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*From the Bullet to the Ballot: The Illinois Chapter of the
Black Panther Party and Racial Coalition Politics in Chicago*
by Jakobi Williams (review)

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Jakobi Williams, *From the Bullet to the Ballot: The Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party and Racial Coalition Politics in Chicago*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. 285 pp. \$34.95.

Jakobi Williams has crafted a fascinating history of the Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party (ILBPP). While the ILBPP existed for only a brief time (1968–74), the author places it within the context of the long civil rights movement. Williams sees his work as a northern urban complement to the southern studies of historians like Charles Payne and John Dittmer, who explore “the black liberation struggle from the ground up” (2). A Chicago native, Williams sets his story squarely within the frame of his hometown’s history.

Williams argues that the local context is vital to understanding the African American civil rights movement. He suggests that because much of the scholarship on the national Black Panther Party has focused on its 1966 origins in Oakland, local differences remain largely unexamined. Building on research by Donna Murch on the Bay Area and Matthew Countryman on Philadelphia, Williams suggests “that the activism of Chicago high school students was central to the black freedom movement.” The author also posits that “the borders between the civil rights and Black Power movements in Chicago were . . . permeable” and must be explored on a continuum (3). The life of Fred Hampton, a student who led the ILBPP until his death at the hands of Chicago police in 1969, embodies these arguments and serves as a center point for the book.

To build his story, Williams mined the Chicago Police Department Red Squad files, previously sealed by court order, at the Chicago History Museum. He completed more than a dozen interviews with those involved with the Black Panther Party in Chicago and utilized oral histories conducted by other scholars and studies. In addition, Williams undertook extensive newspaper research, in Chicago and Champaign-Urbana papers, as well as student publications. Together, these sources afford Williams a rich base for his study.

The opening and closing chapters of the monograph provide a long view of race and politics in Chicago across the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. The middle four chapters focus on the late 1960s and early 1970s, the years in which the ILBPP operated. This organizational framework allows Williams not only to present his own research, but also to assess the importance of the ILBPP.

Williams begins with a broad summary of race, class, and politics in twentieth century Chicago history. While some historians might quibble with what he chooses to emphasize (or leave out), Williams tackles this broad view with assurance. However, the author fails to incorporate (or respond to) several strands of historiography that would have strengthened his positions. Absent in his notes is the work of Christopher Reed, James Ralph, Alan B. Anderson, and George W. Pickering on civil rights in Chicago. Nor does Williams employ the two standard biographies of Richard J. Daley, one written by Roger Biles and the other by Andrew Cohen and Elizabeth Taylor. Instead, Williams relies on the contemporary assessment of Daley by journalist Mike Royko.

The second chapter takes up the story of Fred Hampton and other students who became the backbone of the ILBPP. We learn that Hampton was a suburban youth whose family moved first to Argo, then to Blue Island, and finally to Maywood. Hampton worked to desegregate west suburban swimming pools while he was still in high school. He joined the NAACP and then embraced the more radical politics of the Black Panthers as he graduated from Proviso East High School in 1968 and took classes at what is now Malcolm X College and the University of Illinois at Chicago. Still, as Williams argues, Hampton remained committed to both the NAACP's quest for equal rights as well as the more radical agenda of the Panthers. The initial organizing for the ILBPP took place on college and university campuses across Illinois, and students like Hampton were crucial to the group's success.

Williams's third chapter provides a comparison of the Black Panthers in Chicago and Oakland. This focus allows the author to take advantage of the rich literature on the Panthers nationally and in Oakland. In both Oakland and Chicago, building coalitions with students, academics, and other groups was vital. In Chicago, the ILBPP worked against police brutality and political corruption and continued to support a civil rights agenda. Williams also finds that, while the sexual discrimination uncovered in Oakland was also present in Chicago, efforts were made to combat it.

Williams devotes another chapter to Hampton's development of the original Rainbow Coalition. Hampton used the name as "the code word for class struggle" (128). Hampton worked with other groups (many led by young people) of poor or disadvantaged people in Chicago in opposing Mayor Daley, police brutality, urban renewal and gentrification. The ILBPP had emerged from separate groups on Chicago's south and west sides.

Then the Rainbow Coalition took the ILBPP to the north side to include groups like the Puerto Rican Young Lords and Uptown's Young Patriots (initially poor southern white migrants). Together the Rainbow Coalition established community health centers and school lunch programs and spearheaded a campaign against the political status quo.

Williams sets Fred Hampton's violent death at the hands of Chicago police officers in 1969 against this backdrop of ILBPP campaigns against police brutality and urban renewal. Williams used secret police files and interviews with former members of ILPBB to provide a chilling context for Hampton's killing. He found extensive evidence of police spies in the ranks of ILBPP, as well as twenty-five FBI allied journalists in Chicago who planted stories that maligned the Black Panthers, most prominent among them the *Chicago Tribune's* Ronald Koziol. Both police spies and reporters worked to undermine the Panthers and the efforts of leaders like Fred Hampton.

In the closing chapters of the book, Williams moves the story forward beyond the years of the ILBPP to consider the organization's long-term effects on local politics and society. Williams suggests that the most underappreciated legacy of the ILBPP was the Rainbow Coalition that Harold Washington utilized in his successful bid to become Chicago's first black mayor in 1983. Williams argues that Jesse Jackson later misappropriated the Rainbow Coalition in his runs for the presidency. Finally, Williams loosely links the achievements of President Barack Obama to the ILBPP's success with the Rainbow Coalition, a connection that will need more evidence to be convincing.

This is a book filled with passion and conviction. Williams successfully argues that students, not street gangs, are the key to understanding the ILBPP. Williams has marshaled important new sources in order to reshape the historical legacy of the ILBPP, denigrated for so long in the mainstream media. This new book should be read by anyone interested in racism, civil rights, and public life in Chicago and the broader Midwest.

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