

‘OFF THE PIGS?’: The Black Panther Party and Masculinity

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Male members of the Black Panther Party have a reputation for being unjustly and unrestrainedly violent out of rampant hate for white people. However, the racialized, hyper-masculine reputation of the Panthers was largely constructed by the white media of the 60s and 70s, who feared the image of black men with guns. Instead, this article argues that the masculinity of the Black Panther Party was based in the empowerment of the black community, especially among the lower classes. To demonstrate this, this article analyzes the role of violence, grassroots organization, and women within the Party’s ideology and history. Ultimately, the legacies of the Party’s activities can be seen in the present day among groups such as #BlackLivesMatter.

Dominant perceptions of the Black Panther Party (BPP) are largely defined by how its masculinity was presented in white media of the 1960s and 70s. Scholar Jane Rhodes describes this representation colorfully: they fulfilled stereotypes of blackness “along a continuum ranging from menace on one end to immorality on the other, with irresponsibility somewhere in the middle.” Overall, the Party was framed as a racialized ‘other’ such that it “tapped into white Americans’ primal fears of black male sexuality, black American violence, and the potential of an all-out race war.”² While this perception has dulled somewhat in the modern age, it persists nevertheless through stereotypes of the Panthers as unjustly violent.

To be sure, this reputation is not one which was completely unearned. The Panthers did, to an extent, utilize white fears in attracting publicity.³ However, the racially biased view of the BPP’s masculinity, such as that described by Rhodes, obscures the foundational masculine model that Panther men sought to embody. This article attempts to uncover that foundational model by analyzing the history, ideology, and actions of the Party.

For the purposes of this article, the BPP formed from three major contexts. First was the burgeoning Black Power movement. Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, author of *Black Power: Radical Politics and African-American Identity*, characterizes Black Power as “many things to many people and an enigma to most.” However, he also identifies the phenomenon as having two unifying themes: black pride and black self-determination.⁴ This movement sprung forth in opposition to the mainstream Civil Rights Movement, whose politics of respectability and legal successes did little to

¹ This article is dedicated to Amy-Elizabeth Manlapas, MA, who showed me that a future in the humanities was possible for me. Thank you for sticking with me through everything. I wouldn’t have been able to do it without you.

² Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 64, 70.

³ Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers*, 68-69.

⁴ Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*, Updated edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 2.

address the plight of the lumpenproletariat, or the lower class, of black Americans. This is exemplified by the riots during the long, hot summer of 1967. According to

the Kerner Commission, which was formed to identify the causes of the riots, chronic un(der)employment, low wages, and police brutality remained standard to lower-class black Americans.⁵

The Party was especially influenced by Malcolm X, one of most iconic Black Power figures. In fact, the Party was formed in the spirit of X after he was assassinated in 1965.⁶ X argued that black people had to learn to love themselves by identifying with their African roots. Otherwise, black people would not have the self-worth to overthrow the oppressive system that taught them to hate who they were.⁷

Secondly, the BPP was formed in the context of international decolonization movements. They were especially influenced by renowned psychologist and philosopher Frantz Fanon. Fanon argued that, for colonized peoples, violence against the colonizers is cathartic, and is key to restoring the self-respect of the colonized.⁸ The BPP identified with this philosophy because they saw the black community as an internal colony of the United States, with law enforcement as its occupying army.⁹

Lastly, the Party sprung from the experiences of the founders themselves, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, who grew up as

impoverished black men in the post-WWII era. For Newton, the pain of racial and economic oppression was deflected by the love and support of his parents and many siblings.¹⁰ For Seale, he had a broken family trapped in a cycle of poverty that he had never seen any black American break.¹¹ In both cases, the founders wanted to change the reality of the black community; for Newton, it was to match that familial comfort, and for Seale, it was to oppose his fractured home and impoverishment. These experiences, along with the influence of Malcolm X and Frantz Fanon, had significant implications for the ideology and activities of the BPP.



Figure 1: Stapp, Blair, photographer. *The Racist Dog Policemen Must Withdraw Immediately from Our Communities, Cease Their Wanton Murder and Brutality*. Retrieved from the Library of Congress. A photo taken of Huey Newton in the early years of the BPP. Decorations and clothing simultaneously exemplify what the white majority of the 1960s and 70s feared, and what the Black Panthers learned to love.

⁵ United States National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*. By Otto Kerner, et al (Washington, DC: GPO, 1968), 7-8.

⁶ Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 118.

⁷ Curtis J. Austin, *Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party* (Arkansas: The University of Arkansas Press, 2006), 8.

⁸ Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 90.

⁹ Joshua, Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 67.

¹⁰ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 14-15.

¹¹ Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (New York: Random House Inc., 1970), 6.

This article attempts to demonstrate that the BPP’s masculine ideals did not hinge upon their ability to intimidate the American establishment, whom they sometimes referred to as ‘the man’. I argue that the masculine model that the Black Panther Party sought to embody was based in their ability to protect and empower their community. This model will henceforth be referred to as the “Family Protector.” I demonstrate this by analyzing the role of violence, community organization, and women within the Party’s history, actions, and ideology.

