

A Woman's Place in the Revolution: Gender and Sexual Politics within the Black Panther Party

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The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) is known for its militancy and pursuit of Black Power ideology through the affirmation of Black masculinity, and, in popular memory, the role of women is often reduced to an insignificant minority or left out entirely. Established in Oakland, California in 1966, the BPP was formed with the purpose of alleviating the oppression of Black communities and putting an end to police brutality, which they pursued with an unprecedentedly militant agenda. Since the Party's inception, women have labored and fought alongside their male counterparts to accomplish these revolutionary goals despite continuous resistance to their leadership and rampant oversexualization.

One of the driving forces behind the creation of the BPP was the desire to reaffirm Black masculinity: to restore the sense of dignity and authority that had been stripped from Black men throughout centuries of racial oppression. Sentiments of Black male emasculation culminated in the Black Power era following pent up frustrations over the strategy of nonviolent direct action during the Civil Rights Movement. This belief was also deeply rooted in the long history of racial and sexual violence against women. Furthermore,

the concept of focusing on the restoration of Black manhood reinforced the prioritization of male suffering and upheld expectations for women to be strong, silent, and submissive. This resulted in Black women being depicted as "castrators," blamed not only for the emasculation of Black men, but the sufferings of the Black community as a whole.¹

The role of women within the BPP was constantly debated and ultimately oversexualized, underestimated, and abused. Influences beyond the scope of the BPP, such as the concept of "Black Pride" and the burgeoning women's liberation movement, ostensibly served to embolden and celebrate Black women. However, largely due to Eldridge Cleaver's pervasive influence, the Panthers merged these concepts with their own ideology of bedding Black women in order to restore a desire for dark skin women and uproot an internalized inferiority complex. This hybrid of Black female pride and sexualization engendered a fetishization of Black Panther women that was

¹ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, March 1965); Peniel E. Joseph, "Introduction: Toward a Historiography of the Black Power Movement," in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006,) 1-25.

concept of “Black Pride” and the burgeoning women’s liberation movement, ostensibly served to embolden and celebrate Black women. However, largely due to Eldridge Cleaver’s pervasive influence, the Panthers merged these concepts with their own ideology of bedding Black women in order to restore a desire for dark skin women and uproot an internalized inferiority complex. This hybrid of Black female pride and sexualization engendered a fetishization of Black Panther women that was distinct from any other Black Power organization. The ideals of the “Black Revolutionary Woman,” as outlined in the *Black Panther* newspaper, sought to create a gender-specific militant Panther woman who supported and cherished Black men. Women were called upon to be the strength and spirit of the Party, laboring tirelessly in a myriad of organizing spheres, oftentimes without due recognition. Many Panther women deprioritized their own needs in order to help advance the status of Black men in society.² By these ideals, Panther women established a unique and indispensable presence in the BPP. Furthermore, women were expected to be the soulful companions of their Brothers, both in bed and in the line of duty. These sexual “responsibilities” generated a dangerous environment for women in which allegations of sexual harassment or rape were largely dismissed or discredited despite attempts to uproot sexism from the party’s reputation. These established carnal duties meant that women who refused sex

² Gloria Bartholomew, “A Black Woman’s Thoughts,” *Black Panther*, September 28, 1968, 11; Linda Green, “The Black Revolutionary Woman,” *Black Panther*, September 28, 1968, 11; Judy Hart, “Black Womanhood No. 1,” *Black Panther*, July 20, 1967.

³ Joseph, “Introduction,” 1-25.

could be labeled “counterrevolutionary” and castigated as such.³

Despite rampant misogyny and a hyper-masculine public perception, Panther women permeated into nearly every sphere of the BPP and oftentimes made up over half the Party’s rank and file members. Many women, through careful navigation of the rigid patriarchy, obtained leadership roles, such as Elaine Brown, Kathleen Cleaver, and Ericka Huggins, all of whom became members of the party’s Central Committee. Black women’s voices and labor profoundly shaped the impact of the BPP and their resistance to masculinist patterns of exclusion helped found a more inclusive struggle for liberation. Even so, their contributions within the BPP have been marginalized in scholarship and lost almost entirely to the unforgettably fierce images of rifle-bearing male Panthers lodged into popular memory.

Black Power and Gender Ideology

While Black Power ideology had been percolating throughout the Civil Rights Movement, the slogan was not officially adopted until the Meredith March in June 1966 when unceasing violence and White backlash led a new generation of Black activists to abandon the strategy of nonviolence and advocate for a self-sufficient, Black autonomous movement. The advent of the Black Power Movement brought forth new revelations about what it meant to be African American. Black Power activists, tired of compromising, yielding, and apologizing to White supporters as they had done within many integrated Civil Rights organizations, sought to

develop a new phase of Black liberation in which the wellbeing of Black communities was emphasized. The emerging concept of “Black Pride” renounced the internalized shame and self-hatred that had tormented African Americans for centuries. This new phase of celebrating Blackness--of rejoicing in the physical traits that had been used to dehumanize slaves and their descendants for generations--was novel and monumental in the movement. This idea spurred forth a rejection of White European standards of beauty and a celebration of African American history and Afrocentricity.⁴

