

Chapter 14

**The Vanguard of the Revolution: A Retrospective Analysis
of the Black Panther Party**

Umeme Sababu
Edinboro University of Pennsylvania

INTRODUCTION

In 1969 my mother migrated from Greenville, Mississippi, to Chicago, Illinois. She lived with a friend in a two-bedroom apartment and asked my uncle, Marshall Bowman, if I could stay with him, his wife, and three children until she could afford an apartment. I settled into the small three-bedroom basement apartment on the west side of Chicago on West Wilcox Street. On an early, windy, and cold day, my aunt cooked a healthy breakfast, including grits, eggs, and toast, along with lunch for my first day in school. After listening to instructions about my first day, I put on my coat, scarf, and gloves and met my cousins outside to walk three blocks to my new school, Mary Maples Dodge Elementary School on Washington Avenue. As we walked down Washtenaw Avenue, we passed Monroe Street and observed some police cars and a large crowd of bystanders. I wondered what the reason was for the commotion. It was mindboggling to learn later that I witnessed the aftermath of the chaotic scene on Monroe Street involving a significant and tragic component of the Black Panther Party history—the assassination of

two members of the Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party by the Chicago Police Department under the orders of the Cook County Illinois State Attorney Ed Hanrahan.

Unbeknownst to me, I had witnessed the consequence of the Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) devised by the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) J. Edgar Hoover. COINTELPRO was designed to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise, neutralize the activities on black nationalist, hate-type organizations and groupings, their leadership, spokesmen, membership and supporters.”¹ Moreover, it sought to prevent the rise of a messiah who could unify the militants and electrify the Black nationalist movement. By 1969 the Black Panther Party considered itself the vanguard of the movement and became the primary target of COINTELPRO. By 1969 the charismatic Fred Hampton, Chairman of the Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party, represented this potential rise of a “Black Messiah.” Consequently, he became the target of the Chicago Police Department, the FBI, and State Attorney General Ed Hanrahan. On that cold day of December 4, 1969, at 4:00 AM, a fourteen-gang intelligence unit raided Hampton’s two-story apartment at 2337 Monroe, shooting ninety-nine shots and killing Fred Hampton and Mark Clark.²

¹ U.S. Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Intelligence Activities and the Rights of Americans, Book 3, Final Report (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1976); “Respect to Intelligence Activities, The FBI’s Covert Action Program to Destroy the Black Panther Party, in Supplemental Detailed Staff Reports on Intelligence Activities, The FBI’s Covert Action Program to Destroy the Black Panther Party,” in Supplemental Detailed Staff Reports on Intelligence Activities and the Rights of Americans, Book 3, Final Report (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1976).

² 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), 180.

CIVIL RIGHTS/BLACK POWER MOVEMENT

A growing number of scholars has explored and challenged the traditional paradigm and narrative of the “Civil Rights-Black Power movement.”³ Likewise, a number of crucial issues continue to be reexamined, challenged, and revised in the new scholarship. This new paradigm seeks to expand the discourse of the meaning and significance of the Civil Rights-Black Power movement. First, the new scholarship focuses on local people, local struggles, and the ordinary people, through courage and determination, who made extraordinary steps to change their circumstances. Second, the traditional narrative of the Civil Rights Movement that begins with *Brown v. Board of Education* and ends with 1965’s Selma to Montgomery March is not only problematic but minimizes later developments. This timeline, with its regional focus on events in the Deep South, also ignores Northern movements.

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham commented that “in the late 1990s scholars came increasingly to question static and bifurcated regional images—generalizations that equated the Southern movement with racial desegregation and the belief in nonviolence and the Northern movement with Black Power and violence.”⁴ Furthermore, Jeanne

³ I use the term Civil Rights-Black Power to emphasize the point that these movements, which have often been viewed and examined as a dichotomy, are in fact interrelated. The revisionist scholarship has begun to examine this relationship and interconnectedness of Black Power and Civil Rights.

⁴ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “Foreword,” in Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodward, eds., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave Press, 2003), xi.

Theoharis asserted that “early attention to black nationalist and militant revolutionary groups also largely fell into this paradigm, reducing organizations like the Black Panther Party to a handful of fiery male masterminds. Ideologies of self-defense, socialism, independent political action, and pan-Africanism were not understood as locally grown philosophies and strategies but instead were attributed to the charismatic brilliance (or ‘ideological rhetoric’) of leaders such as Malcolm X, Huey Newton, and Eldridge Cleaver and the alienations of Northern black communities.”⁵ Hence, in this work I will utilize the term “Black Freedom Movement,” which aptly describes the post-World War II movement activities that occurred in various regions in the country.

Since the 1990s, a plethora of articles, books and documentaries have been published to reexamine the interpretations and narrow analysis of the Civil Rights-Black Power movement and organizations. Charles M. Payne’s *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* and John Dittmer’s *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* ushered in a revisionist approach in examining the Black Freedom Movement. Challenging the traditional emphasis on larger events, e.g., Birmingham, March on Washington, and the Selma campaign, this formative publication focuses on local struggles and people who laid the foundation for larger events in the movement.⁶

⁵ Jeanne Theoharis, “Introduction,” in Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodward, eds., *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York: New York Press, 2005), 4.

