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# The Gender Politics of Revolutionary Struggle in the Black Panther Party

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## ABSTRACT

Amidst numerous radical movements in the 1960s, the Black Panther Party grew to be one of the most notable Black power groups. From being an Oakland, California-based militant organization to having 40 chapters across 28 states, the Black Panthers were dynamic in adapting to the changing needs of their members and communities. While the organization was not free from misogyny or patriarchal ideas, Panther women sought to direct more attention to women's issues and took on many responsibilities in the wake of suppression from the FBI's CounterIntelligence Program. First, this paper analyzes the origins and development of the Party's gender-related ideology. Second, using primary sources, this research seeks to understand the various roles women fulfilled within the Party, in terms of militants, rank-and-file members, and revolutionaries.

## INTRODUCTION

When asked about women's role in the Black Panther Party, Kathleen Cleaver, the former Communications Secretary of the BPP, reflected that the only relevant question was "Where can I go to get involved in the revolutionary struggle?" (233) in a 1998 speech on gender and the Black Panther Party. In this speech, "Women, Power, and Revolution," Cleaver argues that gender is a lens that is often used to criticize the Panthers, rather than to celebrate the women in the wide range of ways they participated and prevailed against many layers of struggle. While Cleaver's framing speaks to her individual interpretation of how the Panthers are framed historically, it is also valid to dissect the gender politics within the Party to both celebrate female revolutionaries and understand the ways in which patriarchy and misogyny limited them.

The revolutionary struggle began in Oakland, California, with Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founding the Black Panther Party for Self Defense in 1966, combating police brutality in their communities with their own armed police patrols. That same year, Newton and Seale created the Black Panther Party Ten Point Program to address the needs of the Bay Area's Black community. By early 1967, the first official Party headquarters was set up and party recruitment and expansion followed. Panther ideology intersected Marxism, Black Nationalism, and other conceptions of power structures (which will be addressed in the following section) to form their own interpretation of the conditions of the Black community in the United States. Nationwide

growth led to greater targeted attacks from police and the FBI through the FBI's CounterIntelligence Program (COINTELPRO), forcing the Party to adapt towards the implementation of "Survival Programs," such as the Free Breakfast Program, among others.

While popular history remembers the male-centric leadership and imagery of the Party, it's easy to simply think of women's roles as limited or restricted by the innate hypermasculinity of revolutionary struggle. Additionally, the Panthers were one of many radical groups that emerged in the mid- to late-1960s. Along with many other Black nationalist groups, there were many feminist women's groups. The question often centers on why Panther women didn't join other women's groups or form groups of their own (Banks, 2005, 58). Oftentimes, the answer is simply that women's liberation groups fit the needs of just white-middle class women. Typically in this context, narratives surrounding women in the BPP often center on the ways patriarchy prevailed in a group that was supposed to reject it. Narratives have centered on the experiences of individual members, notably Elaine Brown and Ericka Huggins (Spencer, 2016 and Rocker, 2020). That said, the Party, especially at its peak, was so large in its breath that there is no one narrative about women in the Party, whether it be positive or negative. This is not to say the BPP was without sexism and misogyny, but women often worked within the constraints of their environment.

There was a great deal of hypocrisy and disconnect from male leadership and rank-and-file members when it came to rhetoric around gender

and Party practices. Patriarchal values and practices and “male chauvinism” were not simply ignored, though. The women involved in the BPP, whether they were national figures like Kathleen Cleaver, Ericka Huggins, or Assata Shakur, or the average Party member, who contributed to the publication of *The Black Panther* or the Free Breakfast Program, ensured that anti-sexism was a part of the revolutionary struggle. The different roles fulfilled by women in the Black Panther Party advocated for the breaking down of white patriarchal values through their various party functions, while working with their male counterparts to combat their own sexism and misogyny.

The BPP’s goal was a Black Power revolution and Black liberation, where the white bourgeois power structures would be broken down to grant societal equality. In this broader revolutionary movement, how did women express their own agency, so that societal equality would include gender equality? How did women place themselves in the revolutionary context with their male counterparts? How did women adapt their roles to suit the broader movement? Using the three commonly used roles fulfilled by women in the BPP (the Militant Woman, the Rank-and-File Woman, the Revolutionary Mother), this paper will analyze how the BPP engaged with gender and how women advocated for their role in this segment of the Black Power movement. Women’s participation in the BPP was dynamic in the ways that they responded to the varying and changing needs of the Party as a whole, but many women faced the results of their male comrades’ attitudes, which were often informed by patriarchal values.

