KILLING THE MESSANGER

A story of radical faith, racism’s backlash, and the assassination of a journalist

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For Mary Sayre Frazee
You inherit the sins, you inherit the flames
BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN, “Adam Raised a Cain”
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Author’s Note on Usage

This work spans periods of American history when Americans of African descent were commonly called Negroes, Colored, then Blacks, and eventually African Americans. I have attempted to stay true to the context of the time, using, as have other authors, the word “Negro” to describe African Americans during the Plessy v. Ferguson and civil rights eras. “Colored” and “Black” are used from the midsixties through the eighties, when the preferred phrase “African American” became more common. Much of this book is set in Oakland, California, home at one time to the Black Panthers. It is a city where the word “Black” remains in popular use to describe African Americans. In specific Oakland references, “Black” is used to describe people and events as late as 2011.

The slur “nigger” is never an easy word to write. I use it primarily in quoted dialogue, as I use the slur “darkie,” to fully illustrate the state of mind of the speaker.

The phrase “Black Muslim” is frequently employed in reference to followers of W. D. Fard and Elijah Muhammad. It is the phrase that the primary subjects of this book, Yusuf Ali Bey and his followers, use in self-description. Historically, it is used to describe members of the Nation of Islam through the mid-1970s, but it also describes Bey’s followers and descendants in the text through 2011. At no time should the reader interpret “Black Muslim” or “Muslim” in the text to refer to traditional followers of the Prophet Muhammad, who are referred to hereafter as Orthodox Muslims for clarity.
Numerous characters in this book are referred to by more than one name, largely because of their evolution through the Black Muslim faith. There are also numerous characters in this book with the surname “Bey.” For the sake of clarity, many are referred to on second reference by their first name or by their common name, which is sometimes a number.

To aid the reader, following are the full names of prominent characters along with their names commonly used in the text.

Yusuf Ali Bey, founder of Your Black Muslim Bakery: Joseph Stephens, Joseph X Stephens, and sometimes Daddy
Billy Stephens: Billy X Stephens and Billy and sometimes Abdul Rabb Muhammad
Theron Stephens: Theron
Farieda Bey: Farieda
Yusuf Ali Bey IV: Fourth and occasionally Bey IV
Yusuf Ali Bey V: Fifth
Antar Bey: Antar
Joshua Bey: Joshua
Akbar Bey: Akbar
Waajid Aljawwaad: Waajid Alaia Bey: Alaia
Saleem Bey: Saleem
Antoine Mackey: Mackey and occasionally Ali
Devaughndre Broussard: Broussard and occasionally Catfish
Robert Harris: Sometimes referred to as Karriem in chapters 6 and 7
Elijah Muhammad: Elijah; sometimes referred to as Elijah Poole in chapter 7
Malcolm X: Malcolm
W. D. Fard: Wallace D. Ford, Walli Fard, Wallace Davis-el, Master
Wallace D. Fard Muhammad

I have given pseudonyms to several people who were victims of Yusuf Bey’s rapes and other abuses. “Jane,” “Nancy,” “Timothy,” “Tammy,” “Alice,” and “Vincent” are pseudonyms out of respect to the victims they represent. Tammy is referred to a few times by Yusuf Bey IV as “Mommy.” A woman kidnapped and tortured in 2007 by Yusuf Bey IV and others has been given the pseudonym “JoAnne.” The pseudonym “Cheryl Davis” has been given to a woman who worked at Your Black Muslim Bakery at the time of Chauncey Bailey’s murder.
Introduction

A Murmur of Growing Intensity

On the morning of August 2, 2007, I drove my then-usual commute from an apartment, not far from the eastern shore of San Francisco Bay in the city of Alameda, to a newsroom nearly twenty miles away in the East Bay suburbs. The route took me in and out of the city of Oakland through tunnels—the first passing beneath a shipping channel, the second carving its way through cumbersome hills. Oakland was little more than the place I passed through to get anywhere—to work, to pick up my wife at her job in San Francisco, to visit friends.

That bright, sunny morning seemed like just another day. I had moved to California seven years earlier and had only recently committed to staying longer, having just turned down a good newspaper job in New Jersey. That summer I was in the throes of finishing a graduate writing program, and my mind was stuck on a looming thesis deadline. The radio was off, and as I drove I dictated ideas into a little recorder about how to finish that tome. As I entered Oakland, I didn’t know that a horrible murder had occurred an hour or so earlier just blocks away—a man had been gunned down on a busy city street by a masked killer.