⁶ Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights Mississippi* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

Komozi Woodward's 1999 book, *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) and Black Power Politics*, set the stage for a more serious and critical look at the much-maligned Black Power Movement, and critiqued historians who "claimed that black nationalism was the cause of the early demise of the Black Revolt." Instead, *A Nation Within a Nation* argued that "the politics of black cultural nationalism and the dynamics of the Modern Black Convention Movement were fundamental to the endurance of the Black Revolt from the 1960s into the 1970s."⁷ Over the last two decades, a number of authors have similarly provided new research and interpretations which challenge the traditional characterization of the Black Power movement and its participants. These works examine the "Black Power" movement not as a dichotomy of the "civil rights" movement, but intertwined with, connected to, and extended from the larger social and political struggles of the era.⁸

⁷ Komozi Woodward, *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) & Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 4.

⁸ For further examinations of Black Power see Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America*. (New York: Owl Books, 2006); Judson Jeffries, ed., *Black Power: In the Belly of the Beast*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Cedric Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

Black Panther Historiography

The 1960s saw the most pervasive and glaring movement to transform and revolutionize the economic, cultural, and social climate in the United States. From the Black Freedom Movement to the Anti-War Movement, from the Free Speech Movement to the women's rights movement, the nation faced a renewed challenge to the oppressive, racist, and discriminatory history of the United States. The Black Panther Party emerged in the context of this renewed struggle. Yet, the history of the Black Panthers, like similar Black revolutionary and radical organizations, has been reduced to symbolism and commodification that distort and minimize the revolutionary time that the 1960s represent. Important symbols that reflect the meanings of struggles are reduced to nostalgic memories and romantic recollections of days gone by.

Hence, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) represents another challenge to our historical consciousness on how to analyze its significance, strengths, and weaknesses. Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams's *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement* remarked that "The BPP remains caught between culture—the popular perception, idealization, and misconception of the Party rooted in the cultural politics of the past and romanticism of the present."⁹ Ryan J. Kirkby adds that "Of all the Black power groups to emerge from the tumultuous environment of the 1960s, the Black Panther Party (BPP) remains one of the most misunderstood and controversial."⁹

⁹ Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams, eds, *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 3-4, 25; Ryan J. Kirkby, "'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised': Community Activism and the

The historiography of the Black Panther Party can be divided into four periods. The first period included publications of books, articles, essays, and commentaries by participants emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These personal and first-hand accounts provided an up-close examination of the origins, beliefs, and ideological underpinnings of the Black Panther Party. Likewise, the media fascination served as an important platform for the Panthers to explain its goals.¹⁰

The second period emerged with the publication of Hugh Pearson's *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America*. Pearson's account proved to be the catalyst for a new phase of Black Panther Party studies, not least because it lay bare the amorality of a 1960s icon, Huey Newton. Given the central position of the Black Panther Party in the popular memory and history of the 1960s, Pearson's book was likely to be read widely; "given its relentlessly negative tone, it was sure to provoke a vociferous response from Panther supporters," asserted Joe Street.¹¹ The publication of Pearson's

Black Panther Party, 1966-1971," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2011), 25-62.

¹⁰ See Huey P. Newton, *To Die for The People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton* (New York: Random House, 1972); Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (New York: Penguin Books, 1970); Earl Anthony, *Picking Up the Gun: A Report on the Black Panthers* (New York: Dial Press, 1970); Ruth-Marion Baruch, *The Vanguard: A Photographic Essay on the Black Panthers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970); Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*. (New York: Random House, 1967); Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

¹¹ Joe Street, "The Historiography of the Black Panther Party," *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (May 2010), 363; Hugh Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* (Massachusetts: Addison Wesley, 1994).

book witnessed an enormous outpouring of books and articles to refute and challenge this one-sided view of the party and Huey Newton.

The third phase focused on the Black Panther Party's contribution to African American and American political culture. The emergence of the renewed scholarship provided more documentaries and books that explained the positive contributions of the Party and the challenges that it faced as a vanguard organization. Challenging the notion that the party was simply an organization that promoted violence and was composed of misguided youth, the new publications revealed the complexity, composition, and varied interests of the party. Examples of this new scholarship were Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams's *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement* and Brian Shih and Yohuru Williams's *The Black Panthers: Portraits from an Unfinished Revolution*. Shih and Williams's text is a collection of interviews, essays, and photographs of the rank-and-file members. The value of the portraits is that they challenge the myopic, narrow, and negative perceptions of the Black Panthers and examine the Party from the bottom up. This collection also sheds light on the various reasons that ordinary people joined the Party and the varied experiences of its members.¹²

Fourth, overlapping the books and articles is a number of documentary and films. Filmmaker Stanley Nelson's *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution* was the first feature-length documentary to explore its significance. More recent is Shaka King's *Judas*

¹² Lazerow and Williams, 1; Brian Shih and Yohuru Williams, eds., *The Black Panthers: Portraits from an Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Nation Books, 2016).

and the Black Messiah, which details the betrayal of Fred Hampton by the FBI informant William O'Neil that led to Hampton's death in 1969.