## FOUNDATIONS OF PANTHER IDEOLOGY AND ITS ROLE IN PARTY GENDER POLITICS

The BPP interpreted particular concepts in application to the Party’s conceptualizations of the Black community’s experience in the United States. Panther ideology supports Black nationalism (ideas that originate with Malcolm X) and liberation as internal colonies within the U.S. and, as Bobby Seale explained in a 1967 speech, the colonial forces are “White cops [who occupy] our community like foreign troops. (Bloom & Martin, 2013, 80)” The historians Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr. explain the concept of internal colonies and the structures that enforce them: “The oppressive imperial American state denied black people political and economic power... The police were not officers of justice- they were pigs... and foreign troops oppressing black people. Those who challenged the police were not criminals- they were anti-imperialists. (Bloom & Martin, 2013, 114)” The Party “saw police, government officials, and capitalists alike as ‘pigs,’ that upheld, what was typically referred to as, the “pig power structure” that oppressed the Black community (Bloom & Martin, 2013, 388). Rhetoric of anti-imperialism often related to the experiences of other countries, who

had anti-colonial and anti-imperial movements, notably Vietnam (especially as the Party aligned with the anti-war movement). Furthermore, rhetoric using the concept of fascism was defined as “as capitalism plus racism practiced by an open dictatorship of finance capitalism. (Williams, 2012, 34)”

Finally, important concepts used in Panther gender politics are Black emasculation and male chauvinism. To start with the former, Black manhood has been historically weaponized as a tool of white supremacy, with the convergence of “political terrorism, economic oppression, and conventional codes of sexuality and morality,” making it particularly important to reclaim Black masculinity in the context of Black power (Carby, 1985, 268). Particularly, the lynching of black men demonstrated the ways in which this persecution occurred. Additionally, the Black family structure, the target of Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” informed negative stereotypes about both fathers and mothers (Spencer, 2008, 90). Notably, these stereotypes reinforced the single matriarch and the absent father.

“Male chauvinism,” on the other hand, was a term that became en vogue during the second wave of feminism “to derogate the conviction of men that they were better than women. (Mansbridge & Flaster, 2005, 261)” Male chauvinism was essentially a blanket term, utilized in both contemporary Panther language and retrospective oral histories, to address the behavior and attitudes that assumed male superiority in everyday behaviors (i.e. not formally addressing patriarchal structures or misogyny). (Mansbridge & Flaster, 2007, 642) The popularity of this term makes it the lens for many women to describe an array of behaviors or experiences.

Although the original inception of the BPP, rooted in self-defense of the Black community, was inherently hypermasculine in nature, this identity was not static. While the Party itself was rooted in ideas of Black Power and liberation, ideas about gender evolved as the conditions of the Party did. This evolution does, however, begin with male-centric Party leadership. Male leaders, from Newton and Seale to Eldridge Cleaver and Fred Hampton, were often the face of the Party, but the struggle for Black liberation had a larger focus on women’s issues as more and more women participated.

That said, male Panthers’ conceptions of gender issues were understood through the lens of their own struggle as Black men in the context of American capitalism and white supremacy. Party co-founder, Huey Newton, explained what is at the core of Black men’s socio-economic position across society in his 1967 article “Fear and Doubt:” “As a man, [the Black male] finds himself void of those things that bring respect and a feeling of worthiness. He looks around for something to blame for his situation, but because he is not sophisticated regarding the socio-economic milieu and because of negativistic parental and institutional teachings he ultimately blames himself.”

Newton further explained the ways that Black men have internalized society's limitations and the alternatives they may find to regain masculinity and power. He then explained how views on the gendered differences of Black people's socio-economic abilities within the system:

"In a society where a man is valued according to occupation and material possession, he is without possessions. He is unskilled and more often than not either marginally employed or unemployed. Often his wife (who is able to secure a job as a maid cleaning for white people) is the breadwinner. He is, therefore, viewed as quite worthless by his wife and children. He is ineffectual both in and outside the home. He cannot provide for or protect his family... Society will not acknowledge him as a man."

