

The Feminist Leadership of Ericka Huggins in the Black Panther Party

Mary Phillips

ABSTRACT

Born on January 5, 1948, in Washington, D.C., Ericka Huggins was an important figure in the Black Panther Party (BPP) as well as a key Black Power era activist. A high-ranking member of the BPP, she served on the organization's Central Committee. As a writer, poet, educator, former editor of the *Black Panther* and Director of the Oakland Community School, Huggins was vital to the BPP as an organizer and intellectual. This essay provides an in-depth analysis of Huggins's feminist theory, her work as a revolutionary educator, and the impact of her incarceration on the BPP as a member of the New Haven 14. I argue that Huggins's experiences serve as an example of progressive gender politics in the BPP. Until recently Black women's activism has been largely neglected in BPP scholarship and this work contributes to the emerging scholarship on Black women in the most widely known organization of the Black Power Movement. This essay differs from previous interpretations on Ericka Huggins and the BPP by showcasing her voice on the intersections of Black Power and Black feminist politics in the BPP.

On the front cover of the Saturday, July 12, 1969 issue of *The Black Panther*, an enlarged picture depicts a mother and child in a rat-infested apartment, with the mother pointing a loaded

rifle at a hole in the wall to kill the rats as they enter. The significance of the picture is in its depiction of a mother staving off danger against her home. This photo speaks to the historical legacy of Black women's activism from slavery to freedom and disrupts the notion that self-defense was reserved for men. Often, women worked as militant radical activists upholding the beliefs of armed self-defense. During the nineteenth century, women such as Harriet Tubman carried a gun to rescue fugitive slaves from the South to the North as the conductor of the Underground Railroad. Ida B. Wells endorsed Winchester six-shooters during the anti-lynching campaign. Wells (2002) researched many cases in which the public and law enforcement accused Black men of rape falsely and her work revealed "that many sexual liaisons between White women and Black men were in fact consensual, and most were not rape" (p. 21). Women, during the modern phase of the Civil Rights/Black Power Movement, continued Wells's activism against social injustices.

The scholarship on Black women's long history as revolutionary organizers within the Black freedom struggle developed significantly within the last decade. (See Giddings, 2001; Harley, 2001; Gore, Theoharris, & Woodard, 2009; McGuire, 2010; Theoharris, 2013). For example, Jeanne Theoharris (2013) challenges the way in which the mainstream historical narrative remembers Rosa Parks as a reserved, passive, and non-violent leader in the Civil Rights Movement by reconstructing her as a revolutionary advocate of self-defense. Furthermore, Civil Rights activist Gloria Richardson advocated militancy as the leader of the Cambridge Movement in Maryland (Harley, 2001), and in Timothy Tyson's book *Radio Free Dixie* (1999), Mabel Williams, a major organizer in the Monroe, North Carolina, branch of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), is shown holding a gun in 1961, as her spouse, Robert Franklin Williams, instructs her on its use. The subtitle of the picture reads, "Four months

earlier she had held off Monroe police officers with a .12-gauge shotgun when they came to arrest her husband” (p. 183). The leadership of women, including Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Gloria Richardson, and Amy Jacques Garvey, influenced radical female activists of the late 1960s and early 1970s and laid the foundation for Black women’s activism in the Black Panther Party (BPP). The staff of the *The Black Panther*, the party’s famed publication, chose the aforementioned political artwork of the mother and her child as the cover of during a critical time when the members discussed the complexities of gender politics. A stance traditionally assigned to men, the mother in this case fulfills the role of protector of the entire family, which includes not only the children, but the father as well and challenges the representation of women being merely complimentary to men.

Although many party women utilized feminist rhetoric in their discourse, historian Tracye Matthews (1998) argues “most did not think of themselves as feminists, this did not necessarily mean that they accepted male chauvinism or sexism. Most expected to be treated as equals, as revolutionary comrades, by their male counterparts” (p. 275). Due largely to the racism inherent in the Women’s Liberation Movement, they disassociated themselves from nominal feminism, as “Women’s Liberation,” in the mainstream, served the needs and interests of middle-class White women. The racism and White privilege practiced among some of the most visible feminist leaders, as well as the sexism in the Black Power movement, isolated Black women. Some found refuge in the BPP because they wanted to serve the community in a practical way. Women’s membership in the BPP called for participation in feminist politics within the organization because they played an integral role in the group’s operation and daily functioning. As Huggins explained, “we operated as feminists [but] we didn’t see ourselves in

that movement” (personal communication, July 30, 2011).