BLACK PANTHERS FOR SELF-DEFENSE

The Black Panther Party emerged amid the burgeoning Black Arts and Black Consciousness movement of the late 1960s. The death of Black nationalist icon Malcolm X galvanized a generation of poets and writers who began to publish their work in literary magazines, held poetry readings, staged plays in community theatres, and established independent printing presses. These artists represented a rejection of the values of the dominant society, and African Americans began to call themselves "Black" and identify with Africa. They began wearing dashikis, taking on African names, changing their hairstyles to natural Afros, and emphasizing links to the pan-African world and the African liberation movements.

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) emerged as the major youth organization in the Black freedom struggle in 1960. Created as a mechanism to organize the sit-in movement, SNCC served as the bridge for many activists who became more radical in the late 1960s. I use the word "perceived" because, in reality, SNCC was a radical group only in the context of the times to challenge the prevailing White power structure throughout the South. Ella Baker, a longtime activist who had served in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference headed by Martin Luther King Jr. urged students to remain independent from the mainstream civil rights organizations. The SNCC

movement would become controlled by youth who had different ideas that challenged the mainstream civil rights leaders.

It is vital to understand the roots of the BPP and its forerunners. In *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*, Hasan Jeffries explained the importance of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), stating that "the creation of the LCFO was the defining event of the Lowndes movement. It transformed local black political behavior by providing African Americans with a framework for a new kind of political engagement."¹³ Inspired by local activists and SNCC, Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) used the ballot symbol of a black panther, which later inspired Huey Newton and Bobby Seale as the name of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. In Lowndes County in Alabama in 1965, the Black population was eighty percent Black, but not a single Black citizen was registered to vote. More than half of the African American population in Lowndes County lived below the poverty line.¹⁴

Moreover, White supremacists had a long history of extreme violence toward anyone who attempted to vote or otherwise challenge all-White rule. Lowndes County Freedom Organization members didn't want to vote simply to place other White candidates in office. Instead, they wanted to be able to vote for their own candidates. The resistance to the LCFO movement resulted in various tactics to destroy the movement. The White power structure evicted sharecroppers, leaving many Black residents unhoused and unemployed, and it refused to serve known LCFO members in stores and restaurants.

¹³ Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 2.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Small riots broke out with the local police often firing only on Blacks during these confrontations. However, despite these attempts at intimidation and disempowerment, the LCFO pushed forward and continued to organize and register voters. In 1966, several LCFO candidates ran for office in the general election but failed to win. While their attempt was unsuccessful, the LCFO continued to fight and their goal and motto of "Black power" spread outside of Alabama.

That same year in Memphis, Tennessee, James Meredith began his March Against Fear. Meredith had been the first African American enrolled in the University of Mississippi. In Mississippi more than 300,000 African Americans were not registered to vote despite the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. On June 5, 1966, Meredith left Memphis on a 200-mile march to Jackson, Mississippi, to "point up and challenge this all-pervasive and overriding fear that is so much a part of the day-to-day life of the Negro in this country and especially Mississippi."¹⁵ On the second day of the march, a White supremacist shot Meredith in the back. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Stokely Carmichael's SNCC rushed to Mississippi to complete the march. It was during this march that the ever-increasing tension between SNCC and SCLC came to a head. SNCC planned to issue a new call near Greenwood, Mississippi. Instead of calling for Freedom Now, the new call would be "Black Power." Carmichael asked, "what do we want?" The crowd responded, "Black Power!"¹⁶

¹⁵ James Meredith as quoted in Henry Hampton's *Eyes on the Prize: The Time Has Come* (1987), a production of Blackside, Inc. (Alexandria, Virginia: PBS Video, 2006).

¹⁶ Ibid.

It was within this context that the Black Panther Party for Self Defense emerged in 1966 in Oakland, California, where it aimed to combat rampant police brutality. Huey Newton and Bobby Seale had their first political experiences with Donald Warden in the Afro-American Association. Warden founded the association while he was a student at the University of Berkeley. Many of the Los Angeles-based activists, including Cedric Robinson, Richard Thorne, Ernest Allen, and Ron Everett (who changed his name to Maulana Karenga), received their politicization in the association. There was a large following at Merritt College who demanded Black Studies courses under the newly created Soul Students Advisory Council (later renamed the Black Student Union). Donna Jean Murch argues that the foundation and formulation of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (and other organizations) “had their origins—and antagonisms—in campus struggles” over curriculum and campus issues.¹⁷

PRECURSOR TO THE IDEA OF SELF-DEFENSE

Armed self-defense has a long tradition in the Civil Rights/Black Power movement. Charles Payne noted that Mississippi has a long tradition of Black folks taking up arms to defend themselves and their communities. The idea that the Southern movement was nonviolent does not adequately speak to the notion that southern Blacks, when necessary, “pick up the gun” to protect themselves. Although many Southern Blacks

¹⁷ Donna Jean Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 125.

believed in the philosophy of nonviolence, they saw no contradiction in using armed self-defense when attacked by White terrorists.