Maureen E. Coulter (2012) interprets Newton's argument as inherently aligning Black women with American capitalism "by presenting female breadwinners as undermining the authority of men," (p. 20) due to the perception that Black women have a greater ability to work within that system. While Black men are excluded from entering even the American working class, Black women seemingly have the advantage, as they are both able to work in and outside of the home and enter the working class (Banks, 2009, 35). Therefore, the only solution, as Newton later asserts, is to break down the structures and institutions that uphold this oppression of the Black community through "self defense," with Black men at the forefront.

In his 1967 article "In Defense of Self-Defense," Newton explained that "the black colony of Afro-America" faces "the imperialistic racism of the oppressor," with oppression also upheld by non-violent, Black "spokesmen" of the oppressor. Rejecting the non-violent civil rights movement, Newton justified self-defense as "black people realize brutality and force can only be inflicted if there is submission," therefore to overcome this, they must follow "the principle that the oppressor has no rights that the oppressed is bound to respect. Kill the slavemaster, destroy him utterly, move against him with implacable fortitude. Break his oppressive power by any means necessary." Essentially, equivalent use of force against the oppressor, through militancy, was the only solution left. Although this doesn't explain patriarchal practices, this logic explains why the Panther segment of the Black Power movement was originally very male-centric. By default, it was thought to be up to Black men to break down the system that oppresses them first, which would, in turn, break down the system that oppresses Black women in different ways, as their experiences with capitalism separated them, not their experiences with racism. Furthermore, this did not assert that women had no place in the revolution, it more so implied that men would be the vanguard.

In early inceptions of the role of women in the BPP, Black women internalized this rhetoric, delegating themselves as support systems for the men actively participating in revolution. Two articles in a September 1968 edition of the Black Panther newspaper reinforced these ideas. Panther Gloria Bartholomew (1968) writes, "Not only do [Black women] have to stand behind our men, but we have to stand beside them... and let our Black men know that we have complete faith in them; that they will achieve the battle or regain our true identity as Black men and women, who are very damn proud of our race." Another contributor to this edition, Panther Linda Greene (1968), argues that the inherent identity of being a Black woman is revolutionary, but again reinforces that she acts primarily as support for the men at the frontlines: "She is what her man, and what her people need her to be, when they need her. She is the strength of the struggle. She is a worker for Black liberation. It is her goal. Within this goal lies the fulfilling of Black man in every way that they must be fulfilled in order to live and fight.... She must be committed and dedicated, because the revolution will be lost without her." The early inceptions of Panther women reflect the priorities and rhetoric of male leadership in the way that they wanted to fight oppression. For that sake, the role of women would not be an active revolutionary. While those attitudes may have been internalized by women, the appeal of the Panthers was the broader ideology of Black liberation. What was in question in the early years of the Party, then, was how to achieve that.

As the BPP grew nationally and evolved ideologically, women took on larger roles, as well as focused Party rhetoric around gender politics. The growth of the Party coincided with the growth of targeted attacks on the Party. Historian Donna Jean Murch (2010) argues that 1968 was a turning point for women, when the BPP turned to "Survival Pending Revolutions," with programs such as the Free Breakfast programs and liberation schools, to garner more and more grassroots support, in the face of COINTELPRO (p. 169). By 1967, Huey Newton was arrested, leading to the "Free Huey" movement. By 1968, Bobby Hutton was killed by the police and Eldridge Cleaver went underground. By 1969, 21 Panthers from the New York chapter (known as the Panther 21) were indicted for bomb plots. The evolving needs of the Party allowed and needed women to take on more leadership roles and fulfill more roles in the Party's day to day needs. In an August 1969 edition of the Black Panther, Candi Robinson wrote the article "Message to Revolutionary Women," arguing that women are the "equal halves of men" at all levels of the revolution. She wrote, "Sisters, let's educate our people Combat liberalism, and combat male chauvinism. Awaken our men to the fact that we are no more nor no less than they... Far too long we have been women without men, for far too long we have been double oppressed, not only by the capitalist society, but also by our men. (Robinson, 1969)"