This article provides an in-depth analysis of the feminist leadership of Black Panther Party member Ericka Huggins. In particular, I focus on the impact of her incarceration on the party as a member of the New Haven 14, her feminist theory, and progressive gender politics in her work as a revolutionary educator. A high-ranking member of the BPP, Huggins served on the organization’s Central Committee from 1977 to 1979. As a writer, poet, educator, former editor of the *Black Panther*, and director of the Oakland Community School, Huggins became vital to the BPP as an organizer and intellectual. She embedded her theories and actions, including her time as a political prisoner, in the notion of Black Power as it concerned women’s needs.¹ I highlight Huggins’s voice by drawing on interviews I conducted with her, highlight the intersections of Black Power and Black feminist politics, and uncover the existence of a Black feminist theory and practice in the party, which I identify as Black Power feminism, i.e., the practice of Black feminism and Black liberation theories simultaneously. Huggins’s experiences serve as an example of a larger progressive gender politics in the BPP.

Ericka Huggins and the New Haven 14

After Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents carried out an orchestrated plot on January 17, 1969, through the nefarious counterintelligence program dubbed Cointelpro, that killed party members Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter and Huggins’s husband, John, she took the train with her daughter, Mai, to New Haven, Connecticut. At the request community members, including students from Yale University, she opened the New Haven branch of the Black Panther Party. Three months later, the FBI arrested her along with party chairman Bobby Seale and other

¹ I define a political prisoner as a person incarcerated and subjected to cruelty because of their political views.

members in ploy in which the court charged them with conspiracy with the intent to commit the murder of former party comrade Alex Raxley. Reported agent provocateur George Sams claimed that the police employed Alex Raxley as an informant. According to historian Yohuru Williams, (2000) “For three days members of the New Haven chapter, under the direction of Sams, tortured and interrogated Raxley in the cellar of Warren Kimbro’s home.... Sams ordered Ericka Huggins to record the interrogation for national headquarters. That recording would eventually become a key piece of evidence against the New Haven Panthers” (pp. 140–141). In recalling the trial of the New Haven 14, Huggins elucidates that no one brought George Sams to trial. She declared, “I was and all the other people were released with the exception of Bobby Seale and myself and that’s how the trial came to be known as Ericka and Bobby’s trial” (personal communication, April 16, 2010).

With the stress of John’s murder and her separation from Mai, who was three-weeks old at the time of her father’s death, Huggins explained that she used meditation as a coping strategy in prison. Reflecting on her experience, Huggins stated, “I felt very alone and despondent.... One of the reasons I taught myself to meditate is so that I could bear seeing my daughter for an hour on a Saturday once a week... once I recognized that I could use meditation as a way to keep myself sane and balanced in prison then I could focus on my inner work. So, I’m grateful to prison for that” (personal communication, April 16, 2010). During this time, John’s mother, who raised Mai while she was incarcerated, brought her granddaughter to see her mother consistently. Her detachment from Mai brought more mental stress, especially since the doctors gave her pills to inhibit her breast-milk production. As a breast-feeding mother, she treasured her bond and attachment to Mai and mourned that loss. The party and the larger community mobilized in

defense of the political prisoners, Huggins and Seale, and stories about Huggins and the New Haven 14 often appeared in *The Black Panther* newspaper.

As a political prisoner, Niantic staffers isolated and detained Huggins in a highly restricted area of the prison and placed her in solitary confinement. Akinyele Umoja (1998) points out that the corrections officers treated political prisoners more inhumanely than other inmates and that they more frequently receive “maximum sentences, isolation, and sensory deprivation,” (p. 431). He asserts that “Human rights advocates see the rendering of maximum sentences to political prisoners as a punitive measure to keep insurgent activists out of their communities as long as possible” (p. 431). In an effort to remove her from solitary confinement, her lawyers appealed the process to the state of Connecticut. For the first time in a year, corrections officials placed her in the mainstream prison population. As a support unit, she established the Sisterlove Collective, along with other women, to assist newly admitted female prisoners and used hair as a space to build a tight-knit community. Huggins commented, “We braided each other’s hair and curled each other’s hair and over the hair-doing we had all kinds of conversations about how we wanted the world to work and unfold. It looked so harmless to the prison guards, but it was revolutionary” (personal communication, April 16, 2010). Silja J. A. Talvi (1999) explains that women cope with isolation in prison in distinct ways from men. She claims that their response ““takes on an even more significant dimension because of the way that gender differences play out in society. Women turn to each other for support and basic survival in ways that men don’t as often. So the isolation issue takes on an even deeper [meaning] for women”” (p.127).