Black Pride particularly examined and paid tribute to Black womanhood, acclaiming female curves, facial features, and natural hair. The Afro style of hair nicknamed “The Natural,” became one of the ultimate expressions of Black Power and a mark of androgynous strength that stood tall, brave, and defiant against oppressive beauty standards. Consequently, natural hair was viewed as a political statement; “an instrument for the expression of nationalism,” and part of a broader goal to create a “positive value system that embraces the African woman,” as one woman described in the *Liberator*.⁵

However, a new and intense scrutinization of women’s revolutionary roles accompanied some of the nuanced attention toward Black femininity. In the previous decades, Black women had been critical organizers and leaders in the

Civil Rights Movement, though much of their role had gone unrecognized or been severely diminished. Yet, while the Black Power Movement purportedly celebrated female expressivity and empowerment, Black women’s roles as leaders within the movement were being re-examined and disputed. The magazine *Liberator*, a prominent outlet for Black intellectual thought, issued a multitude of articles addressing the “Woman Question,” or what a Black woman’s role in the revolution should entail. The *Liberator*’s platform amplified the ongoing debate contesting the role of female leaders in the Black liberation struggle. These articles, many of which were authored by women, overwhelmingly sympathized with the men who were portrayed as the natural leaders of Black liberation and concluded that women should primarily serve to inspire and support revolutionary men, particularly through rank-and-file positions. Though many women did obtain positions of leadership in the BPP, they were often discouraged from supervising roles or overshadowing their male counterparts.⁶

Moreover, the core of the Black Power Movement was designed to restore and uplift Black manhood at the direct expense of Black women. In mid- to late 1960s Black Power rhetoric, Black men were depicted as emasculated: having been deprived of their

⁴ Eleanor Mason, “Hot Irons and Black Nationalism,” in *Liberator*, May 1963; Joseph, “Introduction,” 1-25.

⁵ Eleanor Mason, “Hot Irons and Black Nationalism,” in *Liberator*, May 1963.

⁶ Katy Gibson, “Letter to Black Men,” *Liberator*, July 1965; Evelyn Rodgers, “Is Ebony Killing Black Women,” *Liberator*, March 1966; Amerlia Long, “Role of the Afro-American Woman,” *Liberator*, May 1966; Louise R. Moore, “When a Black Man Stood Up,” and Betty Frank Lomax, “Afro-American Women: Growth Deferred,” *Liberator*, July 1966; Louise Moore, “Black Men vs. Black Women,” *Liberator*, August 1966; Stephen Ward, “The Third World Women’s Alliance: Black Feminist Radicalism and Black Power Politics” in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006.) 124.

ability to protect themselves and their families, and stripped of their authority and independence, not only by White men, but by overly assertive, matriarchal Black women. In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*, ordained by the U.S. Department of Labor, set the stage for the increasing debate and scrutinization over the role of Black women, both at home and within the revolution. Moynihan's report claimed that the Black community "[had] been forced into a matriarchal structure," a phenomenon that "seriously [retarded] the progress of the group as a whole, and [imposed] a crushing burden on the Negro male, and in consequence, a great many Negro women as well." Moynihan used statistics found in surveys about Black families coupled with profoundly racist and fallacious arguments to uphold statements such as "Negro husbands have unusually low power."⁷ Even so, his report was widely read within the Black community and its sentiments about Black male emasculation were echoed in the rhetoric of many Black Power activists.

For example, Huey P. Newton, at the expense of portraying Black women as counterproductive and potentially dangerous to the party, wrote in a 1967 essay that, "often [a Black man's] wife . . . is the breadwinner. He is, therefore, viewed as quite worthless by his wife and children. He is ineffectual both in and outside the home Society will not acknowledge him as a man."⁸ Newton's essay, which plainly engaged with many of Moynihan's themes about dominant women, sought to unite Black men under shared

experiences and victimizations in order to draw them into the BPP's goals.

Safiya Bukhari-Alston, the former Communication and Information Officer for the East Coast BPP, argued in a 1994 Black Panther essay that the historical explanation for the misogyny overwhelming and dividing the Black community could be traced back to slavery when men were made to helplessly bear the abuse and degradation of women, forced to "stand by and watch while the woman was raped." This, in conjunction with the belief that, after the end of slavery, Black women "had to be the breadwinner as well as homemaker" when men were either imprisoned or unable to find work. Bukhari-Alston asserted that all this "was too much for the Black man to handle psychologically and resulted in the Black man casting the blame for his situation at the feet of the Black woman."⁹ While this was not true of the comprehensive African American experience, it became a prominent justification for pinning women as the cause of Black male emasculation. Bukhari-Alston asserts that Black men were uniquely traumatized by the history of slavery and racism because they were stripped of their masculinity and innate desire to protect and care for women. Rather than focusing on the gender-specific trauma that Black women have endured for centuries, Bukhari-Alston, like many Black Panther women, chose to be sympathetic with the men who have been made to witness the abuse of women.¹⁰

With one of the movement's original and foremost goals being to provide Black men

⁷ Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, 29-30.

⁸ Huey P. Newton, "Fear and Doubt," 1967.

⁹ Safiya Bukhari-Alston, "On the Question of Sexism within the Black Panther Party," in *Black Panther*, 1994, 6-7.