Another contribution from a November 1969 edition of the newspaper by Corona Branch Secretary Jackie Harper supported the call to action, in standing with their male counterparts in the struggle against fascism, but this article also goes a step forward in abandoning traditional gender roles for the struggle: “We are to be (as well as the brother) out and out cold-blooded. [There] is no need for sewing circles and cooking duty at home. We are Revolutionaries!” Both of these women acknowledge the ways in which male chauvinism has held women back in their participation, but they both go further to say that women now have to work with men to reeducate them on gender roles. Robinson’s rhetoric of “women without men” demonstrates the ways that women alone have been fighting for their needs and that liberation should include feminism. Harper’s rethinking of gender roles can be applied to daily practices, as well as broader conceptions about Black women. Women played active roles in working to incorporate women’s issues in the Party, not just for themselves, but so that men could also acknowledge the gendered aspects of inequality. That said, the simple act of publishing articles like these demonstrates a fluidity and flexibility in thought, as well as the urgency of mobilization in 1968 and 1969.

### **“CAN I HAVE A GUN?”: THE GENDERLESS, MILITANT APPEAL OF THE PANTHERS**

Tarika “Matilaba” Lewis is credited as the first woman to join the Panthers in Oakland and she often recounts her experience. When she first expressed interest at Party headquarters, she asked Bobby Seale, “Ya’ll have a nice program and everything. It sounds like me. Can I join? ‘Cause ya’ll don’t have no sisters up in here.” She then asked, “Can I have a gun? (Spencer, 2008, 94)” Lewis’ skill with guns is often told as part of her narrative as a Party member, along with the illustrations she created for the Black Panther and her work in the Oakland office.

While the way the Panthers characterized militancy was hyper-masculine, the appeal of militancy as part of their program had a broader, genderless appeal. At the core of this was the imagery that the Panthers employed for themselves. When Newton and Seale began their police patrols in Oakland in 1966, legally carrying unconcealed weapons and “[observing] police as they arrested people to make sure the officers were not breaking laws or using excessive force,” the effectiveness of their tactics became a strong recruiting tool (Spencer, 2016, 40). To further demonstrate the Party’s organization in its tactics, they cultivated a look of “black slacks, a powder blue shirt or turtleneck, a black leather jacket, and a black beret, rakishly tilted to one side,” was “a symbol of powerful masculinity to be emulated. (Spencer, 2008, 94)” Between the look cultivated by the Panthers and their ever-growing track record of self-defense, the idea of who was protecting the Black community seemed to

lay in the hands of men, with protection being attributed to an aspect of masculinity, as referenced by Newton. Militancy was not just applying the Panther program, but it was an active recruitment tool that could further their program.

The intention of demonstrating militancy was for both legitimacy and recruitment, not to make the BPP an exclusively male organization. As membership grew, so did the amount of women who became members. It was not just Lewis, for instance, who saw the political and militant appeal of the Party. Brenda Presley, who worked at the San Francisco office after becoming interested in the Party in 1967 said, “I liked the militancy. I liked the fact that they appeared to be disciplined and they didn’t take any mess from anybody. They were really serious and that impressed me. (Spencer, 2008, 98)” Historian Robin Ceanne Spencer argues that those early Party members who sought “to challenge police brutality and economic discrimination, and opened the doors of the organization for other women. (Spencer, 2008, 99)”

This is clear in the way the Party evolved and applied this imagery to include women in the militant aspects of its program, as well as the way women grew to cultivate their own militant images. As part of a broader Black power movement, Black women increasingly wore their hair naturally. By rejecting white beauty standards in embracing their natural hair, leading to the popularity of the Afro, Black women championed “a political statement and embodied the new invention of a Black woman becoming a political subject through dressing her body in public. (Lee, 2015, 98)” Their male counterparts also embraced the Afro and the image Party promoted of itself included a sense of androgyny, which was a way they projected their image as militants. In a May 1968 volume of the Black Panther, a political cartoon depicts a group of armed Panthers surrounding a police car (labeled “Pig Dept.”) with a sleeping pig inside. Except for minor differences (jewelry on women and facial hair on men, for example), this political cartoon conveys that participation in self-defense via militancy is for everyone. Considering it was the Party themselves promoting this imagery, it is clear that the male-centric origins of the party was not a static characterization. As a recruitment tool, this paved the way for further female participation and leadership in the Party. With more women in the Party, a plurality of voices added to Party beliefs and action, but it also furthered state repression. The convergence of these events led to a far more active role for women.