Huggins awaited trial in prison for almost two years before the state of Connecticut dropped the charges. In my interview with Huggins, she focused more on the jury and their

decision to acquit her. She emphasized, “the jury selection process was the most difficult in the history of picking a jury to that date. It took three months to get the hearing because New England was very racist, homogenous, and conservative right-wing Republican and they were extremely biased about the Black Panther Party.” Huggins explained that women on the jury helped her get acquitted, “when it came to declaring a verdict, the women were the ones that said, ‘you know there’s no evidence. Why are we trying these people?’” (personal communication, April 16, 2010). After two hung juries, “the judge said, ‘let them go. We cost the taxpayers of Connecticut too much money. They’re free to go.’ So, Bobby and I walked out that day” (personal communication, April 16, 2010). In maintaining their innocence, “one of those women, we were told, after everything was over, that she picked up a chair in the jury room and said ‘Let these defendants go. You know you don’t have any evidence.’ It was a white woman, a nurse. She said, if you want to confine them to prison for the rest of their lives go on and try it but I swear I will kill you.” (personal communication, April 16, 2010). The state released Huggins from prison in 1971.

Huggins served the community as a member of the Black Panther Party from 1968 to 1981, a fourteen-year period. Specifically, from 1968 to 1969, women’s membership increased in the party. As Angela Le-Blanc-Ernest (2005) points out, by 1968, “females represented approximately 60% of the Party’s membership.” During this period, the party broadened their activism to include “community service programs, such as the free breakfast program and free health care clinic projects as well as liberation schools and community political education classes” (Matthews, 1998, p. 277). Greater participation by women prompted internal discussions on male chauvinism and sexism and women’s vocal protests advanced the party’s position in relation to gender. During this time, the “gender-based hierarchy in which men and

women reported to officers of the same sex” was denounced and eradicated (Matthews, 1998, p. 309).

LeBlanc-Ernest (1998) marks 1969 as “a watershed period for the participation of women,” specifically due to increased political repression (p. 309). For example, Ward Churchill points out that “the Black Panther Party was literally sledgehammered [by the FBI’s Cointelpro Program]. Of the 295 counterintelligence operations the bureau had admitted conducting against Black activists and organizations during this period, a staggering 233, the majority of them in 1969 aimed at the Panthers” (2010, p. 82). Agents targeted many of the male members of the party, including highly profiled leaders, such as Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, chief of staff David Hilliard, and minister of information Eldridge Cleaver.² During this time of heavy governmental repression, the party closed ranks and put forth many expulsions for quality control. Women took over many of the positions formerly held by male members and the “Expansion of female participation became critical for the organization to function effectively” (LeBlanc-Ernest, 1998, p. 310). Matthews (1998) suggests, “the increased presence of women, the shift from a paramilitary to a community service focus, the incarceration, assassination, and exile of male leaders, and the increasing pressures of state-sponsored repression, all affected the internal dialogue about gender” (p. 275). Many articles in the party publication *The Black Panther* reflected women’s voices on a variety of topics related to the revolutionary struggle.

In an interview published by Panther women in 1969, entitled, “Panther Sisters on Women’s Liberation,” six anonymous women shared their thoughts and experiences as members

² Newton and Seale were both in prison, one for voluntary manslaughter in the killing of police officer John Frey and the other on charges of conspiracy. Hilliard was arrested and in and out of jail on various charges, including threatening to kill President Richard Nixon. Cleaver was in exile because he violated his parole for his involvement in the April 4, 1968, shoot-out with the Oakland police. Sixteen-year-old Bobby Hutton was killed in the shoot-out; he was the party’s initial recruit (See LeBlanc-Ernest, 1998, p. 310).

of the party. They discussed the changes that had taken place since the increased participation of women:

We've recognized in the past 4 or 5 months that sisters have to take a more responsible role. They have to extend their responsibility and it shouldn't be just to detail work, to things normally women do. This, I think has been manifested in the fact that a lot of sisters have been writing more articles, they're speaking out in public more and we've even done outreach work in the community. (as cited in Heath, 1976, p. 340)

One woman suggested that Panther women labored toward alleviating all forms of male chauvinism: "We believe that male chauvinism must be stomped out, because we have come to realize that it is bourgeois. Bourgeois ideas are those which are perpetuated upon us by the bourgeois class and is something we're fighting against" (as cited in Heath, 1976, p. 347).