Additionally, Malcolm X's influence on young activists was enormous, especially on those in the urban areas of America and on some participants in SNNC whom he encountered during his trip to Africa. He spoke to young activists concerning the limitations of nonviolence when local, state, and federal government was unwilling or unable to protect American citizens who were peacefully protesting for basic human rights. Prophetically, Malcolm X pointed out the frustration and questioning of the traditional civil rights strategies and objectives, noting, "And now you're facing a situation where the young Negro's coming up...There's new thinking coming in." He asserted, "There's new thinking coming in. There's new strategy coming in...It'll be ballots, or it'll be bullets"¹⁸ Malcolm X believed in armed self-defense to protect activists when the federal government, local police, and state troopers were unwilling and unable to protect Black people. Moreover, Malcolm believed that the Black Freedom Struggle was part of the global struggle against western imperialism.

The assertion that the idea of armed self-defense was a phenomenon that emerged from the Black Panthers is, thus, erroneous. Quite the contrary, the idea of self-defense was practiced and used in Southern towns and cities. Robert F. Williams was born and raised in Monroe, North Carolina. After serving in the Marine Corps in the 1950s, he returned to Monroe and in 1956 assumed leadership of the nearly defunct local chapter

¹⁸ Malcolm X quoted in George Breitman, ed., *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (New York: Grove Press, 1990), 23-44.

of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Within six months its membership grew from six to two hundred. Many of the new members were veterans who had served in World War II, and emphasized their right to armed self-defense against violent White supremacists, and trained in the use of arms.¹⁹ Angela Davis pointed out armed resistance was not a new phenomenon, having existed before the Black Panther Party due to the armed patrols in Birmingham to protect Black citizens against state and private brutality. It simply is not true because in Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and countless towns in the South, this practice was clearly understood and, more importantly, was not a contradiction to the idea of non-violence. Paradoxically, although Dr. King espoused the non-violence philosophy, it did not prevent him from having armed guards who protected him and his family.

Finally, Lance Hill indicated, "In 1964 a clandestine armed self-defense organization formed in the black community in Jonesboro, Louisiana, with the goal of protecting civil rights activists from the Ku Klux Klan and other racist vigilantes." African American men in Jonesboro, Louisiana, led by Earnest "Chilly Willy" Thomas and Frederick Douglas Kirkpatrick founded the group known as the Deacons for Defense and Justice to protect members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) against Ku Klux Klan violence. Most of the "Deacons" were veterans of World War II and the Korean War. The Jonesboro group organized an affiliate chapter in nearby Bogalusa, Louisiana, led by Charles Sims, A.Z. Young, and Robert Hicks. Eventually, they organized a third chapter in Louisiana.

¹⁹ Robert F. Williams, *Negroes with Guns* (New York: Marzani & Munsell, 1962).

The Deacons' tense confrontation with the Klan in Bogalusa was crucial in forcing the federal government to intervene on behalf of the local African American community. The national attention they garnered also persuaded state and national officials to initiate efforts to neutralize the Klan in that area of the Deep South.²⁰

BLACK PANTHERS, 1966-1968

The question then is what made the Panthers different? What was the charisma that captured the nation, Black youth, activists, and people who had been apolitical in the Oakland area and beyond? The Panthers were bold and openly challenged police brutality by *patrolling the police*. The Panthers, with their leather jackets, berets, large afros, and emphasis on Black culture, were primarily young people in their late teens and early twenties, representing the new wave of Black consciousness. Moreover, the brutality and repressive measures that were seen on the nightly news of Black people being beaten, water hosed down, attacked by police dogs, and killed in the Southern Black civil rights movement left an indelible mark on the urban youth. The party's emergence also stemmed from local problems in Oakland such as the murder of Denzell Dowden in Oakland, California.²¹ African Americans in Oakland had experienced years of police

²⁰ Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 2.

²¹ Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

brutality. "The police'll jump on you, beat you up, put the gun to your head. This is what we were going through on a daily basis," stated Wayne Pharr.²²

Adopting the symbol of the panther from the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale formed the Black Panther Party in 1966 primarily for self-defense. Newton had studied the legal system in Oakland and discovered that it was legal for those without a felony to carry a firearm, and the weapon could not be concealed. Thus, they began to patrol the police. If a person was pulled over, the Panthers would walk to the scene and stay a legal distance with their weapons. Sherwin Forte, a member of the Panthers, stated that "we referred to ourselves as the vanguard and we were setting by example a new course that we wanted the entire community to follow."²³

Two major occurrences marked the organization's emergence on the national arena. In the early afternoon on February 2, 1967, Betty Shabazz was scheduled to deliver a speech on the two-year anniversary of the assassination of her husband, Malcolm X. She arrived at the San Francisco airport and was met by eight members of the Black Panthers dressed in uniform, waist-length leather jackets, powder blue shirts, and black berets and carrying shotguns and pistols. Huey Newton encountered a police officer in the airport who demanded to know why he was carrying a weapon, and when Newton responded that it was his right to carry the weapon, the officer commenced to unstrap

²² Wayne Pharr in Stanley Nelson, *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution*, Firelight Films (Alexandria, Virginia: PBS Films, 2015).

²³ Sherwin Forte in *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution*.

his pistol. Instead of backing down Newton shouted, "O.K., you big fat racist pig, draw your gun." The cop made no move. Newton shouted, "Draw your gun, you cowardly dog," and loaded a round into the chamber. Here were young brothers carrying weapons, challenging the police, and espousing revolutionary ideas such as the right to carry weapons and patrol the community against police brutality. Notably, the party's full name was the Black Panthers *for Self-Defense*.