### **BODY AND SOUL: THE RANK AND FILE EXPERIENCE**

At the Party’s height, it is reported to have 40 chapters across 28 states and an estimated 5,000 members (Jeffries, 2010, 8). Murch (2010) asserts that “Survival Pending Revolution” led to women making up a majority of rank

and file membership by 1969 (190). With this comes the more complicated narratives of gender politics in the Party. Members were expected to equally contribute and participate, whether that be in Party political education or the daily works of the Party, which often included activities like selling the Black Panther newspaper for fundraising or working the Free Breakfast Programs. On principle, there were supposed to be no gendered divisions of labor. However, as Norma Stoke Mtume (2016), who worked in the free medical clinics in Los Angeles and Berkeley, explained, there were complications between beliefs and practices:

“...we tried to make all things equal, that women could do what men could do. And the men cooked, the men cleaned. There were men assigned to the children’s centers and whatnot. But like I said, the people that were in the Party were people who were not in the Party and came into the Party, so they brought those same behaviors, and some chauvinism. Not just men in our community, but all over the world, the patriarchal societies. So, that was something that you constantly had to deal with.” (p. 13)

For many members, being a Black Panther was a day-in and day-out lifestyle, especially due to the communal living situations (often called “Panther Pads”) members participated in. Ericka Huggins (2016) described the all-encompassing nature of being a Panther: “We didn’t get paid for anything. We lived collectively. We just were serving the people, body and soul, our motto. (p. 20)” Communal living arrangements were supposed to offer a “freer” alternative to “imprisoning, enslaving, and suffocating” nuclear and conventional family norms (Bloom & Martin, 2013, 195). However, Panther Pads often replicated these norms and increased burdens on women. In terms of family, women had to uphold all the responsibility for birth control and family planning, as well as take care of childcare, even if single (Bloom & Martin, 2013, 195). Men also often failed to do their share of household chores. For instance, Minister of Information (and later Chair of the Party) Elaine Brown “[recalled] an incident during a visit to Northern California where she was essentially pressured to cook and clean dishes along with her fellow sister comrades while the men conversed in the living room. (Alameen-Shavers, 2016, 53)” In fact, men’s household contributions were often considered exceptional, as in the instance of New York Panther Zayd Shakur, who often volunteered to cook and clean, according to Assata Shakur (Alameen-Shavers, 2016, 53). These anecdotes speak to the ways in which individual experiences were informed by the breath of the organization, in location, chapter leadership, and individual members.

Beyond the day to day lifestyle of Party members, women helped maintain Panther offices and headquarters, as well as the Survival Programs that were of increasing

importance. Despite intentions, it was often the case that women took on administrative or clerical work, due to external expectation of female labor that often relegated women to these types of positions (Banks, 2009, 47). A 1967 article in the Black Panther demonstrates perpetration of these gendered divisions of labor, which explained the ways women can help the revolutionary struggle in the “background.” “...there are papers to sell, donations to collect for guns; there is a lot of secretarial work that must be done in order to keep the Black Panther newspaper rolling...”

On the other hand, as the Party grew, there were opportunities for mobility in the roles women took on in the Party. Roberta Alexander was a Panther for one year, during 1969, in Oakland. She first started out by working at the free breakfast program, before leadership assigned her to type for the newspaper. In the summer of 1969, she was asked to speak at the United Front Against Fascism and focused her speech on the role of women:

“[Eldridge Cleaver] had come out with ‘women are our other half, not our lesser half, but our other half,’ so that all sounded very good. But I talked some about saying and doing... I think I talked about relationships evolving. And yes, there’s problems, but with the brothers, because part of the issue was there was the Women’s Liberation movement. And then there was questions whether or not women should be in the Black Panthers... and I believed at that time that the right place to be was in the Black Panther Party. So I gave the speech after his speech.” (Alexander, 2016, 33-34)

Alexander’s experience speaks to the ways women grew to advocate for their own positions within the Party and how gender politics played a fairly active role in their experiences. On the other hand, Alexander’s speech was a part of the visibility of women’s participation in the Party and an active role in Party discourse.