Before proceeding, a disclaimer: this article has done its best to portray the Black Panther Party in the best light possible without dismissing the pain of those who may have suffered from their actions. This is justified because, at the moment, a new wave of activists has taken to the streets in service of black protection and empowerment. The mass protests of summer 2020 in response to George Floyd’s murder only serve as one example of this, among many others. Because of these calls for change, it is critical that we bolster success stories from the past in moving forward with this movement. Despite the group’s many flaws, I do my best to demonstrate that the Black Panther Party at its best was one of those success stories.

Off the Pigs!

On the surface, violence seemed to play a flagrant and dominant role in the Black Panther Party’s masculinity. However, a closer look at their ideology and actions regarding violence prove otherwise. Instead, they sought to empower the black lumpenproletariat through displays which they could relate to and learn from. The reputation which they have today for unrestrained violence stems from these displays. But these actions fall in line with the ideals foundational to the Family Protector model.

In analyzing the BPP’s views on violence, a critical source is co-founder Huey P. Newton’s “In Defense of Self-Defense,” which was printed in nearly every copy of *The Black Panther* newspaper during its first year. In a nutshell, it advocates for armed self-defense by the black community against American structural oppression—not unrestrained violence against ‘the man.’ Furthermore, it demonstrates the focus of the BPP on community empowerment. To this end, two main aspects of the document are relevant.

First, “In Defense of Self-Defense” incorporates various ideological strains to justify its position. This intrinsically refutes the conception of the BPP as pursuing simple retaliation, given that its position was deliberately thought out. One ideological strain is that of Malcolm X. In describing the plight of black people and how to subvert it, Newton refers to black people having been “brainwashed to believe that [they] are powerless” and needing to “unite and rise up in all their splendid millions” to “smash injustice.”¹² This refers to the very foundation of X’s ideology: unlearn hatred of blackness as taught by white racism, join in political and communal solidarity with each other, and empower each other to reclaim their humanity.

Another example is the ideological strain of Frantz Fanon. Later in the document, Newton refers to Panther members as “the wretched of the earth,”¹³ a direct reference to a book of Fanon’s by the same name. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon describes self-defense as “a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect.”¹⁴ This, along with Malcolm X’s influence, points to the role of violence in

¹² Huey P. Newton, “In Defense of Self-Defense.” *Hampton Institute*, January 12, 2020.

¹³ Newton, “In Defense of Self-Defense.”

¹⁴ Qtd. in Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 90.

the BPP as oriented around reclaiming the black community's dignity by invoking their right to resist injustice.

The second relevant aspect of "In Defense of Self-Defense" is its multifaceted definition of self-defense. Take the following quote, for example:

Black people must now move, from the grass roots up through the perfumed circles of the Black bourgeoisie, to seize by any means necessary a proportionate share of power vested and collected in the structure of America. ... The racist dog oppressors ... fear most of all Black People armed with weapons and the ideology of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.¹⁵

By using assertive rhetoric to argue for the enfranchisement of the black lumpenproletariat, Newton conveys that empowerment is not only found in the physical act of fighting back; it is also found, perhaps more powerfully, in political empowerment.

In enacting their idea of self-defense, the fledgling BPP started with police patrols. These were the focus of the Party's program during the first year of its life. A typical police patrol occurred like this. Panther men would dress in their signature uniform and arm themselves to the teeth. They would then drive around the neighborhood, on the prowl for cops interacting with black community members. Upon finding such a situation, they would exit the car and monitor it. These patrols marked the beginning of a long and contentious relationship with law enforcement.

But Newton and other co-founder Bobby Seale did not choose this activity out of a desire to intimidate or harass the cops. Instead, they chose police patrols for four main strategic purposes. First is about publicity. Newton and Seale understood that the image of black men with guns would attract media attention, and that police brutality united black experiences across the country, and. So, choosing first to address this incarnation of systemic oppression effectively advertised the BPP and built their membership.¹⁶

Second, Newton and Seale wanted to be role models for the young, impoverished black men in their community. Coming from the same background, Newton and Seale understood how the mainstream Civil Rights Movement alienated those deemed unworthy of the politics of respectability: the black lumpenproletariat.¹⁷ Working-class black men also felt powerless due to their lack of technical skills and education in conjunction with chronic unemployment.¹⁸ The many instances of nonviolent Civil Rights marchers being brutalized by law enforcement in the national media likely drove home working black men's hyperawareness of their own weakness. To counter this, Newton and Seale wanted to provide a "positive image of strong and unafraid Black men in the community" by standing up to the cops.¹⁹

The third reason Newton and Seale inaugurated the Party with police patrols is about protection. With so many witnesses to their behavior, cops were less likely to brutalize their subjects, thereby preventing racist violence. Further, as an extra measure to prevent altercations with the police, patrollers stayed a safe distance away from police as they were working. Not once did they interfere with their duties. If cops arrested a community member, Panthers would not resist, instead opting to bail the person out of jail as soon as humanly possible. According to Newton's autobiography,

¹⁵ Qtd. in Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 90.

¹⁶ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 120-121.

¹⁷ Steve Estes, *I Am a Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 156.

¹⁸ Estes, *I Am a Man!*, 156.

¹⁹ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 355.

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this significantly reduced the rates of police brutality in their neighborhood and increased community confidence in the BPP.²⁰

Finally, Panther patrollers used their vantage point to educate and raise the political consciousness of the community. It was standard procedure for Panthers to inform community members who were stopped by cops of their rights, so that their ignorance could no longer be used against them by law enforcement. Additionally, these police patrols were such a novel sight that they attracted spectators from the surrounding buildings. So, when Panthers informed a suspect of their rights, they were often informing swaths of the community, as well.