I had worked for newspapers of various sizes since 1983, pulling myself upward from the traditional starting places of municipal-government and police beats, and now carried the somewhat overblown title of “investigative reporter.” I liked to dig, to get to the bottom of things, to find their roots, their causes. As sort of a subspecialty, I had also carved out a niche writing about the First Amendment, censorship, and press rights. People, I had come to believe, were often ignorant of journalists’ struggles to adequately serve them, the roadblocks we overcome, the daily fights to be watchdogs of the public interest. As I parked my car in the lot next to the long, flat, nearly windowless building that housed the Contra Costa Times, slung a bag over my shoulder, and grabbed my ubiquitous cup of black coffee, I had no idea that three booming reports of a shotgun in Oakland earlier that morning had signaled the convergence of many of my interests.

I walked into a newsroom in transition. The newspaper industry had not yet been rocked the way it would be a few years later, with massive layoffs and closures, but it was starting to tremble. The Contra Costa Times, once a part of the venerable Knight Ridder chain, had recently been put up for sale and bought by MediaNews, the same company that owned the nearby Oakland Tribune. A painful consolidation of news staffs that had competed for years was under way. Everyone, it seemed, was leery of losing their jobs.
As I entered, there was a commotion around the desks where the police reporters sat amidst an array of scanners and radios, a wall-mounted television dangling over their heads. Even to a skeptical veteran such as me, the buzz seemed different, a real story developing with a murmur of growing intensity about it.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Someone shot the editor of the Oakland Post,” a reporter told me.

“Dead?”

“Very,” she deadpanned, glancing up from a computer, a hand briefly covering the mic on her telephone headset.

A journalist? Really? I knew the Post was a small weekly that covered Oakland’s African American community, but I had no idea who was its editor.

“Chauncey Bailey,” the reporter told me and turned away to continue her call.

I knew the name, but only vaguely. Bailey had worked for the Tribune once and had gotten fired for some sort of ethical lapse. I asked an editor if anyone knew yet who had killed Bailey or why. He said no. I felt an immediate frustration. Before the merger, our newsroom would have mobilized to cover the story, but now Oakland was strictly the Tribune’s territory, and I could do nothing. And though I worked primarily on long investigative pieces that often took months, I wanted in on this breaking story. A journalist. Murdered. If someone had killed him over his work, then the implications were boundless.

A few minutes later my phone rang. It was a source I had developed in Oakland a few years earlier, a minor official who often proved helpful with information.

Two theories about the murder were raging across the city, he said, both fueled by rumors concerning Bailey’s personal life—he had been killed either by a jealous husband or boyfriend or by someone seeking retribution over an unpaid debt, a loan shark or shylock. My source had strong credibility, and his leads that Bailey’s slaying had to do with something other than journalism brought me a tinge of relief. It seemed overly dramatic anyway, I realized, to suggest that the editor of a weekly newspaper had been killed for reasons directly related to his job. The last local print reporter killed in the United States was Don Bolles of the Arizona Republic, who was investigating ties between business leaders in Phoenix and the Mafia in 1976 when he suffered fatal wounds in a car bombing. The little Oakland Post was not prone to the type of reportage that provoked anyone. I returned to an analysis of government pay data I’d been working on for months, thinking the Bailey story would blow over in a few days.

Half an hour later, my source called back.

“Bailey was working on a story about the Black Muslim Bakery,” he said.

“Holy shit,” I said out loud, as if I were playing a reporter in a B movie.

That phone call changed everything.

If a journalist was going to get killed in Northern California over any story, then Oakland’s Your Black Muslim Bakery, run by a defiant, violent, polygamous cult under the leadership of the Bey family, was a likely topic. A few years earlier, a gutsy reporter named Chris Thompson of the weekly East Bay Express, had written several long exposés about the Beys. Consequently, he received death threats, the windows of the Express’s office were smashed, and Thompson spent several weeks in hiding. The Beys were demonstratively dangerous people. Their belief system didn’t just approve
of violence—it encouraged it as the default mode to deal with any and all problems they encountered.

