
The idea was obviously twofold for the specific purpose of serving those people who were directly benefited by our programs. But also secondarily, to influence the minds of people to understand not only that the Black Panther party was providing them this, but more importantly, that if they could get food, that maybe they would want clothing, maybe they’d want housing, maybe they’d want land and maybe they would ultimately want some abstract thing called freedom.

—Elaine Brown, quoted in Eyes on the Prize, episode 3, “Power! (1966-1968)”
plain the 1960s, the Panthers represent the proverbial “black sheep” of the era whose celebration of retaliatory violence ultimately doomed them to failure.

A vocal chorus of journalists, scholars and ex-Panthers have challenged this view with decidedly mixed results (6). October 2006 marked the fortieth anniversary of the BPP’s founding. On its previous anniversaries pundits, police officials and ex-Panthers were trotted out and expected to perform according to what has become the accepted script. That is, the FBI was wrong for harassing the party, but the party invited violent retribution through provocative rhetoric and a confrontational posture.

The publication of dozens of books since the appearance of The Shadow of the Panther, and a half dozen more around the BPP’s fortieth anniversary is part of a larger field of scholarship devoted to chronicling the Black Power era. However, even as this scholarship recasts our understanding of Black Power, the discussion of its legacy remains mired in outdated models. To some extent the problem is inherent in the venue in which most of this discussion is taking place. Like all “public history,” given the dictates of memory and the notions of a usable past, there is an expectation that the BPP story follow narratives that privilege the southern nonviolent civil rights struggle. As Panther cofounder Bobby Seale insisted in a 2006 interview, “Our legacy is one of social-change activism that was probably one of the most profound grassroots anti-institutionalized racism messages.” “The Black Panthers,” added Clarence Walker in the same article, “represented that phase of Black Power that believed black people should be armed and defend themselves and turn away from the nonviolent resistance movement” (7).

The field that historian Peniel Joseph has characterized as “Black Power Studies,” provides fertile ground for analysis and reinterpretation of the problematic Civil Rights/Black Power dichotomy. Curiously, the subtitle of Pearson’s Shadow of the Panther was “the Price of Black Power in America,” but besides reporting many of the misconceptions about the movement and by extension the party, Pearson’s fundamental misunderstanding of the Black Power movement proved a major impediment toward an objective reassessment of the group. This same distortion and devaluing of Black Power as an independent movement has left ex-Panthers, scholars, and the media scrambling to define its legacy ever since. Take for instance, the words of former Panther chief of staff David Hilliard who complained during a campaign for the Oakland city council in 1999 how the BPP remained “probably the most misun-
contributed to this misconception. Heralded in the early days of the party as its primary legacy, the BPP’s stand on armed self-defense was viewed by many supporters as a badge of honor. Consider, for example, BPP cofounder Bobby Seale’s take on Panther police relations in a 1983 interview: “They wounded 60-odd of us,” Seale explained but “we wounded 32 of them.” “I think the reason we killed less and wounded less,” he continued was “because they had . . . more equipment” (10). Presently ex-Panthers seem less inclined to engage that history. “We didn’t want to shoot anybody,” Seale noted in a 1997 speech at Allegheny University. “Our objective was to capture the imagination of the people in our community” (11).

Until very recently accounts of the party tended to fall between what Ebony Utley describes as vilification and hagiography. In order to excavate the origins of the historical Black Panther Party one must consider its relationship not just to the civil rights movement but also to Black Power and its influence in the late 1950s and 1960s. In the process, we can tease out the BPP’s larger significance to Black Power and ultimately gain a better understanding of their contributions and legacy to postwar freedom struggles (12).

**Origins**

Shortly before the formation of the Oakland BPP, in 1966, *The New York Times* reported the activities of “an amalgamation of militant, youth oriented Negro groups” preparing a protest against Harlem schools. Their demands included the hiring of black faculty and the addition of African American history courses. Among the participants, which included the New York chapters of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was the Harlem-based Black Panther Party. Declining to confirm anything more than the existence of a Harlem branch, an unidentified representative explained the group’s agenda. “Harlem is the spiritual and historical home of the Black man in America,” said the spokesman, it’s “only natural that a Black Panther Party be established here” (13).