¹⁰ Bukhari-Alston, "On the Question of Sexism," 6-8.

with the sanctity of masculine power, both in society and the home, women were often discouraged from becoming leaders in the cause. Moreover, self-assertive women or women who assumed positions of authority were considered a threat to the objectives of Black liberation. These women were labeled as “castrators” because they were thought to willfully undermine the capability of Black men. In a 1970 speech, Newton addressed some of the reasoning behind the perverse sexism foregrounded in the movement: “. . . we want to hit the woman or shut her up because we are afraid that she might castrate us or take the nuts that we might not have to start with.”¹¹ With this statement, Newton alluded to some of the violence and abuse towards women that regularly occurred within the BPP and that later tormented some of the party leaders when the expanding women’s liberation movement was unable to be ignored.¹²

The Woman Question

While the entirety of the Black Power Movement was founded on and upheld misogynist and masculinist viewpoints, the BPP was unique in their sexism. The BPP seemingly combined the patriotization of Black femininity with the rampant theories of Black emasculation within the movement to adopt a kind of fetishization of militant Black womanhood. The apparent highlighting of Black women who were sexy and tough presented itself as a source of intrigue and potential power for women seeking to join the

¹¹Ashley D. Farmer, “The Black Revolutionary Woman, 1966-1975” in *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 58; Huey P. Newton, “The Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements” (speech, New York City, August 15, 1970); Ward, “The Third World Women’s Alliance,” 124-125.

¹²*Ibid.*

movement.

When the BPP was formed in 1966 it was designed to be a militant and male dominant organization, with all of the initial recruits being male. However, as more women began to attend meetings and express interest in the party’s revolutionary goals, the founders yielded to allow women to become members.¹³ Once the issue of female membership was settled, the BPP began to actively recruit women. Many Black women wanting to join the revolution--or women who had already been active in Civil Rights organizations and sought to continue their activism in the burgeoning Black Power Movement--were attracted to the ideals of militancy, comradeship, and fearlessness in the BPP. In order to attract new recruits, initial issues of the Black Panther newspaper were replete with fierce revolutionary women, armed with a rifle in one hand and a baby propped on their hip. The Black Panther artist Tarika Lewis, under the pen name “Matilaba,” frequently depicted militant Black women with guns and belts of ammunition alongside Panther men; their faces, hair, and bodies barely distinguishable from the males. Through her illustrations, Lewis asserted Black women’s capability and eagerness to take part in the front lines of the revolution. Consequently, Black women were drawn to the Black Panther Party by the elusive promise of equality and power. Within a few years after its inception, women made up nearly half of the party’s

¹³ Bobby Seale, *A Lonely Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1979), 203.

membership.¹⁴

While depictions of Panther women were often glamorized and glorified, many women within the party questioned the validity of their roles in such a male-dominant environment and admitted to adapting their public persona to become more masculine. Assata Shakur, one of the leaders of the BPP's chapter in Harlem, said that she and many other Panther women developed an "arrogant kind of macho style in order to be heard," as part of their "day to day battles for respect."¹⁵ This masculine posturing reinforced the notion that a woman had to imitate the language ("look mothafucka"), attire (leather uniforms, rifles, Afros, etc.), and entire behavior patterns of Panther men in order to grasp the possibility of authority and respect.¹⁶ Maulana Karenga, founder of the US organization, whose teachings greatly influenced initial BPP ideology, claimed that a woman "can't be feminine without being submissive."¹⁷ Consequently, the perverse notion that being feminine was inherently weak infiltrated the BPP's ideology and pushed many women to develop inauthentic personas in order to achieve the inalienable power that men possessed.

From the party's inception, Black Panther women debated how to best conceptualize Black womanhood and questioned what their role within the party should include. Throughout the first

several years of the party, the conclusion was that women should play a supportive, gender-specific, though not submissive role. For example, Panther women first organized themselves in a short-lived auxiliary called the Pantherettes, in which women's duties were largely separate from the men and included mainly clerical work. The concept of the "Black Revolutionary Woman," an idealistic female-version of the militant Black Panther, arose alongside the growth of female membership. The ideals of this revolutionary Sister were concretized in the "Sisters' Section" of the Black Panther; this short-lived section called upon Black women to join the party and convinced them of the efficacy of its goals. The "Sisters' Section" articulated the importance of supporting and uplifting Black men in order to ameliorate their degradation, while also celebrating womanhood and Black-centered ideals of beauty.¹⁸ Judy Hart stated in her 1967 article "Black Womanhood No. 1," that Black women were starting to "constantly analyze and evaluate [their] position and direction in relation to each other, [them]selves [and] to the Black community."¹⁹ Hart's argument largely fell in line with Moynihan-inspired theories about Black male emasculation and believed that it was the Black woman's role to uplift and unburden

¹⁴ Black Panther, September 7, 1968; Black Panther, December 21, 1968; Ashley D. Farmer, "The Black Revolutionary Woman, 1966-1975" in *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 51, 62-63.

¹⁵ Tracey A. Matthews, "No One Ever Asks What a Man's Role in the Revolution Is: Gender Politics and Leadership in the Black Panther Party, 1966-71," in *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*, ed. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin (New York: New York University Press, 2001,) 243-244.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Matthews, "No One Ever Asks What a Man's Role in the Revolution Is," 235.