The second incident that propelled the BPP onto the national scene occurred in Sacramento in May 1967. In a direct response to the Black Panthers, the California legislature was entertaining a new bill, the Mulford Act, which would repeal a previous law allowing public carrying of loaded firearms. The Black Panther Party decided to send a group of Panthers to Sacramento to voice their disagreement. Walking through the capital halls in their trademark black leather jackets and berets, the Panthers mistakenly walked onto the floor of the capital where the discussion of the Mulford Act was in session. The Panthers' charismatic character was on full display to the nation and had a tremendous effect on Black people who witnessed their resistance on every television set, radio station, and newspapers around the country. Almost overnight, a once-local group in Oakland gained national notoriety and would become the vanguard of the movement to empower and protect Black Americans.

The Panthers did not intend to have a nationwide organization, but the events of 1967 led to the creation of Panther-affiliate organizations in Washington, D.C., New York, Chicago, New Haven, Atlanta, Nashville, Raleigh, and countless other cities. The BPP linked the Black freedom struggle to the global movements for national liberation and the

fight against imperialist nations. Similarly, they were influenced by the writings of Frantz Fanon, Chairman Mao Tse Tung, and national independence movements in Vietnam, Guinea Bissau, Algeria, Ghana, and the Congo. From these influences, Newton and Seale sat down to develop the ten-point program (See Appendix).

Bryan Shih and Yohuru Williams's *The Black Panther: Portraits from An Unfinished Revolution* provides first-hand accounts of why people joined the Panthers. Moreover, it examines Panthers from the bottom up, rank and file members rather than the party's leadership. People joined the Panthers for different reasons. Some joined because they had been the victims of police brutality and supported the idea of policing the police. Others were attracted to social programs like housing, health, and free breakfast. The Panthers did not specifically target the church people, or the Muslims, or members of the mainstream civil rights organizations. They sought the brothers who were in the streets, who had just been released from prison, or who had been the victims of police brutality. These were students, young people who had not been involved in movement organizations. A cursory examination of the Panthers' Ten-Point Program provides a more robust and insightful analysis that challenges the often myopic view that the Panthers were simply gun-toting thugs. The Ten-Point Program revealed the party goals and demands, including freedom, full employment, decent housing, decent education, completely free health care, an end to all wars of aggression, and the end of police brutality. Moreover, the Panthers' goal was not to reform the American economic system, but to dismantle the capitalist system that oppressed African American people. The Panthers promoted an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist position and supported national

liberation struggles in Asia and Africa. Yet, unlike their actual efforts to create an anti-racist, democratic society, the Black Panthers have consistently been portrayed as “violent, racist thugs” in popular media.²⁴

GENDER AND THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY

The success of the grassroots activism was due to the rank-and-file membership of the Black Panther Party chapters. As such, the role of women in the party cannot be underestimated. Although the public faces of the organization were men like Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, and Eldridge Cleaver, women constituted more than two-thirds of the membership. Shortly after it was formed, women began joining the party and playing pivotal roles. Several women even served on the security force when Betty Shabazz visited San Francisco and were in the entourage when the Panthers traveled to Sacramento to protest the Mulford Act.

In 1966, Kathleen Neal was working with SNCC in New York City and had organized a conference at Fisk University, where she met Eldridge Cleaver, who asked her to come to Oakland and join the party. The two married in December 1967, and Kathleen served in several executive offices, including the position of Communications Secretary, a role that enabled her to solicit and write articles for the Black Panther Party newspaper. The newspaper was a vehicle that allowed the organization to publicize its program and to promote the BPP’s political positions in a way that was unfiltered through mainstream

²⁴ Meredith Roman, “The Black Panther Party and the Struggle for Human Rights,” *Spectrum: A Journal of Black Men*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2016), 8.

news affiliates. It also served as a recruitment tool to distribute information on the Panthers throughout the United States.

Other notable women Panthers included Ericka Huggins, who withdrew from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania to join the party in Oakland. Claudia Chesson-Williams joined the New York Party and taught the chapter's political education classes. When Yasmeen Sutton joined the party as a college student, she sold newspapers on campus and served on a committee with other Panthers to start the Langston Hughes Library. Katherine Campbell did not know anything about the Panthers when her sister suggested she volunteer for the Black Panthers' Free Breakfast for Children Program. Although initially hesitant at first, Campbell joined the party and became a dedicated member. Hence, although much of the attention was directed toward the Black men with the leather jackets and berets, women served as the backbone of the Panthers and held important administrative positions, participated in armed security, organized chapters in other cities, worked in the free breakfast program, and taught in the freedom schools.²⁵

As such, there were inevitable gender complications in the Panthers that have been highlighted by Kathleen Cleaver and Angela Davis (who was a supporter, not a member) among others. However, it was not simply a Panther issue because gender disparity was an issue among many student and activist organizations in the sixties, including SNCC, Students for a Democratic Society, and the Free Speech Movement as