Another woman replied, "It's very important that black man's manhood is not dependent upon the subordination of black women, but rather his manhood is, in fact, dependent on his revolutionary relationship" (as cited in Heath, 1976, p. 343). The incarceration of Huggins during the New Haven 14 trial makes this point most evident. Huggins, whose case was covered extensively in *The Black Panther*, ranked high in the party. Her imprisonment sent a direct message that women fought for revolution alongside their male comrades. In "Panther Sisters on Women's Liberation" one woman wrote:

The Brothers had to look on Ericka with a new light because she had been thru a lot of things that some Brothers hadn't even been thru. The sisters looked up to her and we all saw what we had to do. The sisters have to pick up guns just like

brothers. There are a lot of things the sisters can do to change society. (as cited in Heath, 1976, p. 339)

Numerous articles printed in the *Black Panther* discussed the plight of female political prisoners, in particular police harassment, harsh violent treatment of party members, inadequate medical treatment, unfair trials, and stressful labor conditions.

In the article “Free Our Sisters,” Lt. of information and New Haven chapter member Cappy Pinderhughes pointed out in 1969 that women in the New Haven 14 were:

isolated from other prisoners; kept awake by constant bright lights and noise outside their legal right to interview counsel; denied their civil right to choice of doctors; denied their physical right to exercise, fresh air, rest, and proper clothing; denied their human right to their children; denied their constitutional right to prepare for their defense.

In response to this harsh treatment, the New Haven 14 Panthers, including Rose Smith and Huggins, drafted a list of 10 demands to the corrections staff that included, the reduction of strip searches, the elimination of wiretapping when visiting with lawyers, the right to reading materials, mail that is unopened by Niantic Prison and/or the FBI, adequate exercise, a special diet for Peggy Hudgins’s rheumatoid arthritis, as well as quality medical attention to meet her needs. In reaction to their revolutionary politics, prison authorities isolated the women from the rest of the prison population. In their list, they emphasized that the prison conditions they endured are unconstitutional and “cruel and unusual punishment” and demanded “to be treated

with the knowledge that we are innocent until proven guilty regardless of our politics beliefs” (Political Prisoners, Rose Smith and Ericka Huggins).

While incarcerated, New Haven 14 Panthers Frances Carter, Loretta Lukes, and Rose Smith were pregnant. Carter delivered a child in prison under poor medical conditions. She remembered, “First they had a lot of FBI in the delivery room... I had gotten very, very sick so my mother got the baby and they sent me back to Niantic-the medical wing. They didn’t change my bandage. I had gangrene, stinking like I don’t know. They would not wash me. I was full of crabs and everything” (as cited in Hilliard & Cole, 1993, p. 292). Despite her harsh treatment, Carter comments, “out of all of us, Ericka went through the hardest time. She had already lost her husband, John. Now she was pulled away from her daughter” (as cited in Hilliard & Cole, 1993, p. 291–292).

Many male party members publicly acknowledged their female comrades for their efforts as revolutionary leaders, including Huey P. Newton, Seale, and Eldridge Cleaver. In *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton*, Bobby Seale (1991) mentioned that the many arrests of party women awakened male members to issues of male privilege and sexism. He commented on the impact of the shoot-out among the Panthers and the Los Angeles Police Department on December 8, 1969, “brothers have begun to see that the sisters can get arrested too, just the same as the brothers. I know that the community can see this in the recent shoot-out in LA, where the sisters were in there, too, battling, defending, just as hard as the brothers” (p. 398). Cleaver recognized Huggins’s contribution as an equal comrade in his article, “Message to Sister Ericka Huggins of the Black Panther Party,” in the Saturday, July 5, 1969, issue of *The Black Panther*. In this article, he urges the eradication of sexism and misogyny, “The incarceration and suffering of Sister Ericka should be a stinging rebuke to all

manifestations of male chauvinisms within our ranks. That we must purge our ranks and our hearts, and our minds, and our understanding of any chauvinism.... That we must too recognize that a woman can be just as revolutionary as a man and that she has equal stature, that, along with men, and that we cannot prejudice her in any manner, that we cannot relegate her to an inferior position” (p. 12–13). Huggins’s incarceration became a critical component in the evolution of gender politics in the BPP.