This focus on rights is further evidenced by how Panther leadership required patrollers to keep the state and federal legal codes in their cars with them. This was a requirement so that patrollers could show the legality of their actions if needed, in addition to educating the community. The BPP’s emphasis on empowerment and education demonstrates that, according to historian Bridgette Baldwin, “protecting the right to self-defense and the right to bear arms ... was as important as the actual use of arms,”²¹ if not more so.

Despite the tangible benefits of police patrols, they led to severe consequences. In essence, the presence of black men with guns intimidated the cops, and gave the Party a masculinist, militant reputation that obscured their actual goals of community protection, empowerment, and education. For example, the BPP’s use of ebonics confounded law enforcement and others, who were not equipped to understand that ebonics often makes use of hyperbole. So, what may have been a figure of speech to Panthers was perceived as a tangible threat by the establishment.²² This exacerbated antagonism between police and black Americans, especially as incidents of civilian-on-police violence (by non-Panthers) increased significantly. In 1969, such assaults had increased by 41% since 1967. This pattern was reproduced in nearly every place a BPP chapter existed.²³

Law enforcement’s fear of Panther men was reinforced by the artwork of Emory Douglas in *The Black Panther*. According to Douglas, he used his art to make



Figure 2: A comic by Emory Douglas in *The Black Panther* 2, no. 2 (1968). *Marxist Internet Archive*. Notice how the black man is carrying both a gun and a book entitled “Black Studies.”

²⁰ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 120-121.

²¹ Bridgette Baldwin, “In the Shadow of the Gun: The Black Panther Party, the Ninth Amendment, and Discourses of Self-Defense” in *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*, ed. Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams, E-Duke Books Scholarly Collection (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2008), 82.

²² Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 95.

²³ Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 90.

BPP ideology accessible to lower-income black people, who did not have the literacy to comprehend texts as complicated as, for example, Newton’s “In Defense of Self-Defense.”²⁴ While accessibility is a noble cause, his art was not always nuanced enough to distinguish between unrestrained violence and armed self-defense. For example, one of his early comics shows a pig—used by the BPP to signify oppressors, especially cops²⁵—being dismembered by bullets. This implies simply that the BPP sought to kill cops. However, as demonstrated, this is not what they were advocating for.

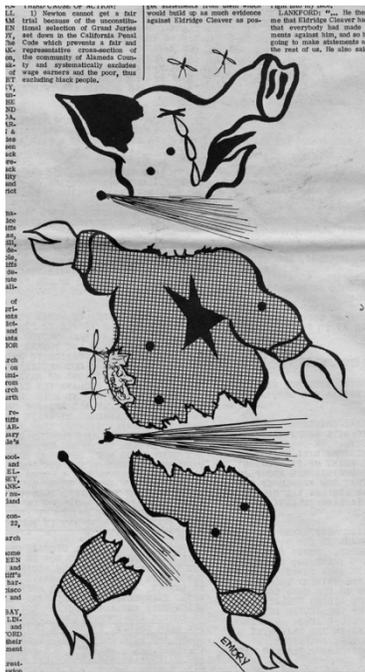


Figure 3: A comic by Emory Douglas in *The Black Panther* 2, no. 2 (1968). *Marxist Internet Archive*. Note the absence of provided context for the killing of the cop (depicted above as a pig).

The cops’ feeling of persecution culminated in unrestrained state repression of the Panthers.²⁶ This is best exemplified by the attempted assassination of Huey Newton by Oakland police in 1967, when police shot Newton unprovoked. Then, when he survived, they framed him for the murder of officer John Frey, who had been shot while Newton was unconscious. Newton was then convicted and incarcerated until 1970.²⁷ These efforts extended to Panther leadership nationwide, resulting in the assassination of Fred Hampton and the framing of Bobby Seale and Ericka Huggins, among others.

To make matters worse, as interactions with police became increasingly dangerous, Panther leadership did not immediately cease their police patrols. In fact, just prior to Newton’s incarceration, the Party was losing its way. Its actions were based primarily in standing up to ‘the man,’ even as its masculinist reputation was becoming a liability for them and the community they set out to protect.²⁸ This implies that Panther men did, to an extent, relish the masculine power associated with standing up to law enforcement.

But this reputation and militant masculinity is largely a result of the leadership of Eldridge Cleaver, who took the helm of the Party when Seale and Newton were incarcerated. Cleaver’s ideology diverged sharply from the foundation of the Party. According to Newton,

Eldridge Cleaver identified with other negative aspects of the Party. ... What appealed to him were force, firepower, and the intense moment when combatants stood at the brink of death. *For him this was the revolution.*²⁹

This characterization is supported by Cleaver’s memoirs, *Soul on Ice*, which emphasizes retaliation rather than justice for the black community.³⁰ Consequently, Cleaver fostered the Party’s truly criminal element, who took advantage of its

²⁴ Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 38-39.
²⁵ Seale, *Seize the Time*, 404.
²⁶ Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 95.
²⁷ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 286-300.
²⁸ Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers*, 7-8.
²⁹ Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 330-331.
³⁰ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991).

openness for their own purposes, sometimes relating “*only to the gun*”.³¹ In the words of historian Simon Wendt, “armed resistance became mainly a symbolic form of defiance that served to affirm and nurture militant black manhood.”³² The fostering of such “do-nothing terrorists”³³ justified repression to the government, leaving the Party in shambles by the time of Newton and Seale’s release.