Unconfirmed reports of a Bey connection to Bailey’s slaying soon overwhelmed the story. A colleague came to me and suggested what I was already thinking: If Bailey had been killed over a story, the journalistic community needed to rally the way it had following Bolles’s murder, by banding together to answer the assassination with a show of force in finishing his work. The response to Bolles’s death, known as the Arizona Project, was journalistic legend—two dozen reporters had descended on Phoenix and dug into the corruption Bolles had been investigating in a way that he never could have working alone. Their message was clear: A story could not be killed by killing a journalist.

A legendary investigative reporter for Newsday, Bob Greene, pitched the project to journalists around the country, writing that a communal response to Bolles’s death would cause “the community and other like communities [to] reflect on what has happened and hopefully would think twice about killing reporters. For all of us—particularly newspapers with high investigative profiles—this is eminently self-serving. As individuals we are buying life insurance on our own reporters. If we accomplish only this, we have succeeded.”

That a similar effort—eventually known as the Chauncey Bailey Project—would occur in this case became clear early the next morning, August 3, when police raided the Beys’ North Oakland compound, an operation planned for weeks in response to two other murders and the kidnapping and torture of a woman that cult members were suspected of committing months earlier. That raid had come too late to save Bailey’s life. In less than a day, a nineteen-year-old Bey “soldier” admitted to police he had killed Bailey to stop a story he was writing about the bakery.

The confession made clear that Bailey’s work had to be completed, that a clear message had to be sent by other journalists: Killing a reporter would result in far more journalistic scrutiny than a single reporter could have achieved. It didn’t matter that the Post was a small weekly on the margins of journalistic credibility, or that Bailey was, at fifty-seven years old, caught in a downward career spiral. What had happened to him was far bigger than that. The free press on which the public depends to keep it informed had been attacked. If Chauncey Bailey could get killed over a story, a reporter anywhere in the country could get killed over a story. A week after the murder, his former editor at the Detroit News, where Bailey had worked for many years, summed it up best: The assassination “was an attack on the American way of life.”

The Chauncey Bailey Project, born of newspapers, nonprofit journalism organizations, radio and television stations, freelance and retired reporters, and journalism students and professors at two universities, began a few weeks later through a series of chaotic gatherings. As my own company’s consolidation went forward, I moved to the Tribune’s office in Oakland, where much of the work was based. Along with a handful of other reporters who had to quickly learn to work together, trust one another, and share sources, I became part of a team that would investigate the Beys and Bailey’s murder for more than four years. We remained, over that time, driven by a common purpose—to get to the bottom of what happened.

To call Chauncey Bailey a flawed journalist is to imply that there is such a thing as
an unflawed one. Journalism is an incredibly human endeavor. Bailey’s reputation, at the end of a career that had taken a long fall to the Oakland Post, was one of hasty reporting, poor writing, and questionable ethics. But none of those things made him less of a First Amendment martyr when he was killed because the subject of his story objected to its publication.

That subject was a young man named Yusuf Ali Bey IV, who had taken over leadership of the cult, which worshipped the teachings of Nation of Islam founder Elijah Muhammad. But while clinging to the Nation’s early dogma, the Beys had long since broken away, acting independently, answering to no one other than their leader and their God. Other than Chris Thompson’s extraordinary work in the Express, they had largely gone without scrutiny for decades. The Oakland Police Department’s indifference to—or outright fear of—the cult members was legendary. Politicians kowtowed to them, praised them, loaned them taxpayer money that went unrepaid. Even when the cult’s patriarch, Bey IV’s father, Yusuf Ali Bey, was found through DNA evidence to have raped girls as young as thirteen years old, he was still heralded as a community leader. That he died in 2003 before the charges were proven in court only added to his followers’ belief that he was a victim of persecution.

As the days following Bailey’s death turned into months and then years, questions about the Beys mounted. What did they really believe, and where did it come from? Was there any sincerity to their dogma about a desire to promote only African American self-help, or was it all hokum and exploitative self-aggrandizement meant only to enrich them? Were they true believers or hucksters who used religion to hide a criminal organization?

How did they manage to find an endless wellspring of converts to their hate-based cosmology? And how did they come to intersect so violently with Bailey, a minor journalist who always seemed to work on the edge of advocacy, who himself believed strongly in the self-determination of African Americans?