Also due to the breadth of the Party and the need for participation, women held more and more leadership positions. Frankye Adams-Johnson first met members of the New York chapter in 1968, after traveling into the city from White Plains. Since there was no White Plains branch, they asked her if she wanted to start one and she did (Adams-Johnson, 2015, 28). Later, the Central Committee moved her to the Brownsville (Brooklyn) branch as Officer of the Day, making her “in charge of all the activities that go on, and overseeing the office and the daily activities. (Adams-Johnson, 2015, 28)” Again, while national party leadership could be viewed as male-centric, female leadership was not discouraged, especially when it came to the Party adapting to external factors.

At the same time, since being a Panther was a such a large commitment, both in terms of work and personal life, sexual relationships between members often replicated the complicated nature of ideology and practice. Many

times, this was in a negative way for women. Eldridge Cleaver, Minister of Information and convicted rapist, claimed that women's revolutionary power was only that of "Pussy Power," ie withholding sex from men who are not revolutionaries: "If you're part of the solution, what do you look like laying up with part of the problem?... You look at these males who call themselves men, and tell them that they're going to be part of the solution or don't call you up on the telephone any more. (Cleaver, 1969, 143)" Women, in Cleaver's opinion, would not be disadvantaged as there were plenty of men acting like Lenin and Mao to "come to your aid in your hour of need. (Cleaver, 1969, 143)" Much like women internalized hyper-masculine rhetoric of Newton in the early years of the Party, Cleaver's words were acted upon as part of Party beliefs. This led to the negative experiences for women because of their male comrades. Roberta Alexander also spoke about her experience with "pussy power" in application:

"One of the problems that I had in the Black Panther Party was being harassed by the guys. It was, just being harassed, you know, it was kind of the thing, like 'we're all revolutionaries and everything belongs to everybody including, you know, you should be doing some, you know, revolutionary sexual favors for me.' I did not buy that. And I got into a relationship with a nice guy, but in some ways it protected me as well." (Alexander, 2016, 32)

Jakobi Williams' study (2012) on the Illinois chapter of the BPP asserts that gender diversity and chapter leadership created an environment where, "Some women members believed that the Chicago chapter did better than other branches at trying to address the gender issue. (41)" Williams explains how sexual harassment was dealt with. One member, Brenda Harris, attested that chapter leadership "made attempts to prevent such occurrences [and] to punish those who mistreated their comrades," while others said that leadership "made every effort to terminate individuals who refused to adhere to their policy of gender equality. (Williams, 2012, 42-43)" In certain cases, as with the Illinois chapter, issues of sexual harassment were seemingly dealt with due to individual actors. However, these patterns were replicated in various instances due to ideas about open sexuality that were weaponized, primarily against women. Additionally, a patriarchal hierarchy was inherently replicated due to presumed roles between men and women in their relationships.

As Frankye Adams-Johnson (2015) said herself, "You can't just put Panthers in a bag and say, 'It was bad. It was good.' So when I try to look at that experience, I try to look at what worked and what did not work." (p. 31) While Panther men and women worked, in theory and in application, on an equal playing field, this did not mean there was an absence of sexism towards women from

their male comrades. Conceptually, labor and communal living situations, for instance, were supposed to be rooted in equality. Yet, those standards were either not often upheld or women had to advocate for themselves. Due to the breadth of the organization, both with the scale of its membership and its chapters, there were issues rooted with how individuals operated and how broader organizational functions facilitated misogyny.