Ultimately, the Party’s conception of self-defense and their police patrols exemplify that unrestrained, retaliatory violence is not the foundation of the masculinity they sought to embody. These aspects of the Party focused on raising the black community’s self-worth and political consciousness for the sake of protection and empowerment, both of which define the Family Protector model. To be sure, the strategy was not enacted perfectly, and it did appeal to the pursuit of masculinity for some Panther men. But their focus on community empowerment remained at the foundation of their actions, and were demonstrably successful.

Survival Pending Revolution

As the BPP crumbled under the weight of state repression in response to their masculinist reputation, leadership realized they were no longer in tune with the needs of the community. Consequently, they switched gears to meet the needs of the black community beyond police brutality, resulting in the creation of survival programs. This exemplifies that Panther men sought to embody the Family Protector model.

After the BPP began to reap the consequences of its masculinist image, especially when Newton was incarcerated in 1967, leadership realized the danger of the path along which they were headed. Not only had state repression begun to dismantle their movement, but the community had come to look upon the Party as “an ad hoc military group, acting outside the community fabric and too radical to be a part of.” Newton himself admitted that before this point, the Party “did not fully understand then that only the people can create the revolution.”³⁴ So the Party switched gears. While Newton was in jail, Seale began purging their ranks of do-nothing terrorists who sought hollow glory over the realization of BPP political ideology, also moving to expel Eldridge Cleaver in 1971. They also became more exclusive about who they allowed in.³⁵ Doing so gave them another chance to prove to the black community that they existed to serve the people, not to inflate militant black manhood.

The reformed BPP took the chance and ran with it. They de-emphasized police brutality as the centerpiece of their platform and moved to fulfill the rest of their Ten-Point Program, which called for healthcare, education, and more.³⁶ Seale, alongside David Hilliard, acted against these issues by creating survival programs, which fought to remedy the long-term effects of systemic oppression in the BPP’s community.³⁷ The Party instituted over 20 different survival programs over the course of its life.³⁸

The most well-known survival program is the Free Breakfast for Children Program. At its height between 1969 and 1971, at least 36 programs were being run

³¹ Seale, *Seize the Time*, 365-367.

³² Simon Wendt, “‘They Finally Found Out that We Really Are Men’: Violence, Non-Violence and Black Manhood in the Civil Rights Era.” *Gender & History* 19, no. 3 (2007): 553.

³³ Seale, *Seize the Time*, 365.

³⁴ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 355.

³⁵ Seale, *Seize the Time*, 369-370.

³⁶ “Ten-Point Program.” *The Black Panther* 1, no. 3 (1967): 3.

³⁷ Bobby Seale and Stephen Shames, *Power to the People: The World of the Black Panthers* (Abrams Books, 2016), 152.

³⁸ “Survival Programs.” *It’s About Time*.

nationwide, with larger chapters running multiple sites.³⁹ The Party also claimed that they had served about 20,000 breakfasts a day at the program’s most popular.⁴⁰ It was so successful that it even served to undo some of the negative reputation which the Party had inadvertently incurred. For example, an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that the Free Breakfast Program would teach children an “unspoken lesson”: that “power in a community begins with people who care.”⁴¹ Finally, in its most striking achievement, this program became the foundation for the federal School Breakfast Program in 1975.⁴²

Many rank-and-file Panther men found feeding the children satisfying in ways that armed struggle was not. One member, Jamal Joseph, said that the program was so important because black children could not learn if their stomachs were growling. But nobody else at the schools took the time to understand that, and simply labeled them disruptive. Another member, Jerry “Odinka” Dunnigan, said, “It was extremely exhilarating to feed the children. You saw the future in their faces, and you wanted to be right for them.”⁴³ This idea of children being the revolution was at the heart of many survival programs as part of Newton’s ideological vision.⁴⁴

Another example of such survival programs was their People’s Free Health Clinics. At the time, many lower-income black people had severely insufficient access to healthcare, some of which had never even seen a doctor. Private healthcare was too expensive, and while public options existed as a part of Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society, they were often overcrowded and underfunded.⁴⁵ To provide an alternative, the Chicago, Kansas City, and Seattle chapters established the first People’s Free Health Clinics in 1968.⁴⁶ These clinics provided quality healthcare to the community without charging them a single dime.⁴⁷ They became so successful that in 1970, central leadership required every chapter to have their own clinic, leading to the opening of 10 more.⁴⁸ Dr. Tolbert Small, who worked at the Berkeley clinic, describes his time there:

We were open five days a week. I would sometimes be there until one o’clock in the morning seeing patients. We were busy. We provided quality treatment. I did house calls on some of those people. ... A man we called Smitty—I think his name was Henry Smith—we trained him to do hemoglobin electrophoresis, which is used for sickle-cell screening. I had a tech from the Oakland Health Center come over and



Figure 4: A photo and some newspaper articles regarding nationwide breakfast programs. *It's About Time.*

³⁹ Bloom and Martin Jr., *Black Against Empire*, 182.

⁴⁰ Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 262.

⁴¹ Qtd. in Bloom and Martin Jr., *Black Against Empire*, 182.