Modeling themselves after the SNCC inspired political party founded in Lowndes County, Alabama, the Harlem Panthers interpreted a critical difference in their mission. In Lowndes County, where blacks constituted nearly 80 percent of the total population the possibility of attaining political power was a distinct reality. North and west of the Mason Dixon line the Panthers argued that blacks required strategic alliances to harness political power and facilitate the creation of lasting institutions. The political overtones of the party coupled with its connection to Stokely Carmichael (whose 1966 call for Black Power fueled fears about black separatism and violence) also raised its profile among other militant groups operating in the city. Rumors even linked Carmichael directly to the formation of the Harlem chapter (14).

In less than a year the Harlem Panthers and dozens of other groups, like them (invoking the symbol of the Black Panther) would be eclipsed by a West Coast incarnation sporting the same name, the Oakland Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Founded in October 1966, the Oakland BPP became the hub of the Panther movement and later, through the sanctioning of chapters, a national organization. As it sought organizational control of these chapters, it encountered problems. Fiercely independent and at times more oriented to local issues and politics, individual chapters proclaimed an unspoken allegiance to an earlier tradition of black radicalism that predated the BPP and relied heavily on black nationalism and pan-Africanism (15).

Two important factors ultimately distinguished the Oakland Panthers from the other BPP groups. One was the codification of their ideas and agenda into a ten-point program and second was their focus and participation in community service, in particular their newspaper and later their survival programs (a copy of the ten point program is available from the Library of Congress, LC-U9-20018-9A.)
In their conscious engagement with Third World independence movements, the Panthers illustrated an earnest desire not simply to reform the system but to transform American society. . . . [T]he Panthers’ real significance and legacy is to be found here, not among the thorny road of civil rights failures, dreams deferred, and radicalism gone wild, but among the lilies of community responsibility, self-determination, and community control, in the hopes of delivering “power to the people”


3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.


8. This was an associated press article which appeared among other places as “Ex-Black Panther has same message, new method,” The Chronicle Telegram, Elyria, OH, January 31, 1999.


10. Ibid.


14. Ibid.


24. For an opposing view of the Panthers legacy and historical significance, see Jama Lazerow, “Race, Class and Power to the People,” in Yohuru Williams and Jama Lazerow, eds., Liberated Territory: Untold Local Perspectives on the Black Panther Party forthcoming from Duke University Press. Professor Lazerow contends, and I partially concur, that the Black Panthers defy classification solely as a Black Nationalist group or a Black Power group primarily because in politics and style they represented what he describes as “a radical departure . . . in composition, tactics, and, ideology” who through their efforts “made the 1960s a far more radical time than it might have been, not just for the black liberation movement but for resistance movements generally.” While there is definite value in this argument particularly with regard to Lazerow’s assertion that the Panthers always privileged class over race, it speaks more to the party’s place in history rather than their legacy. If history can be narrowly defined as the record of what an organization did or accomplished; legacy is often defined as what it leaves behind. Thus while history is an integral part of legacy, legacy can transcend history. Legacy, unlike history, is not measured in successes and failures; it is measured in lasting ideas that transcend time and space. The standard definition of the term as “something that is handed down from a predecessor” is instructive here. As the Panthers have sought to identify their legacy not only in terms of their lineage but their lasting contributions to the American social and political fabric, the Black Power Movement offers more fertile ground for a reassessment of their overall significance to the advancement of American freedom, democracy and even the importance of class. The Panthers most often expressed their consciousness about class in their willingness to work with other organizations similarly situated. Like Malcolm X, they were consciously internationalist in their worldview, another hallmark of the Black Power movement. Thus while they were an important part of the history of both movements and they drew strength and inspiration from both, arguably the most important thing they left behind was a blueprint for revolutionary social change particularly at the community level rooted in Black Power.