## REVOLUTIONARY MOTHERS: A ROMANTICIZED NOTION

Los Angeles based Panthers John Huggins and Bunchy Carter were killed in a police shootout on January 17, 1969 at the UCLA campus after a meeting of the Black Student Union. Other Panthers fled to the home of Huggins, his wife, Ericka, and Elaine Brown, which the police surrounded and arrested the 17 Panthers inside (Bloom & Martin, 2013, 219). Ericka Huggins gave birth only a few weeks prior to their daughter, Mai, whom the Los Angeles Police Department tried to create an arrest record for (Rocker, 2020, 40). John Huggins' funeral, in New Haven, Connecticut took place on January 23, 1969 (Bloom & Martin, 2013, 247). It was in New Haven where Ericka Huggins and Warren Kimbro formed the newest BPP chapter. Shortly after the formation, an interparty dispute (along with some COINTELPRO infiltration) led to the torture and murder of Panther Alex Rackley, of which Huggins, Kimbro, and several other New Haven Panthers were charged with the murder of (Bloom & Martin, 2013, 349). Party Chairman Bobby Seale was also arrested in Berkeley, California on murder conspiracy charges (Bloom & Martin, 2013, 350).

Not only did the New Haven trial bring more attention to the Panthers' cause (especially with the rallying cry of "Free Bobby! Free Ericka!"), but it also brought about another evolution in the way women's participation was conceived in the Party. Three Panther women incarcerated for the Rackley murder were pregnant and Huggins was the widowed mother of a newborn. These women were considered the Party's first female political prisoners, which led other Panther women to "[reason] that if they were risking their lives and going to jail then it was time for them to assume or be assigned more responsibility. (Alkebulan, 2003, 157)" The same heightened COINTELPRO activity against the Panthers that required rank and file women to step up in place of their male comrades led to rethinking ideas of women as revolutionaries. Whether Huggins and her cohorts were made more sympathetic as victims due to the labels of widow and mother or not, those labels were heavily tied to their narrative. Despite the various other ways women stepped up to participate in the Party, attributing a victimhood that put them on the same level as their male counterparts still leaves a gendered way of thinking of them as revolutionaries.

Eldridge Cleaver wrote a letter in the Black Panther in defense of the revolutionary identity of this cohort of female political prisoners. In this letter, he emphasized that Huggins' participation in the struggle (ie her membership and activity beforehand) and her personal struggle (the death of her husband) demonstrates why male chauvinism should be eradicated from the organization, because "a vanguard organization" should be "vanguard in all our behavior, and.... Also in the area of women's liberation. (1969)" Huggins' case demonstrated how women are targeted, therefore legitimizing their revolutionary status as something men, too, should uphold: "...the pigs recognized a revolutionary woman to be just as much a threat as a revolutionary man. (1969)" Prior to this, Huggins was celebrated for her strength in the wake of her husband's murder (1969). While Cleaver seemingly intended to promote female revolutionaries, he created qualifications for how women can be considered revolutionaries and disregarded the multitude of ways that women contributed to the Panthers. Furthermore, this rhetoric upheld a standard for women that simply could not be applied to men, since men were inherently considered revolutionary due to attacks on male Panthers.

While Ericka Huggins' incarceration demonstrated a legitimate female revolutionary struggle, motherhood was utilized to connect the Panthers struggle with anti-imperialism around the world, which Newton theorized as "revolutionary intercommunalism." By 1970, intercommunalism had been a theory promoted by Newton, that also furthered state repression of the BPP, due to the Party and members of leadership expressing support for communist countries and movements and guerilla organizations (Spencer, 2016, 102). Intercommunalism also fueled divisions within the Party, with influences from COINTELPRO. The Panthers co-opted imagery of other anti-imperialist movements to demonstrate this shared struggle and also frequently promoted the activity of other movements. For instance, a 1969 article "The Heroic Palestinian Women," highlights anecdotes that have circulated about militant Palestinian women. One section in the article, "Heroic Mothers," framed some mother's ultimate heroic action as mobilizing their families or "Upon hearing the sad news of the death of their husbands or sons, many Palestinian women turned their grief into strength, took up the arms left behind by their dear ones and fought in their place." At the top of the article is a depiction of a Palestinian woman, holding a gun, and her child, also with a gun, mimicking the same pose. What comes out of these depictions of the idea that female revolutionaries are no longer independent of their children or their identities of motherhood. Revolutionary motherhood should be aspirational. They become visual and anecdotal representatives of future generations of revolutionaries. Ultimately, this takes away from their individual struggles and identities to uphold women to figureheads beyond themselves.