¹⁸ Farmer, "The Black Revolutionary Woman, 1966-1975," 60-62.

¹⁹ Hart, "Black Womanhood No. 1."

the man.²⁰ A 1968 article written by Linda Greene entitled “The Black Revolutionary Woman” upheld prominent ideals of strong, unmoving, even unfailing Black women: “The woman is, and must be, a Black man’s everything. . . She is what her man, and what her people need her to be, when they need her. She is the strength of the struggle.”²¹ This statement called upon Panther women to possess an inhuman amount of courage, to silently endure their own struggles for the sake of giving their full attention to their communities. It also exemplifies the higher, unforgiving standard that Panther women were held to in comparison with men. While Greene only referred to the significance of the Panther woman’s role when in relation to men, she nevertheless asserted that women were vital to the facilitation of the Panther’s agenda and convinced her readers that supportive roles were indispensable, not subordinate.²²

One issue of the Black Panther from September 1968 featured a full-sized image of Kathleen Cleaver, a recent recruit and wife of prominent leader Eldridge Cleaver, clad in an all-black leather ensemble and holding a rifle pointed at the viewer. The text surrounding her fearsome image announced her candidacy for a seat in the 18th Assembly District in California; her image succeeded posters of Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, and Eldridge Cleaver, all running for the San Francisco Peace and Freedom Party.²³ Juxtaposing Kathleen Cleaver’s powerful poster is a column on one of the preceding pages written by Gloria Bartholomew entitled “A Black Woman’s Thoughts.” Bartholomew begins:

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Greene, “The Black Revolutionary Woman.”

²² Ibid.

²³ “1968: Ballot or Bullet,” Black Panther, September 28, 1968, 20.

What is a Black woman’s chief function, if it is not to live for her man. The Black women must drop the white ways of trying to be equal to the Black man. The woman’s place is to stand behind the Black man, so in the event he should start to fall she is there to hold him up with her strength. . . . We Black women today must serve as an inspirational booster to our Black men.²⁴

Bartholomew’s article fell in line with numerous other female-written articles advocating for Panther women to play strong, but purely supportive roles; some, like Bartholomew’s, alleged that gender equality was merely a vexatious myth bolstered by White women, but that the Black community should not stoop to acknowledge. Yet, the advertisement for Kathleen Cleaver’s political nomination, ostensibly depicting her on terms of equality with the co-leaders of the BPP, illustrates a contradictory kind of feminine power – one in which Cleaver is taking on her role in the revolution independently and unapologetically. The nearly side-by-side sources within the same newspaper issue encapsulates the ongoing debate and confusion over the “Woman Question” throughout the first several years of the BPP.²⁵

Eldridge Cleaver and the Sexual Politics of the Revolution

Although the Black Revolutionary Woman’s role was publicized as being militant,

⁹ Safiya Bukhari-Alston, “On the Question of Sexism within the Black Panther Party,” in Black Panther, 1994, 6-7.

¹⁰ Bukhari-Alston, “On the Question of Sexism,” 6-8.

supportive, and distinct from, but inherently subordinate to the men, it was also deeply sexualized. Eldridge Cleaver, Minister of Information and commander of the Black Panther Party during Newton's incarceration, had incredible control within the party and influence over its sexual politics. Before joining the BPP, the 1968 publication of Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, a compilation of essays and letters penned in prison, catapulted him to new heights of power and influence. Included in the first chapters of *Soul on Ice* is Cleaver's disgusted realization that he had become more attracted to White and light-skinned women than to women of his own race; a comprehension he attributed to living in a country "indoctrinated with the White race's standard of beauty" and it "intensified [his] frustrations" to know that he, too, had come "to see the White woman as more beautiful and desirable than [his] own Black woman."²⁶ In an effort to uproot his desire for White women and take revenge on White men, he attempted to serially rape the notions out of his mind and took sickening satisfaction in believing that he was avenging Black womanhood. In 1971, Kathleen Cleaver took to his defense and offered an explanation to her husband's ideological approach to revenge rape, arguing that while the White woman had been historically "sexually exploited in one level by being denied sexual freedom . . . the Black woman [had been] sexually exploited . . . by being raped

²⁶ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 6-14.

²⁷ Kathleen Cleaver and Julia Hervé, "Black Scholar Interviews: Kathleen Cleaver," *Black Scholar*, (December 1971), 57.

and brutalized and tortured and used by the White man." She explained that "a Black man viewing this and knowing this can only feel revenge and take that out on the White woman, the possession of the White man."²⁷ Even with the White woman as his primary "prey," Cleaver sought out Black women to practice on, not only because he found them to be easier targets, but he also yearned to reinvigorate his passion for Black women.²⁸

Cleaver spent nine years in prison for his perverse sexual experiments, but his revelations about race and sexuality captivated many Black revolutionaries and made him a perfect recruit for the Black Panthers. Newton admired Cleaver's prison-to-power backstory, similar to Malcolm X's, and he, like many other Panther men, also had a desire to restore his desire for Black women. Cleaver's misogynist philosophies complemented and contributed to the patriarchal underpinnings of the party. As a result of these beliefs, sleeping with Sisters of the Revolution became a way of not only restoring value to Black women, but of showing support for their community and eradicating any commonalities with the White man.²⁹

It was not only Black men within the Panther Party who admired Cleaver and his book; many Black women also praised his intellect and audacity to confront the

²⁷ Kathleen Cleaver and Julia Hervé, "Black Scholar Interviews: Kathleen Cleaver," *Black Scholar*, (December 1971), 57.

