a way it is, but it is very practical for me. I operate on energy. I can tell when somebody is okay for me to be around or probably not okay or definitely run in the other direction. When I met Huey Newton in 1971, it was nothing to make me run in the opposite direction. Eldridge Cleaver? Yes, I stayed out of his way – and he definitely was not addicted to anything, it wasn't about that – it was just energy. Bobby, I just loved him from the first sight. He's an open, fun guy, but I couldn't talk to Bobby in the way that I could talk to Huey. They're just two totally different beings. I could talk to Huey about the most vast expanses of human existence. I could share my poetry with him. With Bobby, I could talk to him about community programs and all kinds of things. So, I found a real friend in Huey.

Thomson: You talk about him in the eighties as just having been overtaken by drugs and so forth…

6-00:23:01

Huggins: Yeah, and also by the pressure of the FBI COINTELPRO. I read a document when we got our… through the Freedom of Information Act you can request your files, and we requested the files of the Party. I told you this story –

Thomson: [negative response]

6-00:23:21

Huggins: We requested the Black Panther Party FBI documents and they came in a UPS truck. There must have been, I don't know, 25 boxes of them and every document I read about Huey, the intent was to drive him crazy. Every document. It made me nauseous. There are also the documents that showed how they set up John's and Bunchy's death, how they set up Samuel Napier when he was running the newspapers across the country, how they would

have somebody pour water on the newspapers before they could be delivered or shipped, to damage them, to make them undistributable. The amount of stuff that the FBI's counter-intelligence program did with tax payers' money is just about the most violent thing I could think of and violence, it pretty much breeds violence. Huey was surrounded by people he couldn't trust, intentionally, through the FBI's counter-intelligence program and just by the sheer numbers of people who once they recognized what the Party faced were afraid and would do whatever they could to protect themselves.

After a while the paranoia, a true paranoia, set in with Huey, complicated by the drugs, so he even began to distrust people like David who would never harm a hair on Huey's arm and body. Eventually he distrusted me because I said, "You know, you really want to think about how you're behaving in public."

I used to be one of the people who covered for him if something happened. "You want to be behaving in public. You're violent and I can't do anything about that but you're impacting the school and the children." That was always my standpoint. Do whatever you're going to do if it blows your dress up, but keep the children out of it and keep other people's lives out of it. He didn't like that. That was just before the shit hit the fan with me and Huey. I want to go back though because that's not the seventies. That's the eighties. So you wanted to ask me about the seventies.

Thomson: I do. [tape ends]

**Interview 4: October 5, 2007**

Audio File 7

7-00:00:03
Thomson: Okay, you ready?

7-00:00:06
Huggins: Yes.

Thomson: It is October 4th I think. October 5th?

7-00:00:21
Huggins: 5th.

Thomson: This is Fiona Thomson here with Ericka Huggins. This is the fourth, final probably interview and we're here in Oakland, California and we're going to go ahead and get started.

7-00:00:44
Huggins: Where did we leave off last time?

Thomson: Well we talked about the school and maybe we want to come back to that more too, I don't know, but I had a question I was hoping to start with today. When we talked last time you had talked a little about what changes you saw in Huey Newton by the early eighties and I wanted to go back to that because I was curious where you located those changes in time because looking at it from the outside, I start to see a level of violence by the mid-seventies and I'm wondering if that feels true to you.

7-00:01:33
Huggins: I knew—you mean his personal violence?

Thomson: Yeah, but well—

7-00:01:39
Huggins: I knew that he was a particular kind of person and I knew that, for instance, unlike many other people he had unbelievable control and then in the next moment absolutely none. If I were to describe him, and I'm not a professional psychologist, but it wasn't mood swings, it was like he was really, really up at some points and really, really down at others; there are people that think that he was bipolar. I don't know, that's a clinical term used to describe all kinds of things. I would say that he self-medicated and when he did, he was not the most pleasant or peaceful person to be around and when he was sober, he was absolutely peaceful, quiet, shy. Then I got to see him when he was disturbed by external circumstances affecting the Party, or his own life, or the world, because he used me as a confidant in that regard. I didn't see him until very, very late in the years in that other way, let's say in the way that was more manic.