Although revolutionary mothers were celebrated, the realities of being a mother and a revolutionary added to the workload of women. On top of the experiences of rank and file members, for instance, who already worked constantly to support the organization, motherhood added an extra, personal workload. The Party did have some childcare infrastructure, in the school's the Party set up, but, "Many women complained about childcare issues, a shortage of time with children, and having to endure parenthood as single mothers. (Alameen-Shavers, 2016, 51)" Frankye Adams Johnson (2015) addressed the difficulty in balancing family and revolution: "When I look back in retrospect, I do think that we spent a lot of time serving the people, and kind of got lost along the way that our families were also part of the people... As a result of being married to a Panther man, many of us ended up single-parenting, because many of the Panther men ended up in jail. (p. 30)" She also recounted her experience going underground and giving birth to her youngest daughter during that time, explaining that they were put in "very dangerous and unsafe" positions out of expectations from a "romantic kind of notion" that women could "be revolutionary guerilla and mother at the same time. (Adams Johnson, 2015, 31)"

Despite the Panthers' desire to move away from traditional ideas of family, revolutionary motherhood upheld the many layers of work women took on as mothers. It also tied womanhood and motherhood together as identities and promoted motherhood in the context of the Panthers. The standards women were held up to were those that their male comrades simply could not be held to. In earlier conceptions of revolutionary womanhood, Cleaver qualified women as only being able to use "pussy power." Meanwhile, upholding Ericka Huggins and the other women she was incarcerated with, along with global revolutionary mothers, took away from the realities of balancing participation in the Panthers and actually being a mother. This concept also towed the line of reinforcing the strong, Black matriarch (upheld in the previously mentioned Moynihan Report) that emasculates her male counterparts, while evolving identities of Black motherhood away from stereotypes making her out to be the caregiver of white children and the (at the time) emerging stereotype of the welfare queen.

Overall, conceptions of Black womanhood continued to be tied to conceptions of motherhood and added burdens that their male counterparts inherently did not have to deal with.

## CONCLUSION

Thinking of the question Kathleen Cleaver posed, it is easy to say that there is no one way that women participated in the revolutionary struggle. Panther women worked hand in hand with their male comrades, from everything to running Party offices to implementing

the Survival Programs. They took up arms to defend their communities. They took on numerous leadership positions, in chapters across the country and on the Central Committee. But their revolutionary struggle was also one against the patriarchy. They upheld their male comrades to egalitarian principles and forced the liberation narrative to include their struggles as women. Additionally, women's participation was dynamic and adapted to the Party, as the Party itself evolved- Militancy did not take away from the work of the rank and file experience, just as being a mother did not make non-mothers any less revolutionary.

At the same time, many women struggled and dealt with misogyny, sexual harassment or assault, and the layered burdens of womanhood. Many patriarchal and misogynistic ideas were internalized and perpetuated within the Party as an organization. On top of the attitudes that men carried while a part of the BPP, the Party did not have the means, particularly due to COINTELPRO repression, to handle the complexities of uprooting an entire system, let alone confront their own faults. It was up to many women Party members to uphold their male comrades to intersectional thinking on egalitarianism, not just when it suited their ideological goals.

Although Kathleen Cleaver, in "Women, Power, and Revolution," explained that she did not think of the work men and women did as separate, there were distinct gendered experiences within the Party. Her overall argument, presenting the BPP as fighting against many layers of oppression, is valid, though, when she said: "...the genesis of the gender question, and this is only an opinion, lies in the way it deflects attention from confronting the revolutionary critique our organization made of the larger society, and turns it inward to look at what type of dynamics and social conflicts characterized the organization. (Cleaver, 233)" Many external forces changed the path that the BPP took as it grew, members were persecuted, and it struggled to survive. During the Party's peak, the BPP's goals and ideology were not always applied in a way that demonstrated egalitarianism. On the other hand, time after time, the Party demonstrated its ability to change and adapt, particularly when it came to the politics of gender.

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### Mentor Details

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Trevor Jackson received his PhD from the University of California, Berkeley. His first book, *Impunity and Capitalism: the Afterlives of European Financial Crises*, will be published by Cambridge University Press in the fall of 2022.

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