²⁸ Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 6-14; Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 212-213; Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers, "The Woman Question: Gender Dynamics within the Black Panther Party," in *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men*, Vol. 5, No.1, The Black Panther Party (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, Fall 2016), 42-43.

²⁹ Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 121; Joseph, *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour*, 213, 220.

internalized plague of White supremacy. Elaine Brown, a long-time member of the Los Angeles' BPP chapter and chair in the Party's Central Committee, divulged in her autobiography *A Taste of Power* how she and a friend had poured over *Soul on Ice* and made a bet to see who could bed Cleaver first. Brown won the challenge and disclosed that he "forcefully made love" to her in a motel.³⁰ The sexual act, Brown believed at the time, was a form of consummating and renewing the bond between Black men and women. In a 1968 *Playboy* interview, Cleaver reasoned that it was only through this act, "the primary thrust of life - the fusion of male and female," that men and women could become equals and "be freed of sociological obstacles."³¹ This extreme sexual objectification of Black women was pitted as a form of honoring and uplifting women, equalizing them to men.

Similarly, Safiya Bukhari-Alston attributed this over-sexualization of Black women to the processes of dehumanization that had been forced upon African Americans since the time of chattel slavery, renouncing Black men of everything except their most base, sexual instincts. "Since [Black men] had been stripped of their manhood in every way but in the ability to 'pleasure' women and make babies," Bukhari-Alston argued, "the sexual act soon became the measure by which the Black man measured his manhood."³² This deeply disconcerting stereotype fell in line with many of Eldridge Cleaver's assertions about sexual politics within the Black community. Bukhari-Alston claimed this belief

greatly contributed to the treatment of women within the ranks of the BPP and worked to justify and excuse sexual harassment.³³ On these bases, women within the BPP were customarily expected to have sex with the men; to offer their bodies in service for companionship, pleasure, and to bear children for the revolution. Elaine Brown, who had a prominent affair with Huey Newton, wrote that Newton believed women's role in the Party as soldiers and comrades should "[include] love and sex."³⁴ An article in the "Sisters' Section" of the Black Panther newspaper professed that Black women could "not help but gravitate" toward revolutionary Black men; as if to say that it was not only a Panther woman's duty to love and sate the sexual appetites of her revolutionary Brothers, but she should also fiercely want to.³⁵ If a woman neglected these carnal duties, or "socialist fucking," as some Panther members referred to it, she risked serious consequences.³⁶

Janet Cyril, a prominent member of the BPP's Brooklyn chapter and citywide coordinator of the free breakfast program, was expelled from the party after refusing to sleep with a high-ranking male member.³⁷ Many Panther women gave in to the toxic seduction out of a sense of revolutionary obligation or fear of what might happen if they resisted. In order to coax a reluctant Elaine Brown into his bed, Earl Anthony, the Deputy Minister of Information for the Party told her that "a true Sister would be happy to sleep with a revolutionary Brother."³⁸ Co-founder of the

³⁰ Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 121, 129-130.

³¹ Nat Hentoff, "Playboy Interview: Eldridge Cleaver," *Playboy*, December 1968, 209..

³² Bukhari-Alston, "On the Question of Sexism," 5-6.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Brown, 259.

³⁵ Hart, "Black Womanhood No. 1."

³⁶ Matthews, "'No One Ever Asks What a Woman's Place in the Revolution Is,'" 247. ³⁷ Matthews, "'No One Ever Asks What a Woman's Place in the Revolution Is,'" 246.

BPP Bobby Seale admitted that labeling a woman as “counterrevolutionary” was a common and often effective tactic to persuade a Panther woman to have sex; as well as the phrase, “I’m a captain, so it’s your duty to give in to me,” once again invoking the belief that sex was included in a woman’s revolutionary duty.³⁹

Regina Jennings, a member of the Oakland BPP chapter, disclosed that her captain, a trusted friend and mentor figure, began to make repeated, unwanted sexual advances toward her. Each time she refused him, he retaliated against her, attempting to demolish her reputation and credibility within the party. Jennings looked to the Central Committee for redress but found that the “all-male panel” believed she was acting like a “bourgeois woman” and that her “attitude of sexual abstinence was both foolish and counterrevolutionary.”⁴⁰ Without protection from the leadership, the abuse continued and worsened until her captain discarded her to a different division “where [Jennings] experienced the same kind of vicious sexism all over again.”⁴¹ Jennings stated that, while not all men within the party were abusive, her experiences were not unique. Many women left the BPP to escape the “vulgar male behavior” or, like Jennings, endured miserable years in service because they felt that the revolutionary cause was greater than their own private sufferings.⁴²

Some Panther women discovered ways to

navigate the rigid system of rampant over-sexualization in order to maintain some level of control over their bodies. Ericka Huggins, a Panther woman whom Eldridge Cleaver described as “a shining example of a revolutionary woman,” argued that a woman’s sexuality could also be used as a weapon if she were to sleep with the enemy and “slit his throat in the morning.”⁴³ Bukhari-Alston claimed that some women utilized their sexuality as a way to either “achieve rank and statue within the Party” or, allegedly, to “get out of work and certain responsibility.”⁴⁴ These instances of being complicit with or finding ways to benefit from the misogynist structures of the BPP often served as tactics of survival for Black women to help cope with daily abuses; yet these instances ultimately only served to further the belief that women were merely sexual ornaments in the Party, rather than revolutionary comrades.