In 1974 I was pregnant with Rasa, my older son, and I got a call that Huey had been out and was arrested for shooting a young prostitute. Never would I think that he would shoot anybody, okay? Beat somebody up? Yes, I'd never seen him do that, but I knew he was capable of it. I know one thing that I asked. I had a strange feeling about it and this all came out later in the trial but he said to one of us, if not directly to me, that it was an accident. I knew him well enough to know when he was covering something up or telling the truth and I really believe he was telling the truth, not because I am Pollyanna but because there was just something about the way he said it, with such remorse. That was the paradox and the dilemma. He didn't want people like that young woman, Kathleen, to be on the street prostituting anyway, yet he was out there with a group of people and she was a part of that group – the lumpen. That's kind of what the term represents, Kathleen and her pimp and all the other people who might have been out there on the streets at that time in 1974.

The next thing I knew, Huey was in exile to Cuba where he was for a number of years and during that time was very focused and clear and so on. People went to visit him, particularly Elaine, and said that she'd never seen him so clear and focused and sober. Not just sober, alcohol and drugs, but sober. Then he came back and found the Party to be in a good place but not a place he took the Party to, and in that more manic phase of his, he was upset with Elaine. When he was not in that manic phase, he had great gratitude for her for everything she had done. This is how we lived. This is the nature of addiction. This is also the nature of the craziness that the external forces and the internal forces in resonance with one another create. I said he fought with his demons and he didn't succeed. That's how I described it, that's how I continue to describe it.

What happened in the late seventies is that I talked to him about this. He would call me to his house late at night and we would talk about any and everything. We were friends, never lovers, although in some stretch of the imagination that could have been possible because Party members were free to have lovers – male, female, multiple lovers anytime they wanted, sometimes with the permission of people who were married to others, and with permission I would say that because we lived on the edge and didn't have great respect for the gendered society we live in or the construct called family, that we created it as we went along to serve us and hopefully not in disservice to anybody. For instance, I was lovers with a man named Al. He was married to Norma, who was one of my best friends. Norma wasn't really in love with Al anymore, she was married to him. So with permission, I was Al's lover and Norma and I are still friends and Al and I are still friends. That was something we created and I'm grateful that we did because it taught me a lot about how people can be with one another. We tried not to be deceitful and devious in our relationships.

Then I noticed that Huey's way of being was continuing to escalate in a very dark way and then he asked me, since I was one of the leaders of the Party

who continued to be around, he trusted me enough to ask me to sell the houses, like the two houses that the school started in, those two houses in North Oakland and some other houses, including the one on 29th Avenue where we had the big dormitory for the school and it became by the way, because I made certain of it, a battered women's shelter, a pretty famous one. So we sold the homes.

Since, we had been confidants not to mention friends, and I was still doing Party work and running the school, at one point I spoke to Huey at the school. He came to the school because he would come to the school to be in the presence of the children. It was like the hub of the Party's activities in a way, and Huey always loved being there because there was a part of him that was like a big kid. I don't mean he never grew up. I mean he was just childlike. He loved it there and the children loved him. But by 1978, '79, he was coming just as a show of power in a certain way. He would come. The men that he traveled with would come and they would kind of hang out and we were like, "What are you doing here?" The staff would say to me, and I think that the children eventually noticed that Huey wasn't as friendly as he used to be, but this was drugs. Straight up, no other reason for it, drugs. Cocaine specifically.

I've done everything you can imagine except heroin but I've never had any strong feeling for drugs, definitely not alcohol, being raised with an alcoholic parent. It just wasn't my thing. I don't have judgments about people for whom it is except when it's affecting me and those around me, and it was definitely affecting all of us, so I spoke up about it one day when he came and sat in my office and was talking to me. The assistant director of the school, Donna Howell, was there.

I said, "Huey, your behavior, which I know is partly caused by the pressures you're experiencing, is having a negative impact on the school and the children, and you're using the money that comes into the school for yourself." You have to understand that he had never done that before. The school was sacred to him. So I knew that the drugs were taking him right over the edge. He looked at me with this fierce look and I know that if I had not been as close to him as a friend, I would have been jumped on when he gave me that look. The men who he traveled with were around too, and I knew them all, they were all my friends, I knew all of them, they were no strangers, but they were all acting like strangers that day, in that moment.