This book, a further endeavor to provide a full accounting of what happened, is an attempt to explore those and other questions.
part one
“You don’t know my name?”

Your Black Muslim Bakery on San Pablo Avenue in North Oakland, the base of power for Yusuf Bey and, eventually, his sons Antar and Yusuf Bey IV. *Photo by Bob Larson/Contra Costa Times, courtesy of the Bay Area News Group*
PROLOGUE
Chauncey Bailey awoke near dawn that fateful Thursday summer morning. By six thirty he was hurrying around his little apartment near the western edge of Oakland’s Lake Merritt, folding a silver pocket square into a point before tucking it into his jacket, stuffing papers into the gym bag he used as a briefcase. Newspaper work was never much of an early-morning profession, at least for reporters, but a busy day lay ahead and Bailey wanted to get at it. He took a moment to check his suit—a suit he had bought in a thrift store because at fifty-seven, after spending his entire adulthood in journalism, he had long accepted the frugal realities of the news business. But in spite of his finances, he took great care in how he appeared, often lamenting to friends that too many African Americans dressed badly. “The only men a lot of Blacks see in ties are detectives and preachers,” he once told his brother. Throughout his career he had both witnessed and been the subject of constant racism inside and outside of newsrooms. To combat it, Bailey clung tightly to his self-respect, and that meant dressing well. He was by no means an overly talented reporter or writer, but he remained a hardened and gritty adherent to his basic craft—an editor once described his strength as the ability to “get it down and get it in.” He was good with the facts on deadline. Bailey dressed fancy. He wrote plainly.

Bailey knotted a gray tie and stuffed a jury summons in his pants pocket. He needed to mail it back; it was just one more bother. His civic duty wasn’t in a jury box; it was at his desk, putting out a newspaper. A few weeks earlier, Bailey had been named editor of the *Oakland Post*, a tiny, giveaway weekly that served the city’s African American community. It printed just about anything written by anyone—press releases, community notices, rambling columns. Its main source of income was competing pastors, who were always trying to outdraw each other on Sunday mornings—and thus fill their collection plates—by heralding their coming sermons in display ads. The paper even carried a biblical quote in its banner, Proverbs 29:18: “Where there is no vision, the people will perish …”

But Bailey had his own vision for the *Post*. He wanted to shape it to address minority issues head-on, with blunt, aggressive reportage in the long tradition of the Black press. That challenge, he’d confided to friends in recent weeks, had righted him after a time spent listing and being adrift. He was, quite simply, happy to be working and determined to turn the *Post* into an intricate slice of Oakland’s life. At the same time, Bailey’s often stormy personal life seemed to be calming. He had recently reunited with his father after a long estrangement. He had a young son in Southern California, Chauncey Wendell Bailey III, and despite the geographic distance, he was doing all he could to help raise him. His son’s visits to Oakland were nothing short of a joy for Bailey; people said the child brought out the best in him. Hidden behind his tough
reporter persona was a soft spot for children. When he had lived in Detroit years earlier, he and his then wife had taken in and raised her sister’s two daughters, creating an instant family that Bailey loved. Although friends said he was loath to admit it, he wanted those closest to him to be proud of his new job title: editor.

But at a small paper like the Post, which ran on a thin budget, his assignment encompassed almost all editorial functions. He wrote stories, took photographs, laid out pages, sometimes even carried copies over to Oakland’s ornate city hall and handed them out.

The paper crammed Bailey’s days with meaningful work, and August 2, 2007, arrived as if it would be no different. First on his list that morning was to get downtown to the Post’s cramped offices in the old Financial Services Building at Fourteenth and Franklin streets and finish a story about an Oakland cult of Black Muslims with a long history of crimes and violence.