Eldridge Cleaver coined the infamous slogan “pussy power” in an October 1968 speech in which he praised the Panther women in the audience for having the innately feminine ability to withhold sex from their male partners in order to persuade them to vote for the Peace and Freedom Party and, more generally, to support the revolutionary goals of the BPP. Cleaver went so far as to say that this carnal control that women could hold over men was one of the most powerful forces within the BPP’s reserves: “We

³⁷ Matthews, “No One Ever Asks What a Woman’s Place in the Revolution Is,” 246.

³⁸ Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 259-260; Hart, “Black Womanhood No. 1.”

³⁹ Bobby Seale, *Seize the Times: The Story of the Black Panther Party*, (New York: Random House, 1970), 393-403.

⁴⁰ Regina Jennings, “Why I Joined the Party: An African Womanist Reflection,” in *The Black Panther Party (reconsidered)*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 262-263.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Farmer, “The Black Revolutionary Woman, 1966-1975,” 76; Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 136; Eldridge Cleaver, “Message to Sister Ericka Huggins of the Black Panther Party,” in *The Black Panther Party*, July 5, 1969.

⁴⁴ Bukhari-Alston, “On the Question of Sexism,” 11-12.

⁴⁵ Eldridge Cleaver, *Post-Prison Writings and Speeches* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 142-143; Charles E. Jones and Judson L. Jeffries, “Don’t Believe the Hype: Debunking the Panther Mythology,” in *The Black Panther Party (reconsidered)*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 33-34.

say that political power, revolutionary power grows out of the lips of a pussy,” Cleaver declared.⁴⁵ Consequently, this explicit slogan became extremely popular among Panther women, as well as men. This slogan provided an illusive guise that women held considerable power, but ultimately amplified the belief that a woman’s role in the Party was predominantly sexual and that men held the real political sway.⁴⁶

Kathleen Cleaver epitomized the intersection of sexuality and power upheld by the ideals of the Revolutionary Woman. After being involved in BPP-police confrontations in 1967, Cleaver was quickly swept into the party politics; a few months later, she played a critical role in organizing the grassroots Free Huey campaign. On the opening day of Huey Newton’s infamous 1968 trial, Kathleen Cleaver led a section of Panthers and the newly formed White radical Peace and Freedom Party in chants protesting Newton’s arrest and demanding his immediate release. Cleaver’s glamorous, yet lethal appearance, with her knee-high leather boots, short skirt, hair standing like a halo around her face, and a rifle in her hand, was described as “strikingly handsome” by the *San Francisco Chronicle*.⁴⁷ Cleaver’s awareness of her sexuality gave her more power within the Party, greater national recognition, and elevated her to somewhat of a movie star status amongst the local press. Her confidence in and awareness of her sexuality also did much to complicate and obscure perceptions of the BPP’s treatment of women.⁴⁸ Cleaver rose to Communications Secretary of the BPP, a role she

created, which enabled her to become the first woman to attend the party’s Central Committee. She was attractive and fierce, as well as supportive of her man. For this she was hailed as a Black Power icon and a perfect representation of a Black Revolutionary Woman by the Black Panther.⁴⁹

However, much of Kathleen Cleaver’s identity in the BPP was tied to her husband Eldridge Cleaver and because of that she enjoyed many privileges which eluded the majority of Panther women. Not only did the high-ranking status of her husband shield her from some of the most degrading sexism, but being a married woman meant she was somewhat “off-limits” to the other male members and protected her from unwanted sexual advances. Because of this, Kathleen Cleaver often did not sympathize with victims of sexual abuse in the BPP or corroborate their statements with her own experiences. In a 1971 interview, her contradictory views about women’s revolutionary roles surfaced when she voiced her frustration that “women [were] always relegated to assistance,” yet argued that “the form of assistance that women give in political movements to men is just as crucial as the leadership that men give.”⁵⁰ Nevertheless, she merely asked for more recognition for her work and never questioned why women could not be accepted as leaders in the movement. Because she ostensibly viewed assistance and leadership as equal roles, or at least equally important, she repeatedly claimed that women in the BPP were treated the same as men and never

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ San Francisco Chronicle, July 16, 1968.

⁴⁸ Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til The Midnight Hour*, 231; Farmer, “The Black Revolutionary Woman, 1966-1975,” 66-67; Ward, “The Third World Women’s Alliance,” 124.

⁴⁹ Black Panther, September 28, 1968, 20; Farmer, “The Black Revolutionary Woman, 1966-1975,” 66; Ward, “The Third World Women’s Alliance,” 124.