He said, "Say one more thing and I'll knock your teeth down your throat." At which point Donna jumped up out of her seat and she said, "I'm not having this. I'm leaving." And he said, "Sit down or I'll kick your ass." Donna didn't sit but she was totally stunned. I was, I don't even know what the word was, I wasn't shocked but, I don't know how to describe the feeling. It was a mixture of feelings because I believed that he would. He didn't. He didn't touch me but I knew at that moment, I can tell you what I knew: The Huey I knew was

gone. Gone. As a matter of fact, there was a time not too long after that that I looked into his eyes and I don't know who was there, but it wasn't Huey.

I don't remember what year that was but it was after a beautiful event had occurred and that was in January of 1979 I found out— so this had to be late '79, early '80 when that interaction occurred. In January of 1979, which had always been a problematic time for me, it was my birthday and also the anniversary of John's death, so internally it was a melancholy kind of time. My lover at the time, Mark Alexander, who I'd had met through Gwen Newton, Huey's wife at the time, called me and said that there was a man in town, a great being in town and that we should go and see him. When Mark mentioned his name I knew that not only did I want to go to see him but that I wanted to go to see him on my birthday. I said, "That's it, I don't want a party, I want to go and meet him."

A few weeks before that time, mid-December I think because Mark called me very close to New Year's Eve '78, I was in my house by myself. I lived over here in the Lake area and for some reason all of the children were gone and all of my housemates were gone (we still lived collectively). I was vegetarian by this time too. I remember making dinner and then just sort of standing there in the middle of the living room wondering, "Okay, I've got no children. I'm here alone, woo! What am I going to do with this little bit of time?" I really didn't know what to do because it was so extraordinary, you know? I know you know what I mean, as a mom.

I'm standing there and it's a sunny day and I look out the window and I have this feeling that's difficult to describe. It was a feeling that something good was going to happen, and I just rested with the feeling for a second and then I thought, "Let me turn the news on." Now you have to understand, if there's anybody who hates to watch the news, it's me. I feel like it's, first of all, slanted, untrue mostly, and 99% negative. I kept abreast of what was going on in the world but I didn't feel I also needed the news and the newscasters who were a cast of characters. But I turned on the news. It was around 6 o'clock, it was still light outside in the funny California winter. So I turned the news on and as I did, the first thing I saw was this brown man with a brown ski cap and a brown, it looked to me, cashmere coat that came to his calves and he had on an Indian man's wrap. A lungi is what it's called. I looked at him and I thought, "Who is that?" Then I saw, and it looked like he was walking toward the camera people, toward the microphones, coming from, it looked to me, a parking lot or something, I couldn't quite tell. I was later able to figure out that he was in an airport walking from, I guess from de-boarding his plane. The camera people focused on him and then mics were put under his nose.

I forgot to say that this was all happening in a period of time when I was really, really sad. Why? Because all of these people had been killed in Jonestown. I had friends at the time, educator friends and personal friends who had gone to the People's Temple, who had close friends and relatives,

even grandparents, in Guyana. All those people had died and I couldn't figure it out. My buddy and fellow teacher and friend JoNina Abron and I did some research on Jonestown to figure out what had gone on. Sure, we found out about the CIA's involvement, psychoactive drugs and the escalation of odd behavior in Jim Jones. It reminded me of the escalation of the odd behavior in Huey Newton. I don't know if anybody fed Huey psychoactive drugs. I'm not prone to be naturally paranoid but I did consider it at one point. I knew all of that was true, all of those things were true about Jonestown and I had a question that was touching my heart, deep in my spirit. Why would all of these people do what this man said? Beyond the mass psychology of it, because that's there too, like in Hitler's time, why did those people go along with that horror? Beyond that, why did this occur in this time in history? Such a beautiful concept of building a new order, a new world, a new village, a model village that started out really beautifully actually, and all I could come to was that there was something deficit in the spirit of the people and that man. I didn't know except that. I didn't know what that meant.

Rewinding forward, we have this man standing at an airport, probably San Francisco Airport, with microphones under his nose and the newscasters are pouncing on him. This is a time when spiritual teachers coming in from anywhere to America were sensationalized and the events of Jonestown and Jim Jones brought it into highlight because Americans, we hadn't gotten to the point where we were questioning our Catholic priests. We really let people like Billy Graham slide and we know that we have all kinds of scandalous behavior going on in the Christian Church and in the Vatican. Again, I think I have to look at the intersections of race and class and culture, not just race, culture when Americans look at anything skewed by cultural ignorance.