²⁵ Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas, eds., *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and Their Legacy* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

well as in the traditional civil rights organizations like SCLC, NAACP, and CORE. Scholar Tracye A. Matthews notes that “despite the initial self-conscious creation by the leadership of a masculine public identity for the Panthers, some women and men in the Party challenged the characterization of the struggle as one mainly for the redemption of black manhood.” She further stated:

“While it can justifiably be argued that the BPP at various points in its history was a male-centered, male-dominated organization, this point should not negate the important ideological and practical contributions of its female members or of the men who resisted chauvinistic and sexist tendencies. Indeed, the diversity, both in terms of geography and personnel...cannot be understood and appreciated through simplistic explanations.”²⁶

BLACK PANTHER PARTY NEWSPAPER

The Black Panther was the official newspaper of the Black Panther Party. It began in 1967 as a four-page newsletter in Oakland, California. The rank-and-file members performed most of the work. In December 1966 Eldridge Cleaver was released from prison and gained some notoriety for essays published in *Ramparts*, the leading radical magazine in the 1960s. After a brief stint as a reporter for the magazine, he joined the Black Panther Party and became the Minister of Information and Chief Spokesperson.

The first issue was published on April 25, 1967, and *The Black Panther* remained in circulation until November 30, 1976. It became the main vehicle for financing the livelihood of the party. The newspaper cost \$.12 to print and sold for \$.25. The profits

²⁶ Tracye A. Matthews in Betty Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin, eds. *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 233-234.

were used for the party's programs, and the paper became an international vehicle to promote the Ten Point Platform and to establish the Panthers' identity and goals. With the growth of chapters around the country, the newspaper was a means to spread the Panthers' program to cities and other locations where the Panthers could not reach personally without an enormous financial burden.

The paper promoted positive images of Black people, discussed important issues arising in the community, advertised the social programs, and featured powerful artwork by Emory Douglass. Initially an idea from Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, Douglass's first drawing was a pig on four legs. Emory edited the drawing by turning the pig upright and dressing him in a bandolier, holster, and a badge with flies surrounding the pig. It became the symbol for the police and served as common rhetoric used by the Panthers.

Interest in the party grew so large and so fast that there was no way to prepare for a nationwide organization. More than forty chapters emerged in cities across the nation, including Boston, Des Moines, Winston-Salem, Cleveland, Chicago, Philadelphia, Seattle, Kansas City, and Detroit. International chapters were also organized in France, Israel, India, Germany, and several African countries, particularly after Eldridge Cleaver fled to Algeria following a shootout with the Oakland police. The membership of local chapters chose their focus depending on the context of the issues in their towns and cities.

The overriding challenge that the Panthers faced was the tremendous growth of the party nationwide, which was not its original intention. Furthermore, there was no structure to vet or screen potential members or their reasons for joining the organization.

Because anyone could join the organization, some individuals who had no experience in organization were vulnerable to infiltration by agents provocateurs. Additionally, confrontations with the police and the arrests of Panther leadership, particularly Huey Newton, resulted in extensive time, effort, and money for posting bail and paying lawyers, which drained the party of its resources. Notwithstanding these conditions, the party remained relevant and successful in attracting members, and this success led to a concerted effort to destroy the Black Panther Party.

SOCIAL PROGRAMS, POLITICAL ORGANIZATION AND COINTELPRO

The Black Panther Party's social programs were a major success in communities across the country. The Panthers and community activists were aware of studies about the effects on young children of not eating a nutritious meal and its impact on their learning ability. From 1969 to the early 1970s, the Panthers' Free Breakfast for Children Program fed thousands of young people. The program first launched at the St. Augustine Church in Oakland and quickly spread to community centers operated by Panthers members. Grits, eggs, bread, and milk were donated by local businesses. Although the federal government had begun a pilot program to provide breakfast to "nutritionally needy" school children in 1966, the U.S. School Breakfast Program targeted high poverty areas "where children had to travel a great distance to school." Partly because children

in Black communities weren't receiving these benefits, the Black Panthers successfully established free breakfast programs in cities across the country.²⁷

In addition to the Free Breakfast for Children Program, the Panthers established free educational services focused on reading, writing, and history; other programs included free shoes, coats, and clothing drives. To meet the medical needs of the community, the BPP provided free medical clinics and sickle cell testing services. The Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party was successful in establishing survival programs along with making serious inroads in political organization. Not only did these programs earn community support and legitimacy, they challenged the narrow views of the Panthers projected by the media and police. At the time, the Panthers were not fully aware of the forces that were being designed to neutralize and disrupt the programs' effectiveness.

The FBI's Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) initially started in 1956 as a mechanism to disrupt the activities of the Communist Party of the United States. By the 1960s the program broadly targeted a myriad of "dissident groups." In a 1967 letter to FBI field offices across the country, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover explained COINTELPRO's shift to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise, neutralize the activities on black nationalist, hate-type organizations and groupings, their leadership, spokesmen, membership and supporters."²⁸ Moreover, Hoover's goal was to prevent the rise of a

²⁷ "School Breakfast Program History." USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 24 July 2013. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/sbp/program-history> (accessed July 1, 2021).

²⁸ Brian Glick, *War at Home: Covert Action Against U.S. Activists and What We Can Do About It* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 77.