⁴² Mary Potorti, “‘Feeding the Revolution’: the Black Panther Party, Hunger, and Community Survival.” *Journal of African American Studies* 21, no. 1 (2017): 88.

⁴³ Seale and Shames, *Power to the People*, 157.

⁴⁴ Hilliard, *The Black Panther Party*, 7.

⁴⁵ Hilliard, *The Black Panther Party*, 21.

⁴⁶ Diane Pien, “Black Panther Party’s Free Medical Clinics (1969-1975).” *Black Past*, July 9, 2020.

⁴⁷ Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 187.

⁴⁸ Pien, “Black Panther Party’s Free Medical Clinics.”

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show him how to do it. You know, it’s amazing: If someone wants to learn something and you are willing to teach them, people can be trained.⁴⁹

Evidently, Dr. Small is proud of his work in serving the community, and was even able to provide training to those volunteers who wanted to help.

These health clinics especially focused on sickle-cell anemia, a disease which primarily affects people of African descent. Despite having been discovered in 1910, little funding and research had been spent on it due to its infrequency among the white population.⁵⁰ Consequently, the BPP set up a national screening program for the disease to spread awareness of the disease in 1971.⁵¹ They even founded the Sickle Cell Anemia Research Foundation, which helped to move towards effective treatments. There is no doubt that their work contributed to President Richard Nixon’s signing of the National Sickle Cell Anemia Control Act (1972), which allocated \$10 million to counseling, screening, education, and research for the disease.⁵² Ultimately, the Black Panthers are largely responsible for awareness and treatment of sickle-cell anemia today.⁵³

Beyond the sheer magnitude of the survival programs, the BPP’s move away from police brutality is arguably the most telling sign that Black Panther masculinity was not defined purely by armed resistance. Almost as soon as Newton and Seale realized that the Party had drifted from the community’s needs, they made a sharp left turn into community organizing. To be sure, this did not mean they put the gun down entirely. Self-defense in the face of systemic violence remained a key point of empowering the communities that the BPP served.

But their use of the gun was no longer in opposition to the power structure; it was in service of the people. For example, guns played a role in some survival programs, such as Seniors Against Fearful Environments (S.A.F.E.). Older people were significantly more likely to get mugged in their community, especially when collecting welfare checks. To address this, young, strong, Panther men armed themselves and escorted senior citizens to and from their outings.⁵⁴

This shift in ideological stance is also demonstrated in *The Black Panther*. For example, a 1968 edition’s front page blasted the following incendiary headline: “PIGS WANT WAR / PANTHERS COOL / REAGAN ATTACKS ELDRIDGE”.⁵⁵ This is considerably different from a 1972 edition, also about police brutality: “THE DEATH PENALTY MUST BE OUTLAWED ON THE STREETS! RECENT SUPREME COURT DECISION WON’T TAKE GUNS FROM POLICE.”⁵⁶ The difference is stark, in that the first headline is centered around *confrontation* with the oppressors. The second one, however, emphasizes the *protection* of black people from such brutality.

Moreover, survival programs were only intended to ensure ‘survival pending revolution.’ That is, they were intended to nourish oppressed people until they could find it in themselves to fight back and enact the revolution. As Newton said:

[S]urvival programs are not answers or solutions, but they will help to organize the community around a true analysis and understanding of their situation. When

⁴⁹ Seale and Shames, *Power to the People*, 189.

⁵⁰ Mary T. Bassett, “Beyond Berets: The Black Panthers as Health Activists.” *American Journal of Public Health* 106, no. 10 (2016): 1741-1742.

⁵¹ Kevin McCormack, “World Sickle Cell Day: A View from the Front Line.” *The Stem Cellar, California Institute for Regenerative Medicine*, June 19, 2017.

⁵² McCormack, “World Sickle Cell Day.”

⁵³ Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 188.

⁵⁴ Hilliard, *The Black Panther Party*, 17.

⁵⁵ *The Black Panther* 2, no. 7 (1968): 1.

⁵⁶ *The Black Panther* 8, no. 16 (1972): 1.

consciousness and understanding is raised to a high level then the community will seize the time and deliver themselves from the boot of their oppressors.⁵⁷

Clearly, the Party sought to empower the black community to fight for themselves.

Ultimately, the BPP's move away from armed resistance and into community service demonstrates first and foremost that their masculinity was based in providing what the black community needed to thrive. As soon as the Party veered off-course, they made the changes necessary to reintegrate with the black community according to what they needed. This decision precisely embodies that the Panther men did not foundationally pursue black militant manhood. Instead, they sought to enact the ideals of the Family Protector model. And, according to their victories in community organizing, it is plausible to say that Panther men were successful at embodying this model in this chapter of the Party's life.

Panther-ettes

The BPP is widely reputed for upholding misogyny and patriarchy. However, the BPP's gender relations were more complicated than this reputation allows. While the Party was patriarchal in some ways, it was not explicit. Instead, the Party's gender relations largely reflected the context in which it was formed. But as more Panther women protested their treatment, the Party did the work to become better. This narrative demonstrates Panther men's adherence to the Family Protector model.