So they said to him when they held the microphone under his nose, "Why have you come here?" I thought, "What an ignorant question. This is why I don't watch the news." I was thinking to myself. He said, "I've come to teach meditation." The cameras are clicking and the casters are all talking all over each other. Every major news station was there, it seemed. They said to him, "What's your name?" And I didn't catch his name. "Where have you come from?" And he said, "India." They said, "What do you think about Jonestown?" Thank goodness for whatever reason, the man knew what they were talking about and he said, "I don't know about that. If you want to know about that, ask a politician. I'm not a politician. I've come here to start the meditation revolution. I've come here for peoples' hearts," or "to touch peoples' hearts."

I stood there with my mouth dropped open watching this screen thinking, "What a beautiful thing, the meditation revolution!" Since, of course, you know I meditated, I knew what he meant. He meant that he wanted people to go deep into their hearts and work with the darkness that resides there, the war that resides there, the enmity that resides there, the tendency to follow blindly that resides there – to experience the power within themselves. "When you

can do that," I'm thinking to myself, "you're resonant with the power outside you." I stood there watching him and when he said this to the newscasters, "I've come to start a meditation revolution. I've come to touch people's hearts," he nodded at them and as if he had said something, they moved their microphones out of his way and he strode on. I mean, he strode and I've never seen anyone walk like that. It was unbelievable. It wasn't a swagger, it wasn't a posturing. It was just with such ease and such power and such grace. That newscast went off and some other inane something came up and I clicked off the TV and I stood there in front of the TV and I stood there so long that, then TV's had you know, you would watch the little white dot go off as the TV finally ended it's "on" power. I thought to myself, "Whoa!"

When Mark called me a couple of week later, fast forward again, I did not connect that with who he had said except that when he said the man's name, Swami Muktananda, something in me just leapt up in my heart. Like, "I know him!" All I could say to Mark was, "That's where we're going on my birthday." So we went.

I met Swami Muktananda, which is, in itself, the timeframe was a couple of hours long but a whole lifetime transpired in that time, at which time for the first time in my life, when I met him, I experienced myself without titles, without adjectives, without judgment, without all my different identities trailing after it. It was just purely me. It was the most amazing transformative experience in that one moment, to be seen – beyond a poster, and a button, and all that other stuff. That's a really long story. It belongs in the book.

The other really long part of, or prequel to this story is that when I was in prison teaching myself to meditate, I read a book in which the Hindu trilogy was discussed: Shiva, Rama, Vishnu. I focused on Shiva which means the supreme self. When it was time to be handcuffed and ride the hour or so to go to the courthouse, I would repeat the word Shiva. When I was in court, I would repeat the word Shiva. When I meditated before I left to go to court or at the end of the day if the court day had been difficult, like the day I was on the stand, I would repeat that word. When I got in the long line of people on January 5, 1979, ten years after being released from prison, I was standing there waiting to meet Swami Muktananda and have that moment with him because that was what people used to do then. It's an Indian tradition. It's called darshan and it means two things. It means, to see and it also means to be in the company of the truth or in the company of a saint or a great being. As I was standing in the line, I was looking around in the ashram. I met Swami Muktananda at the Siddha Yoga Meditation Center in Oakland. It's nickname is the Oakland Ashram. I was standing there looking at everything and there were beautiful pictures on the walls and a picture of Swami Muktananda's guru, his teacher above his chair, the chair he was sitting in. We called Swami Muktananda, "Baba" which means spiritual father. That's the best way to describe it. He had a beautiful wand of peacock feathers, again a traditional way of blessing. I was just watching it. There was beautiful music

playing and I was standing in the line, then I noticed above his chair, a framed strip of words: "Om Namah Shivaya". And I looked, like, "That's the word Shiva!" I tapped Mark and I said, "That's Shiva!"

I was being escorted in the line by this woman who was hosting me and I stopped in the line and I couldn't walk, because if I had repeated Shiva all those many years ago and it had a great impact on me then, what was about to happen to me? I was so startled at the serendipity of it. So I asked the woman who was escorting me in the line, she was just going to introduce me to Swami Muktananda, I asked her what it meant. She said it meant, "I call upon the supreme self within me." In other words, I call upon God within me as God exists for me. That had always been my belief, from a child asking my mother, "Okay, Jesus, alright, got Jesus, well who was his father? Okay, God, okay, well who was God's father?" She could never answer me. I said, "Don't I have God inside me?" when I was little, and she said, "No you don't." "Why not?" Well again, all these reminders of what I had been looking for all my life were right there in that moment, which is what was so, almost funny in a certain way, and remarkably poignant.