“Black messiah” who could organize and electrify the growing youth revolt. The program targeted SNCC, SCLC, CORE, Students for a Democratic Society, and the Nation of Islam. However, the brunt of the FBI’s secret program was primarily directed at the Black Panther Party. On July 16, 1969, Hoover announced publicly that the Black Panther Party represented “the greatest threat” America.

On April 2, 1969, nineteen men and two women of the newly formed Harlem Black Panther Party were charged with conspiring to blow up subway and police stations, local department stores, railroad cars, and the Botanical Garden in the Bronx. Over two years later when the case made it to court, as activist Lamont Lilly explained, “Despite the odds, after all the surveillance, warrantless wiretapping, infiltration and frame-ups, not one shred of state’s evidence stood in court.” After forty-five minutes, a multiracial jury rendered their decision; all twenty-one members were acquitted.²⁹

The most egregious of COINTELPRO actions occurred in Chicago. At the age of 21, Fred Hampton exhibited the qualities of a “Black messiah,” having shown that he was an effective leader on several levels. He had been elected as the President of the Maywood Youth Branch of the NAACP. He effectively organized civil rights activists by supporting civil rights workers in Mississippi and sending food and clothing to Mississippi aid workers. Not only was Hampton an effective organizer, he also possessed the qualities of a dynamic, charismatic, and electrifying speaker. He became a force to be reckoned with in Chicago. He built multiracial coalitions between various factions in the Chicago

²⁹ Lamont Lilly, “Panther Power: Afeni Shakur and the ‘New York 21’” <http://blackyouthproject.com/panther-power-afeni-shakur-and-the-new-york-21/> (accessed July 1, 2021).

community, and with the assistance of Bob Lee, the recreation leader of the YMCA, worked with African American, Puerto Rican, and White gang members. Forming a Rainbow Coalition of poor Whites, the Young Lords, and the Young Patriots was a daunting task, but Hampton and Lee were quite successful. Hampton also engaged in dialogue with the two largest Black gangs in Chicago: the Black Stone Rangers led by Jeff Fort and the Black Disciples. The goal was to bring awareness of racism and classism to the different gang memberships so that they could work with the Panthers to form a powerful political unit.

Unbeknownst to Hampton, FBI informant and agent provocateur William O'Neal joined the party and rose through the ranks to become Hampton's bodyguard. O'Neal was also a paid informant of the Chicago Police Department who among other acts of betrayal, provided law enforcement with the layout of Hampton's apartment. On December 4, 1969, a gas truck arrived at the apartment building at 2337 W. Monroe Street on the West Side of Chicago. With O'Neal's detailed map, fourteen plainclothes police officers filed out of the truck armed with pistols and machine guns. Coordinated under the orders of Cook County State's Attorney Edward Hanrahan and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, Hampton was murdered while sleeping. Hanrahan called it a shootout, but evidence revealed that 99 shots were fired into the apartment and only one shot came from inside the apartment.

After the death of Hampton, COINTELPRO activities increased. On December 8, 1969, the Los Angeles Police Department served a warrant to search for stolen weapons at the BPP headquarters at 41st Street and Central Avenue. The warrant was obtained

using false information. What followed was a dramatic shootout by the assault team that included 200 police officers, the newly created Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team with gas masks, a helicopter, a tank, and military-grade grenades. The four-hour raid was televised and gained national attention, and it resulted in 13 arrests and 72 criminal counts. A young attorney, Johnnie Cochran, represented the defendants and argued that the group acted in self-defense. A mixed-race jury found the Panthers not guilty on almost all charges.

On March 8, 1971, a cab driver, a daycare worker, and two professors broke into the FBI field office in Media, Pennsylvania, and stole over 1,000 documents, including evidence of COINTELPRO, and after Senate hearings in 1976, the program disbanded. Nevertheless, CONTELPRO effectively reached many of its goals in disrupting, discrediting, and/or neutralizing the activities of so-called Black nationalist groups. It destroyed lives, caused dissension between organizations, and imprisoned countless numbers of activists.

Designated as "political prisoners," BPP activists from the 1970s have been imprisoned from nineteen to forty-nine years. In 2020, Jalil Muntaqim (formerly known as Anthony Bottoms) was released after serving nearly fifty years in prison. Robert Seth Hayes was released in 2019 after serving forty-five years in prison. Elmer "Geronimo" Pratts spent twenty-seven years in prison for a murder he did not commit and was released in 1997. Dhoruba Bin Wahad served nineteen years as a result of a murder conviction and was released in 1995. Despite these releases, at least sixteen known members of the Black Panther Party are still in prison and a number of members are in

exile, most notably Assata Shakur, who is listed as one of America's "most wanted terrorists" with a \$2 million bounty for her capture. Presently, she lives in political asylum in Cuba and has been protected from several U.S. attempts at extradition.