Officially, Panther women were treated equally with Panther men. They took the same political education classes, memorized the same material, were subject to the same rules, and most notably, learned how to defend themselves and others side-by-side. As BPP alumnus Phyllis Jackson conveyed, they were taught how to use



Figure 5: A group of Panther women gather after a political education class in Oakland. *It's About Time*.

cigarettes as gas masks and “how to strip down a gun, clean it, and put it together in the dark,” among other things.⁵⁸ However, informal interaction did not always uphold such equality. Elaine Brown, the Party's final president, notably accused Panther men of treating women as “irrelevant”. She also accused them of saying that women leaders were “eroding black manhood” and allied with “counter-revolutionary, man-hating lesbian, feminist white bitches.”⁵⁹

This distinct treatment of Panther women was not patriarchy for patriarchy's sake; at least, not among those Panther men truly committed to the BPP's cause. Instead, the differing treatment of women materialized as consequences of the Party's context. Three aspects of this context are relevant. First, as an off-shoot of the Black Power movement, the BPP is necessarily connected to and reflective of Black Power's gender ideology (at least somewhat). Masculinity in the Black Power movement was defined in direct opposition to the manhood espoused by the mainstream Civil Rights

⁵⁷ Qtd. in Seale and Shames, *Power to the People*, 152.

⁵⁸ Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers, “The Woman Question: Gender Dynamics within the Black Panther Party.” *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men* 5, no. 1 (2016): 45.

⁵⁹ Qtd. in Robyn Ceanne Spencer, “Engendering the Black Freedom Struggle: Revolutionary Black Womanhood and the Black Panther Party in the Bay Area, California.” *Journal of Women's History* 20, no. 1 (2008): 92.

Movement, which they resented for its exclusionary politics of respectability.⁶⁰ They also resented the portrayal of black men as weak and unresisting, by mainstream news coverage, which often aired photos and videos of Civil Rights marchers being brutalized by police. All of this, and the legal victories these marchers earned barely improved the lives of the black community.

Consequently, Black Power men came to see their ideal future as one defined by self-sufficiency, without having to rely on the establishment, or anyone, for survival.⁶¹ These men also sought to embody a masculinity that was prideful enough to stand up against violence in ways that Civil Rights marchers never did. They wanted to take freedom for themselves. Consequently, they defined Black Power manliness—*real* manliness—according to strength, action, empowerment, and unabashed blackness.⁶²

Black Power masculinity had significant implications for Black Power femininity. In one way, because Black Power men wanted to be the opposite of Civil Rights men, their relations with women had to be opposite as well. In another way, gender roles within the male-female binary are formed in opposition to each other. Both these principles led Black Power femininity to be opposite to that of Civil Rights women, who were often strategically filmed being abused by the police to attract public sympathy. So, in the minds of Black Power men, women had to be stashed away from the limelight in roles where they would be safe.

These Black Power gender roles were endorsed by Malcolm X. Today, he is known for the following quote: “The most disrespected person in America is the black woman.” It has become so popular that it was included in Beyoncé’s iconic album and short film *Lemonade* (2016). But in saying that, X was not advocating for equal opportunity. He meant that women, such as those of the Civil Rights Movement, should be kept off the streets and out of dangerous situations.⁶³

Because the BPP formed in the spirit of X, and because both Newton and Seale revered him, it is likely that the Party inherited his gender views. So, by inheriting Black Power gender ideals, the Party implicitly relegated women to supporting roles for the sake of their safety. Evidence of this can be found in how it framed women in *The Black Panther*. Take this article from 1967:

The Black Panther Party is where the BLACK MEN are. I know every black woman has to feel proud of black men who finally decided to announce to the world that they were police brutality and black genocide. ... The reason they were arrested, Sisters, is the white power structure doesn’t want any brave men with guts enough to say, ‘Hell no,’ to the police force in self-defense of their women, themselves and all of our children. That’s really telling the power structure ‘Like it is.’⁶⁴

This framing of Panther women can also be found in illustrations done by Emory Douglas. For example, in advertising some prints he had for sale, he revealed the place of women in the organization: as Revolutionary Mothers, whose role is to conceive to keep the revolution going.⁶⁵ While there is nothing wrong with this role, that was the only representation of women in his posters, thereby limiting their functions within the Party.

The second reason why the BPP’s treatment of women is connected to its context has to do with acceptance. As much as the BPP advocated for black self-

⁶⁰ United States National Advisory Commission, *Report of the National Advisory Commission*, 7-8.

⁶¹ Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 8.

⁶² Wendt, “‘They Finally Found Out We Really Are Men,’” 556.

⁶³ Wendt, “‘They Finally Found Out We Really Are Men,’” 554.

⁶⁴ Barbera Auther, “Sisters Unite.” *The Black Panther* 1, no. 2 (1967): 6.