So when I met him, I knew I was about to meet myself also, which is exactly what happened. Then the very next day I called Huey and I said, "Huey, I have just met the greatest human being in my life." He goes, "Who?" And I said, "Swami Muktananda." Now you have to know that Huey practiced Zen Buddhism from time to time, so he was familiar with spiritual teachers. He didn't have any aversion to them. We didn't necessarily think like Americans think, and I'm glad we didn't. He said, "I'll go and meet him with you," and I took Huey to meet him. Later Gwen, Huey's wife at the time, came to meet him and then I brought many other people from the school and from the Party to meet him and I brought all of the children from the school to meet him. It was beautiful. Everyone had a beautiful experience of themselves.

As time went on in that year of 1979, Huey got more and more agitated because what he was faced within the presence of a spiritual teacher is what we all face, our own beauty and the things that need some work. I think that his agita was because he was smart enough to know that there were some things he needed to take care of, primarily his addictions, and that it would be a long road to hoe. He was already aware of it. His friends in the entertainment industry, and he had many of them, had given him money to go into rehab. Interventions had been done. All kinds of loving, caring things had been done but he would find a reason not to stay.

We found out later, I don't know if its true or not, but I'll say it because it touched my heart, that Huey had been sexually abused by his father. I have lots of women friends and I have some male friends too who have been addicted, and when they hit that place where it's time to deal with that, they use, because it's so hard. It's so heart-shattering and it takes a lot of courage. That made things make sense to me. In addition, I was told after his death, that

he had been given a bipolar diagnosis and refused to take medication. He just refused and I don't blame him because the medications at that time were horrible.

Then in 1979 his behavior escalated. Going backward and now forward again, Ericka ends up in a room with Donna Howe, Huey Newton, and some of his cohorts and he threatens to knock her teeth down her throat. At the end of 1979 it was at its worst.

By December, 1979 I had invited Baba to come and meet the children at the Children's House on 29th Avenue. He said, "I'm very busy." I had no idea. I was so not used to anybody who was an international teacher like he was. I had no idea then what that meant. Now, when I think of it, I just laugh. When he said he was busy, he wasn't kidding. There were, I would say, thousands of people from all over the world that he was in contact with. But he did send people to help us prepare a meditation center in the basement of that house.

Did I tell you about the basement of that house? This was the dorm where the children lived and it became a meditation center, that basement, and people came from all over the community and that part of the Fruitvale area to learn to meditate, and we taught the children to meditate and so on. When the house got sold and it became the battered women's shelter, I stayed in contact with the director of the shelter for a while to make certain things were okay and everything was as she had hoped and she said, "But I have one question." And I go, "What is that?" And she said, "What went on in that basement?" And I said, "Oh, we meditated there, those of us who lived there, the children, staff but also people from around the neighborhood." She said, "Hmm. Thank you. That makes sense. That is the place that the most traumatized families love to go. They go to the basement to feel peaceful. They go there just to sit." I said, "That's what we did. We went there to sit." Because we had long removed the paintings on the walls – some people painted beautiful Indian pictures on the walls – it was just white walls, but it was deeper than the walls, deeper than the carpet. It was in the cellular makeup of that room, this beautiful energy. So that was very touching.

At the very end of 1979, something happened. I haven't quite figured out how I'm going to say it in my book but I'm going to say it. Bettina Aptheker, in her book *Intimate Politics*, talks about learning from – she's Buddhist now – learning from a spiritual teacher that she respected, that it's important to bear witness. She quotes him by saying, "To shine light all over something so that no one can say it didn't happen." That teacher and Bettina quoting him didn't mean you point your finger, you blame, you judge, you defame the person or the organization or the situation. You just tell your story.