⁵⁰ Kathleen Cleaver and Julia Hervé, “Black Scholar Interviews: Kathleen Cleaver,” *Black Scholar*, (December 197), 55-56.

designated to gender-specific roles.⁵¹

Angela Davis, a Black nationalist philosopher and one of the prominent faces of the Black Power Movement, was acquainted with and in support of many Black Power organizations, but ultimately refused to unite herself with any single group. In a 1992 article, Davis admitted that she “frequently questioned [her] place as a Black woman” when working with different Black Power organizations and struggled with an “absence of a vocabulary with which to pose the relevant questions.”⁵² She attributed this conundrum to the confusing and limited political opportunities for women at the time, when the feminist movement was “White, middle class, and utterly irrelevant,” yet Black liberation organizations were fraught with misogyny and “compulsory male leadership.”⁵³

Elaine Brown also denounced feminism as being “an idea reserved for White women,” but struggled to articulate and reconcile her frustration with the BPP’s excessive male chauvinism.⁵⁴ Brown, along with countless other Panther women, dealt with blatant disrespect from male Panthers who disliked being on equal ranks or refused to take orders from women.⁵⁵ Throughout the many years that she was a member of the BPP, Brown had, to an extent, recognized the abusive patterns, the manipulative language, and ways in which the entire movement was “handicapped by the limited roles the Brothers allowed the Sisters;” yet, she maintained that “sexism was a secondary problem” when compared with racism and capitalism.⁵⁶

Like many Black women, Brown felt that criticizing the patriarchal structure would result in her being labeled an enemy, not only to the BPP’s political agenda, but to her race.

Late 1960s: A New Phase in the BPP

Female membership in the BPP increased dramatically in the late 1960s, with Bobby Seale estimating that women made up sixty percent of BPP membership in 1968. The death, imprisonment, or exile of prominent male leaders--such as Huey Newton, David Hilliard, and later, John Huggins and “Bunchy” Carter--inspired more recruits to join the revolution and led the BPP to promote more women to positions of leadership. Allowing more female leadership was originally part of a tactic to relieve some of the brutality from Panther men who were being targeted by local police, although women quickly became victims of indiscriminate police violence. Subsequently, many Panther women argued that they should be treated equally as revolutionaries because they were equally brutalized and targeted by police.⁵⁷

In late 1968, the BPP began to focus heavily on running survival programs, such as the Free Breakfast for Children Program, which attracted new female membership and promoted many women to leadership positions. In 1974, after Huey Newton’s self-exile to Cuba and Bobby Seale’s resignation from the Party, Ericka

⁵¹ Kathleen Cleaver, *Women, Power, and Revolution*, Howard University Symposium, 1998, 2-4.

⁵² Angela Davis, “Black Nationalism: The Sixties and the Nineties,” in *Black Popular Culture* edited by Gina Dent (New York: Bay Press, 1992), 320.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 363.

⁵⁵ “Panther Sisters on Women’s Liberation.”

⁵⁶ Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 363, 369.

⁵⁷ Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest, “‘The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job’: Black Panther Party Women, 1966-1982,” in *The Black Panther Party (reconsidered)*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 315-318.

Huggins was named Chairperson of the BPP. Her promotion spurred forth an unprecedented rise in female leadership, with the addition of four women elected to the Central Committee: Ericka Huggins, Phyllis Jackson, Joan Kelly, and Norma Armour. Brown's tenure as Chairperson signified a new phase of the BPP, which digressed from their original goals of reclaiming Black manhood and advocating for self-defense; the Party reorganized to focus primarily on community service initiatives, survival programs, and rerouting their notorious reputation of being militant and hyper-misogynist. As a result of this demilitarized and less controversial agenda, the BPP began to fade out of public awareness and the names and contributions of Panther women have been largely forgotten.⁵⁸

In the late 1960s, the BPP attempted to undergo changes in their party to uproot some of its deep-set sexism. Bobby Seale, in his book *Seize the Time*, explained the reasoning behind the party's decision to call for the "absolute equality between male and female" and detailed some of the consequent changes. "The concept I'm trying to establish is the cross-relation of male chauvinism to any other form of chauvinism - including racism. In other words, the idea of saying 'keep a woman in her place' is only a short step away from saying 'keep a nigger in his place.'"⁵⁹ In an effort to ameliorate the ongoing abuses, Seale claimed that sexism against the Black woman and racism against the Black man were equivalent. He attempted to

unite Panther men and women against the same White oppressor; yet, in doing so, Seale allowed the BPP to avoid much of its due responsibility in perpetuating the problem and ignored the compound oppression affecting women of color.⁶⁰ Similarly, Huey P. Newton capitalized this ideology in 1970 in an attempt to eradicate the party's sexism: "We must not use the racist attitude that the White racists use. . . . This kind of psychology is in operation when we view oppressed people." Newton called upon the BPP to unite with the women's liberation movement and to "recognize the women's right to be free."⁶¹ In addition, Newton eventually outlawed the use of the "pussy power" slogan for its derogatory and objectifying affront to women.⁶²

Surprisingly, the most overt condemnation of the BPP's chauvinism came from the man who was, perhaps, most responsible for outlining and exemplifying it: Eldridge Cleaver. ". . . We must purge our ranks and our hearts, and our minds, and our understanding of any chauvinism, chauvinistic behavior of disrespectful behavior toward women," he stated in a 1969 message to Ericka Huggins, praising her for her sacrifice and revolutionary commitment to the BPP after the murder of her husband and her arrest.⁶³ Cleaver continued to plead that Panther men "[had] a duty to stop inflicting injustices of misuse of women."⁶⁴ Cleaver spoke almost exclusively

⁵⁸ LeBlanc-Ernest, "The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job," 321-323.