⁶⁵ Emory Douglas, “Revolutionary Posters.” *The Black Panther* 2, no. 2 (1968): 24.

determination, their early actions demonstrate that they wanted to be accepted as men by society at large; not just by other members of the black community. One prevalent example of this is how they continued to clash with the police during patrols, despite that such interactions had become increasingly violent at no tangible benefit to the Party.⁶⁶ Their persistently inflammatory use of the media beyond their need for

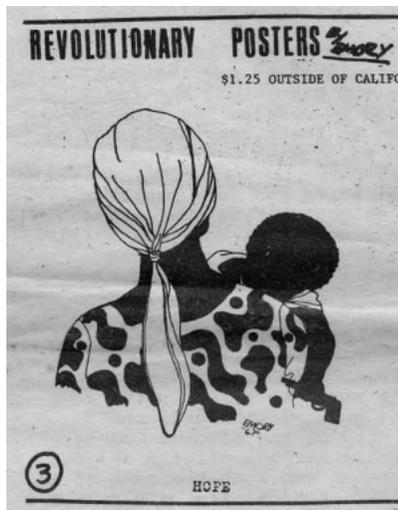


Figure 6: A print by Emory Douglas in *The Black Panther* 2, no. 2 (1968), depicting 'Revolutionary Motherhood.' *Marxist Internet Archive*.

recruitment and visibility also shows how they were looking for public validation. By trying to prove that they had equal worth with white men, the men of the BPP necessarily had to buy into patriarchal white gender norms. So, once more, black women were implicitly relegated to supporting roles within the Party. This had the ironic effect of reproducing white hegemony, rather than shirking it. As scholar Simon Wendt said, "the BPP's powerful image of masculinity countered traditional stereotypes of the powerless of African American men" and "communicated defiance to white America."⁶⁷

Finally, the BPP was formed in the context of Newton and Seale's unique, gendered perspectives. They sought to make life for the black community better in accordance with their own experiences as men. So, at the beginning of the Party's life, they focused on empowering men, at the unintended expense of women. This focus on empowering themselves is made clear

by an anecdote from Seale. Apparently, the first woman to inquire about female membership in the Party surprised him and Newton. They hadn't actually thought about women's place within the organization, and had not established a clear policy about their ability to be members. However, upon being asked about it, they officialized that both black men and women were welcome in the Party.⁶⁸ It is evident, then, that the relegation of women to supporting roles of the BPP was not necessarily direct, nor intended. It was more an emphasis on young black men, whom Newton and Seale wanted to empower due to the personal experience they had in feeling less than.

Despite that BPP women were relegated to supporting roles, their contributions factored significantly in the Party's success. From the beginning, they had a hand in formulating policy and ideology, implementing new ideas, and running day-to-day functions.⁶⁹ Curiously, they also controlled what it meant to be a revolutionary black woman from their entry into the Party.⁷⁰ While this is a curious fact, it can be accounted for in two ways.

First, Panther women did not always have "a full grasp on their identity as women." This was a time when sexism was not yet understood as part of the fabric of American society; at least, not as prevalently as it is understood in modern times. For example, one female member, Malika Adams, said, "We didn't see ourselves as

⁶⁶ Estes, *I Am a Man!*, 177.

⁶⁷ Wendt, "They Finally Found Out We Really Are Men," 557.

⁶⁸ Alameen-Shavers, "The Woman Question," 39.

⁶⁹ Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 343.

⁷⁰ Ashley D. Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 51.

separate from the brothers. ... I don't know that we really saw ourselves as women. ... I think we saw ourselves in the eyes of men. The men pretty much defined what we were.”⁷¹ So, in defining revolutionary motherhood, they may not have understood the role that sexism and gender relations played in their Party activities, rendering



Figure 7: A group of Panther women cooking, ostensibly for a survival program. *It's About Time*.

them unaware of their distinctive treatment by Panther men.

Second, the treatment of Panther women, and how they felt about such treatment, varied regionally.⁷² This is because, as much as the black community was subjected to similar treatment across the country, how they understood their daily life depended on events which were happening in a chapter's immediate vicinity. For example, the women of the Berkeley BPP chapter may have been more aware of how patriarchy defined their relationships with male members, because it was in the same town as University at

California-Berkeley, which was known for their feminist action in the 60s and 70s. This may have been different in the BPP chapter in Atlanta, given that it was not a major center for feminist thought at the time.

To be sure, there were instances when sexism reared its head in ways that could not have been interpreted in any way except as misogynistic. For example, there were instances where female members had alleged that they had been raped by male members.⁷³ But this egregious behavior can largely be traced to the influence of Cleaver, and his fostering of the do-nothing terrorists referred to by Seale. In his memoir *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver writes about his troubled past:

I became a rapist. To refine my technique and *modus operandi*, I started out by practicing on black girls in the ghetto ... and when I considered myself smooth enough, I crossed the tracks and sought out white prey. ... Rape was an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon white man's law, upon his system and values, and that I was defiling his women.⁷⁴

Regardless of whether he was simply engaging in masculine posturing, this indicates the lengths he was willing to go in reclaiming the power of which society had stripped him. Since that point, Cleaver had undergone significant reform. On the surface, he seemed to have completely overcome his internalized misogyny, which was exemplified by his being on-board with the sexual equality aspect of the BPP's platform. Yet, other instances indicate that he had not. For example, he continued to be opposed to survival programs, even going so far as to call the Free Breakfast Program “sissy.”⁷⁵

By contrast, Seale and Newton maintained relatively good track records in gender relations. While they each had their own progress to make in unlearning patriarchal ideals, they worked actively to cultivate women's roles and experiences in

⁷¹ Bloom & Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 307.

⁷² Alameen-Shavers, “The Woman Question,” 47-48.

⁷³ Seale, *Seize the Time*, 401.

⁷⁴ Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 33.