My story that I want to bear witness about is that at the beginning of December of 1979, I was living in a house, another house in the Lake area where I also had people to come and meditate once a week. I was living there

with my children, Rasa and Mai, on Weldon Avenue. I told you earlier that Huey would often call me to his house to sit and chat with him. That was a common thing and continued to be so, but less frequently in 1979 because his addictive behavior had escalated. There were more and more times when he was in that manic state than not. He really wasn't doing any Party work that I could think of, but I was spending 60, 70 hours with the school, not to mention I was raising my children. My daughter was ten and Rasa was five. Maybe, they were, no, maybe they were eleven and six by that time. I'm not sure. At any rate, my daughter, this particular day that I am going to describe, my daughter was spending the night with someone, a friend of hers, and Rasa was asleep. I heard a knock on the door at ten or eleven at night. The state that I was in was really torn between continuing to stay with the Black Panther Party and pursuing my spiritual path. I wasn't torn because I had thought that political action and spiritual action can't go together. That wasn't it. It was Huey's behavior which was setting a new tone and giving a new flavor to what work was being done and also most of the men around him weren't doing any Party work at all anymore. They were just with him. It was as if they just lived for the streets.

I got this knock on the door and I saw a man I know, actually he's my nephew's father, I could see him standing outside. I knew that Huey must be with him because this man and Huey, George and Huey, traveled together at night. So I opened the door. It was Huey, my friend. When Huey came in, he was crazy. I don't mean he was saying words that were crazy. He was crazy. He then, I don't know how much he had been using or for how long, but he was on some kind of binge and George was his normal, peaceful, quiet, stoic self. George stepped to the side to let Huey through. Huey said, "Where's your bedroom?" I think that means, "I want to talk to you privately," because quite often when I would go to visit Huey, I would go into his bedroom. It was like his bedroom was his quiet place, his sanctuary. I said, "It's upstairs. What's up?" He goes, "Follow me." So I went upstairs and then he raped me.

I can give you the details, moment by moment, of how it occurred, but I will say that rape, we all know never has anything to do with sex and this certainly didn't. It was violent. I was violated. I'm saying it matter-of-factly because I know that it's true. I don't care what women writing books, the scholars that talk about rape or the psychologists or psychiatrists or whoever they are, it is the most violent thing, I think, that a person could do to another person, man or woman, and women can do it too. Let's be real.

I have to say that that behavior in Huey shocked me. I had never been shocked by any of his behavior. Kind of like, "Oh! What is going on with you?" but this shocked me. Of course, right before it occurred, Rasa, my son, had this intuition to leap out of his bed and come running into my room as he normally did when he could. Rasa has always had this sixth sense of me, and he jumped in my bed. Maybe he had had a bad dream or maybe he had a nightmare or something, but he jumped in my bed and he, not realizing anybody was

there—Huey just quietly said, "Send him back to his room." Because I was afraid for Rasa, but I felt like his presence was a kind of a protection. I don't know how to describe it. I'm not glad that Rasa was there, but I'm glad that Rasa was there.

I don't know how much time went by, but before he left he said, "If you say anything about this to anybody, I'll hurt your children." That is all a person has to say to me and most any other mom. Moms are hardwired to protect their children. So because he had done what he had done, what would make me think he wouldn't do something to my children?

I remembered sitting in my bedroom after he left. He went downstairs, told George, "We're going." They left. I don't know where they went. I didn't really care. But because he said he'd hurt my children he was able to continue this for a month. Kind of like blackmail, kind of like some kind of odd trap, and no one knew. About two weeks into this month— I was a zombie too. I didn't sleep well. I didn't eat well. I felt, I was about to say this when I said I don't care what people write in books: the woman who has this happen to her feels like dirt. It's just something that goes with the territory. I guess because you wish you could do something so that it hadn't occurred and you wonder, "Isn't there anything that I could have done to prevent it? What did I do wrong?" Women who are physically abused have the same thoughts and the same feelings. So at least twice a week for the month of December, he would call me to his house so that this is what he did. My children intuited something because quite often I would come back to the house and I'll tell you, no one knew, just me, and I would come back to my house because Sumiko, my housemate, still lived with me, it was okay for me to leave them. They were sleeping. He would always call very late at night. I couldn't even tell Sumiko because I was so afraid for the children. One night and then regularly thereafter, I came home and Mai and Rasa were huddled together in the bed. They never slept in the same bed. They were afraid or Rasa was afraid and Mai was comforting him.

[Edited segment explaining the choice to leave the Party]

The first thing on my mind was that that meant that I would also have to sever ties with Mark, not to mention all these friends I had in the Party, and I certainly wasn't going to make some broadcast announcement about why. And I was going to have to leave the school. But my inner life and my outer life depended on it.