The story nagged at Bailey. He had written it—gotten it down, gotten it in—only to have the Post’s publisher, Paul Cobb, a longtime Oakland activist and politician, spike it. The Black Muslims that were the story’s subject—a sprawling family with the surname Bey—owned a business called Your Black Muslim Bakery in the North Oakland ghetto that served as a community center and makeshift mosque. Its founder and patriarch, Yusuf Ali Bey, had died four years earlier. A blood feud had followed for control of the strange business, which Oaklanders simply called “the bakery.” It was now in the control of one of Bey’s many children, twenty-one-year-old Yusuf Ali Bey IV, who was one of five sons upon whom Bey had bestowed his own name. Most people thought that because of the bakery’s name, the Beys were members of the Nation of Islam, the Black separatist sect of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X (before he rejected its teachings), and Louis Farrakhan. They weren’t, though. While the Beys preached with unrelenting zeal the Nation’s original dogma of Black racial superiority, hatred of inferior blue-eyed devils, and salvation though devotion and work, they and their followers were an independent sect. But despite their bombastic evangelism and frequent violence, the Beys were widely credited—even admired—for giving jobs to those others would not: ex-convicts, recovering drug addicts, the poor and uneducated, those with nowhere else to go.

Bailey had reported on the Beys for years, and he headed out the door that August morning wanting to tell another chapter about them. The previous month, he had run into a man who had been driven out of the bakery during the struggle for control of the business. Bailey—who had always admired the Beys’ arguments for African American self-determination—had listened to how the bakery had fallen into chaos and bankruptcy and recognized an important story in the man’s tale. Based on information from this single source, Bailey had hammered out a short piece. But Cobb had spiked it, saying it needed better attribution. Bailey had fumed, but Cobb had won the argument. The Beys were not to be treated lightly. If the Post was going to print a critical story about them, it needed better sourcing than one person with fears about his name being used. At least that’s what Cobb had insisted. Bailey, though, had confided to people that he thought Cobb was scared of the Beys and was just making up excuses.

But Bailey also knew well the level of violence that radicalized Black Muslims could commit. In 1974, as a young reporter for the San Francisco Sun Reporter, he’d
written about a handful of Black Muslims who became known as both the Zebra Killers and the Death Angels. For months they terrorized San Francisco, randomly shooting whites, justifying killings through the sect’s early teachings that salvation could be achieved by the slaying of “white devils.” Bailey had been one of the first journalists to report—weeks before arrests—that those gunmen were likely Black Muslims. He also made a provocative link between the San Francisco slayings and similar shootings in Oakland and other East Bay cities, suggesting a connection. But before he could probe any deeper, he left the Bay Area for the East Coast and a new job. The nexus between the San Francisco murders and those across the bay remained largely ignored.

The sun had barely peeked above the brown Oakland hills when Bailey stepped outside, the bag slung over his left shoulder. Atop the peaked roof of his gray stucco building, someone had stationed a pair of plastic owls to scare away the Lake Merritt seagulls that were the neighborhood’s bane. But they didn’t work: The winged pests were everywhere, doing whatever they wanted, sometimes even sitting atop the fake owls’ heads.

Bailey headed downtown.

During the past thirty-five years, Oakland had grown both numb to and afraid of the Beys. Their bakery was part health-food store, part ministry, and part front for wide-ranging criminal enterprises run by its patriarch, a former hairdresser born Joseph Stephens who had reinvented himself as Dr. Yusuf Ali Bey. The surname was one that followers of a 1920s Chicago-based sect, the Moorish Science Temple of America, which practiced a fictive version of Islam, had used as a suffix. But rather than be Stephens-Bey in the Moorish tradition, he was just Bey, a title once used by Egyptian and Turkish dignitaries.

Bey was blessed with the quicksilver tongue of a natural minister. He also possessed a predator’s ruthless soul. To many of his followers and children he was godlike; to an objective observer of his organization, he was a cult leader that Oakland had let flourish in its midst. Each week, on a television show called True Solutions, which he paid to have broadcast on local cable stations, Bey repeated the Black Muslims’ basic beliefs: In 1930, Allah, in the person of a man named W. D. Fard, traveled from the Holy City of Mecca to Detroit, arriving on July 4 and announcing that he had come to find what he called the Lost Tribe of Shabazz in the wilderness of North America and lead its members to salvation through their true religion, Islam. Fard’s messenger was the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, who led the Nation of Islam for forty-one years, demanding complete segregation of the “so-called Negroes” from the rest of American society.

With images of Fard and Elijah behind him and stoic young men in dark suits and bow ties standing rigidly at his side, Bey railed against “tricknology,” which Black Muslims defined as a science of deception whites used to deceive and suppress people of other races. He referred to people of color collectively as “Asiatics,” a group that included Native Americans, Africans, and Asians. He spewed anti-Semitism and