⁵⁹ Seale, *Seize the Times*, 393-403.

⁶⁰ Alameen-Shavers, "The Woman Question," 41-42; Seale, *Seize the Times*, 393-403.

⁶¹ Newton, "The Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements."

⁶² Charles E. Jones and Judson L. Jeffries, "'Don't Believe the Hype': Debunking the Panther Mythology," in *The Black Panther Party (reconsidered)*, ed. Charles E. Jones. Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998, 33.

⁶³ Cleaver, "Message to Sister Ericka Huggins of the Black Panther Party."

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

about the injustice of relegating women to inferior positions and disregarding them as equal revolutionaries; he avoided addressing the issue of sexual assault plaguing the Party.⁶⁵

In 1969, the BPP implemented sixteen additional rules for members to abide by, including: “do not take liberties with women,” by which the party attempted to quell allegations of sexual harassment. While the BPP did recognize and make an effort to alleviate the abuse cases, their definition of “attempted rape,” as well as their methods of handling accusations and punishing perpetrators were vague and inadequate. For example, in an effort to explain how the BPP had solved the issue of sexual harassment, Bobby Seale cited an instance in which a woman had come forward with an accusation of attempted rape after a man sleeping in her bed had “tried to get a little too close.”⁶⁶ After multiple refusals and attempts to push him away, “he simply quit trying.” Seale and other unnamed members of the Party headquarters “pointed out that since she had been able to just push him away, this wasn’t really attempted rape. And she realized that it wasn’t.”⁶⁷ While Seale deliberately provided minimal details, he unintentionally shed light upon the BPP’s ineffective way of dealing with rape allegations and deeply troubling processes of gaslighting victims. While the acknowledgement of these abuses was recognized by many Panthers as “a monumental step forward,” the injustices were too tightly woven into the party’s foundation to be easily uprooted by the very men who created and perpetuated the issue.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Seize the Times, 393-403.

⁶⁷ Seale, Seize the Times, 393-403.

⁶⁸ Alameen-Shavers, “The Woman Question,” 42; Seale, Seize the Times, 393-403; Bukhari-Alston, “On the Question of Sexism,” 8.

Elaine Brown resolutely summed up her years of experience within the BPP, exposing and condemning the degrading objectification of Black women that was rampant throughout the Black Power Movement.

A woman in the Black Power movement was considered, at best, irrelevant. A woman asserting herself was a pariah. A woman attempting the role of leadership was, to my proud black Brothers, making an alliance with the ‘counter-revolutionary, man-hating, lesbian, feminist white bitches.’ It was a violation of some Black Power principle that was left undefined. If a black woman assumed a role of leadership, she was said to be eroding black manhood, to be hindering the progress of the black race. She was an enemy of black people.⁶⁹

The BPP was built on masculinist underpinnings, one of their ultimate goals being to restore Black manhood, and accompanying submissive womanhood, to the ideals of the Black community. While women in the BPP were anything but docile, acquiescent companions to the men, their roles within the party were limited, often subordinate, and subject to constant debate. Largely due to Eldridge Cleaver’s influence in the party, the rampant sexualization of women was justified as a form of restoring respect and desirability to Black womanhood. Women such as Kathleen Cleaver adhered to and benefited from the ideals of the Black Revolutionary Woman, which

⁶⁹ Brown, A Taste of Power, 357.

⁷⁰ Brown, A Taste of Power, 367.

upheld women in primarily supportive roles; whereas other women, such as Elaine Brown and Angela Davis, questioned their revolutionary role, yet struggled to voice their frustrations without the language to describe their gender-specific oppression. Other women, such as Regina Jennings, found it nearly impossible to endure the rampant toxicity and sexual abuse within the BPP. Brown, like many other Black female activists in the Black Power Movement, eventually came to the realization that “the value of [her] life had been obliterated as much by being female as by being Black and poor.”⁷⁰ Though the BPP’s cofounders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale attempted to eradicate the abuses and align themselves with women’s liberation, their efforts were minor and based on an inexplicit argument that ultimately shifted the blame away from themselves.

The overt sexism of the Black Power Movement, and the BPP in particular, was a critical element that led Black women to kickstart the Black Feminist Movement in the 1970s, which sought to dispel the deep-set misogyny within the black community and give rise to a more intersectional feminist movement. Many Black Panther women became fierce advocates for Black feminism and labored to add more female voices to the Black liberation movement. Throughout the Black Power Movement, Black women, despite consistent attempts to stifle or limit their voices, have played a crucial role in developing, organizing, and leading the struggle for liberation. One anonymous revolutionary woman, interviewed in 1969, bravely stated: “... the success of the revolution depends upon the women. For this reason, we know that it’s necessary that the women must be emancipated.”⁷¹

⁷¹ “Panther Sisters on Women’s Liberation.”

Without the voices of Black women, the freedom struggle would never be fully inclusive and therefore, never had been realized.

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