⁷⁵ Seale and Shames, *Power to the People*, 155.

the Party—both publicly and privately. Not only did they take initiative in factoring women’s experiences into their program, they also listened to the women of the Party when they had problems. BPP leader Kathleen Cleaver said that if she saw a woman being disrespected, she “spoke up, and many of us did. Where did we take all that information, to Huey Newton ... I saw him as a person that loved and respected women and that’s why I went to him.”⁷⁶ Seale even imposed an additional rule on members in 1969: “do not take liberties with women.”⁷⁷ In doing so, he demonstrated his belief that absolute equality “must be established on the principle of *from* each and every person, both male and female, according to their ability, and to each and every person, both male and female, according *to* their needs.”⁷⁸

In summary: the role of patriarchy within the BPP is apparent as an extension of the masculinity which the men sought to embody. It may even have been present in some members who struggled to unlearn, or simply didn’t want to unlearn, misogyny altogether. However, as female members spoke their minds and called for better treatment, the men of the party got better. This betterment of gender relations is also evident in their later newspapers, which more heavily and openly featured the voices of women.

It also important to emphasize that, while this article is dedicated to analyzing the masculinity of the BPP, women were fundamental to the enactment of the Family Protector model. First, it is plausible that the Party would not have made as much progress in gender relations without Panther women speaking up and holding men accountable for their actions. Second and more importantly, Panther women were largely the ones that realized the Party’s survival programs on the ground. A quick glance at photos from cafeterias, clinics, and more from chapters across the country reveal that the Party quite literally depended on its women for success. Had it not been for them, it is unclear that the BPP would have loomed as large as it did.

Further, when all the male leaders had been chased out, arrested, incarcerated, or killed, women were the ones that took the reins and kept the Party from falling into disrepair. The most notable instance of this was when Newton fled to Cuba, and Elaine Brown assumed the position of chairman of the Party. Together with Ericka Huggins, Brown opened one of the most successful survival programs in BPP history: the Oakland Community School, which lasted from 1973 to 1982.⁷⁹ Claudia Chesson-Williams, an ex-member of the Queens chapter, echoed a similar experience:

There were times that our cadre consisted of almost nothing but women, and that was when the brothers were locked up or had to go underground. I remember being on a front line against a policeman on horseback and being six months pregnant. What we wanted was a simple streetlight, and we got the community out there, and we blocked traffic.⁸⁰

In sum, the Party did exhibit some patriarchal tendencies that were connected to the Black Power movement and leadership’s personal experiences as lumpen black men. From their gendered perspectives, keeping women safe out of the limelight qualified as protecting and empowering them. But as more Panther women spoke out, the men once again altered their behavior to fit what the black community and women needed. This is more than a lot of political organizations can say. By the end of the Party’s short life, it is not clear that absolute sexual equality had been achieved. But,

⁷⁶ Qtd. in Alameen-Shavers, “The Woman Question,” 54.

⁷⁷ “Rules of the Black Panther Party.” *The Black Panther* 2., no. 19 (1969): 20.

⁷⁸ Seale, *Seize the Time*, 394.

⁷⁹ Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 262.

⁸⁰ Qtd. in Yohuru Williams and Brian Shih, “Sisters of the Revolution.” *Nation* 303, no. 15 (2016): 27.

if it had survived, it is plausible that Panther men and women would have continued working in that direction together.

Conclusion: Reclaiming One’s Humanity

Clearly, the men of the Black Panther Party enacted their masculinity according to the Family Protector model; that is to say, empowering the community directly, rather than simply attacking their oppressors to empower themselves. This is exemplified by their emphasis on self-defense, community empowerment, and commitment to the betterment of all black people- not just black men.

The legacies of their work also echo into the present day. One can see them in the Black Lives Matter movement, which also seeks to empower *all* black people- not just those who conform to a specific model. To them, it doesn’t matter who a black person is- they are human, and they have worth, and they do not deserve to be tortured and killed simply because of the color of their skin.⁸¹ It can also be seen in how the right to self-defense, armed or otherwise, in responding to state oppression as a means of reclaiming their humanity has become a standard topic in the national discourse.

But one thing remains unclear: the right to self-defense and the overcoming of trauma and internalized self-hatred are not exclusive to males. In fact, the onset of trauma is universally caused by one’s inability to fight back and stop what awful thing is happening to them. Resulting psychological problems can then only be solved by showing oneself that, despite that event, they still have the power, the agency, and the humanity to fight for themselves.⁸²

So, even in times when the men of the Black Panther Party employed masculinist rhetoric and posturing, it can’t be said that they were purely acting from a place of gender, as opposed to a place of humanity. As Frantz Fanon so often said, self-defense is key to reclaiming one’s humanity in the face of violence by others. And it seems that, at least in some cases, he was right. Take the testimony of Black Panther leader Ericka Huggins:

In those days [we fought to] get rid of racism so we could stay alive. We didn’t even think about sexism except when it reared its head. We didn’t spend our time looking at what men and women did or didn’t do because we didn’t have time to think about it. We were too busy living so we didn’t die. ... A lot of people don’t understand what that means in a day-to-day interaction. We were constantly looking over our shoulders. All I wanted to know about the person next to me, be it a man or woman, was would they back me up. If I needed to put my life in this person’s hands, would it be all right. I didn’t care whether they were man or woman, gay or straight, or any of that.⁸³

⁸¹ “About.” *Black Lives Matter*.

⁸² Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Penguin Books, 2015), 30.

⁸³ Qtd. in Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 308.

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