I spent the weekend in Santa Monica. I called from Santa Monica, from a phone booth to Huey and he was sober and clear. I said to him, "Huey, I'm leaving. I'm not taking anything that belongs to you and I'm resigning from anything that has to do with the Party." He said, "Turn over your car keys," he had given me a car, "and your ring," he had given each of us in leadership in the Party a beautiful gold ring that had a panther on it. I thought that was kind

of odd – what is he going to do with my ring? But it was symbolic and I said, "Fine." He said, "You can give them to so and so." And I said, "Fine." He said, "Have a great life, dear." And that was the end of it.

I went home and on the plane, every time I would close my eyes I would have this amazing meditation. Every time I'd sit for meditation, it'd be amazingly deep, this velvety, peaceful expanse which the great ones call the void, where there isn't any thought, there isn't any chatter, there's no particular anything. It's totally, totally peaceful. My life became very, very peaceful.

Of course, in the time that it was becoming peaceful, I also had nightmares and I was physically not myself but as time went on, I healed. I think meditation had a great part to play in my healing – thank goodness. My children became happier again. I didn't tell them until they were adults, because of what use would it be? I did let them know during the time that it was all happening and right after that I wasn't feeling well, that I wasn't myself and it had nothing to do with them, so that they were clear that something was happening, but I didn't need to tell them what. Furthermore, Mai was good friends with Jessica, Gwen's daughter, Huey's step-daughter, so I didn't want her to think that she would not be able to be in touch with all of her friends because I told her that if she wanted to be in touch with all of her friends, that was fine. It had nothing to do with me. I didn't distrust anybody in the Party. I just couldn't remain.

Leaving the school and leaving Mark were the two hardest things, the school because of the children. Donna knew why I was leaving, I think she was the only one who knew the real reason, and my friend Adrienne who was the accountant for the school. Both Donna and Adrienne had also met Baba, so I knew I would continue to see them and a few other people because they came to the ashram, but I really had to sever ties, and I finally was able to sever ties with Mark within three weeks after I came home from Santa Monica. It was very difficult because I really loved him a lot, however, it was made less difficult by the fact that he didn't believe me when I told him that Huey raped me. That made it easier, but the sad part was that I felt like I lost a friend. We have on some level reclaimed our friendship. I'll bump into him. Oddly enough, the both times I've seen him other than a funeral have been at the ashram. That's always been nice. He's a good man.

The thing about Huey Newton is this: he was a good man too. So how I remember him is for the good things that he did do. I don't choose to remember him as a horrible person because I feel like we all have demons, and I don't excuse a person for the things that they do, operating from their demons, I don't mean that, but I don't hold anybody in place, because I don't want to be held in place either. We all can transform.

The indication that I had moved through and healed is that one day I was on the freeway, on the 580 freeway, driving to work at a new job, still working

with children in schools – I think I was working at Hope Academy at the time, a little black private school in East Oakland – I was really in a happy space and I looked to the left of me and I saw that there was a car there, and in the passenger's seat was Huey. I looked at him and he looked at me and I smiled. It was my natural response to seeing him, and I knew that I was fine and he nodded. Then the driver, I think he slowed down because he had seen me, and then the driver sped up a little bit and was gone. That was a turning point for me. Baba said to me, "Remember not to hate him." What he meant was, if you do, you harm yourself. He didn't just mean, "Oh, be nice." It's not about being nice. When he said to me, "It's something in your karma," I didn't take it to mean that I was a bad person. I believe that we've all lived lifetime after lifetime after lifetime trying to work out what, how to love and how to be loved. This was something, not that I needed it, but it was something in the folds of my destiny that I had to go through and I could go through it with grace, or I could go through it in a way that was a repetition of something old. That is my story of Huey Newton and Ericka Huggins.

Thomson: Did you go to his funeral?

7-01:06:28

Huggins: Absolutely, and I read the ten point platform and program there. There was a huge, beautiful celebration and I felt Huey's presence there and it was the Huey I knew before 1978, '79 that was being celebrated. Everybody spoke on his behalf. It was glorious. It was glorious! It was wonderful. It was one of the most fun things I've done and I got to see people I hadn't seen in years as well. Allen Temple Baptist Church had to turn away about a thousand people. It was amazing. So that story stays with me, but it will go in my book because I feel like it's a story that teaches. You know what I mean, that has instruction within it about how to live, how to thrive. How to thrive, that's what I mean.

**[End of Interview]**