CONCLUSION

The 1960s represent the most pervasive era to transform and revolutionize the economic, cultural, and social climate in the United States. The activist movements of the time did not emerge from an empty vacuum, nor were they initiated by any one individual or organization. The Black Panther Party has often been reduced to symbolism and commodification that distorts and minimizes the revolutionary time that the 1960s represent, and important symbols that reflect the meanings of struggles have been reduced to nostalgic memories from a detached past. For a more nuanced view, activist groups must be addressed individually, not as a monolithic entity. The Black Panther Party in particular must be reconstructed and reexamined as one of the most significant and radical organizations of the 1960s whose greatest legacy is the expression of human agency. The BPP's ideologies, actions, and programs were an expression of individual and collective power. They exhibited the power of people who think for themselves and act in ways to shape their life experiences and possibilities despite mechanisms and forces designed to hinder progress. In seeking to challenge the repressive state apparatus, they showed the possibilities and the perils of such endeavors.

Given the internal challenges and external forces designed to destroy the party, it is a testimonial to the courage and tenacity that the Black Panther Party was enormously successful on many fronts—free breakfast and educational programs, free medical clinics, free sickle cell testing, clothing drives, and food banks. The power struggles within the party between Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver, the enormous resources to free Huey Newton and to pay bails for members who were arrested and facing trial drained the resources of the party. Of all of the organizations that were part of the Civil Rights-Black Power movement, the Black Panther Party was confronted with the full force of the repressive state apparatuses, from police departments and state attorneys to the FBI and COINTELPRO. With the revelations that came to light after the secret program of COINTELPRO was exposed in 1971, the Panthers obviously spoke truth to power.

Finally, the continued relevance of the history of the Panthers is evident in the present issues of police brutality, the criminal justice system, voting rights, and human rights. The Black Lives Matter movement is addressing these challenges, and despite the different context of the present movement, there are strategies that can be examined, not duplicated, in the ongoing and complex institutional racial discrimination.

Discussion Questions

1. What factors influenced Huey Newton and Bobby Seale to create the Black Panther Party?
2. What were some of the survival programs that the Black Panther Party created?

3. What role did women play in the Black Panther Party?
4. What was the role of the *The Black Panther* newspaper in the growth of the Panthers?
5. What challenges arose with the nationwide expansion of the Party?
6. Explain why the Black Panther Party was targeted by the FBI.

Writing Prompts

Choose a Black Panther mentioned in this article and do your own research on his or her life. What motivated them to join the Panthers? What were their contributions to the organization?

Appendix

The Black Panther Party Ten-Point Program

- 1. We Want Freedom. We Want Power to Determine the Destiny of Our Black Community.** We believe that Black people will not be free until we are able to determine our destiny.
- 2. We Want Full Employment for Our People.** We believe that the federal government is responsible and obligated to give every man employment or a guaranteed income. We believe that if the White American businessmen will not give full employment, then the means of production should be taken from the businessmen and placed in the community so that the people of the community can organize and employ all of its people and give a high standard of living.

- 3. We Want an End to the Robbery by the Capitalists of Our Black Community.** We believe that this racist government has robbed us, and now we are demanding the overdue debt of forty acres and two mules. Forty acres and two mules were promised 100 years ago as restitution for slave labor and mass murder of Black people. We will accept the payment in currency which will be distributed to our many communities. The Germans are now aiding the Jews in Israel for the genocide of the Jewish people. The Germans murdered six million Jews. The American racist has taken part in the slaughter of over fifty million Black people; therefore, we feel that this is a modest demand that we make.
- 4. We Want Decent Housing Fit for the Shelter of Human Beings.** We believe that if the White Landlords will not give decent housing to our Black community, then the housing and the land should be made into cooperatives so that our community, with government aid, can build and make decent housing for its people.
- 5. We Want Education for Our People That Exposes the True Nature of this Decadent American Society. We Want Education That Teaches Us Our True History and Our Role in the Present-Day Society.** We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world then he has little chance to relate to anything else.
- 6. We Want All Black Men to be Exempt from Military Service.** We believe that Black people should not be forced to fight in the military service to defend a

racist government that does not protect us. We will not fight and kill other people of color in the world who, like Black people, are being victimized by the White racist government of America. We will protect ourselves from the force and violence of the racist police and the racist military by whatever means necessary.

7. We Want an Immediate End to Police Brutality and the Murder of Black

People. We believe we can end police brutality in our Black community by organizing Black self-defense groups that are dedicated to defending our Black community from racist police oppression and brutality. The Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States gives a right to bear arms. We therefore believe that all Black people should arm themselves for self-defense.

8. We Want Freedom for All Black Men Held in Federal, State, County and

City Prisons and Jails. We believe that all Black should be released from the many jails and prisons because they have not received a fair and impartial trial.

9. We Want All Black People When Brought to Trial to Be Tried in Court by

a Jury of Their Peer Group or People from Their Black Communities, as Defined by the Constitution of the United States. We believe that the courts should follow the United States Constitution so that Black people will receive fair trials. The Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution gives a man a right to be tried by his peer group. A peer is a person from a similar economic, social, religious, geographical, environmental, historical, and racial background. To do this the court will be forced to select a jury from the Black community from which the Black defendant came. We have been, and we are being, tried by all-White

juries that have no understanding of the "average reasoning man" of the Black community.

- 10. We Want Land, Bread, Housing, Education, Clothing, Justice and Peace.** When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and nature's God entitle them, a decent respect of the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and, accordingly, all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But, when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right,

it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.