Ericka Huggins and Feminist Consciousness in the Black Panther Party

Although some women in the party demonstrated more boldly and directly a feminist consciousness in their daily activities, there existed a flexible overall engagement with gender that constantly transformed. According to Huggins, women in the party engaged feminism:

We were feminists. We did all kinds of things to break down barriers within the Black Panther Party, gender barriers.... I would take issue with my own comrades and the women in the Black Panther Party. I would ask them “what do you mean you are not a feminist? You absolutely are a feminist. You joined the Black Panther Party.” You could not be in the Black Panther Party if you were not a feminist. (personal communication, February 20, 2010)

While she did not use the term feminist during her tenure in the party, she believed in “the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes” (personal communication, February 20,

2010). Huggins emphasized that when she joined, the organization's leaders asked her to do activities they requested from members, regardless of gender. She explained:

I was asked if I could: A) sell newspapers on the street, B) clean the party office, C) type and answer phones—and so was John Huggins asked the very same questions. I was asked if I could stay up all night and hold watch on the Party office, because there was always police surveillance, so all the men and women were asked that. Later I was asked if I could be a Party spokesperson, just like the men. There wasn't anything I wasn't being asked to do. (personal communications, February 20, 2010)

Moreover, Huggins discussed the paradoxes in relation to gender, describing an incident at a gathering with roughly about 50 other members from the northern and southern California chapter when visiting the Oakland national headquarters during her pregnancy. She stated:

First of all, the women were the only ones cooking the food so I thought this was odd because in Los Angeles everybody did everything. When the women finished cooking a woman came out of the kitchen and said, “brothers you can eat now.” I looked at the woman sitting next to me and I said to her, “what does that mean? Does that mean I have to wait to eat because I'm not?” Then I asked someone “what does it mean, the brothers can eat now?” and the woman who made the announcement said “sisters, brothers eat first” and I said, “oh no, so please excuse me while I go in the kitchen and fix my plate.” (personal communication, February 20, 2010)

Huggins resisted male chauvinism by challenging the female announcer's plea and her actions worked to further encourage the dialogue on gender in the party.

In my interview with Huggins, she identified herself as a feminist, declaring, "yes I'm a feminist always have been. Every member of the Black Panther Party woman or man if they were awake had a feminist perspective" (personal communication, February 20, 2010). Huggins fully embraced feminism, stating, "I'm a strong believer of black feminists or women of color feminists, who believe that we have to uplift our entire community" (personal communication, April 16, 2010). She recognized feminism as "spiritual maturity" and stated, "a true feminist wants all of the barriers moved. When I ask myself what I want for little girls and little boys I want them to be fully respectful of one another in every area of life and interaction and the only way to do that is from the perspective of spiritual maturity, which is what I call: feminism" (personal communication, April 16, 2010). Spiritual maturity, as she refers to it, is the idea that a person constantly challenges the way in which White patriarchal mainstream society has socialized them to dismiss the concerns of women. She stated, "feminism is a humane approach to living on earth. A person who is spiritually mature supports, advocates, and helps to realize the economic, political, and social equality of the sexes (male, female, and intersex)" (personal communication, May 19, 2011).

Reconceptualizing Gender in the Black Panther Party

An example of this spiritual maturity includes the everyday actions of former BPP member Zayd, minister of information in the New York Chapter. Former party member Assata Shakur (1987) explicated his progressive politics:

I also respected him because he refused to become part of the macho cult that was an official body in the BPP. He never voted on issues or took a position just to be one of the boys. When brothers made an unprincipled attack on sisters, Zayd refused to participate... Zayd always treated me and all of the other sisters with complete respect. I enjoyed his friendship because he was one of those rare men completely capable of being friends with a woman without having designs on her. (pp. 223–224)

As cofounder, Huey P. Newton spoke out most of all the male leaders against gender discrimination toward women within the party. Although Newton's theory and practice did not always match, not all that he said contradicted his actions. In his appointment of Elaine Brown as chairperson of the Black Panther Party in 1974, while the bullying of the FBI forced him into exile in Cuba, he lived his theory. As chief theoretician, Newton's essays influenced the party's gender politics and became the only entity he had any control over while in prison.

J. Herman Blake (2011) reflected on his conversations during his visits with Newton in prison and pointed out that Newton published essays in *The Black Panther* despite prison rules and restrictions (p. 248). Newton expressed the challenges he faced leading an organization from prison and that being separated prevented him from fulfilling his duties: "Lacking his ability to 'sense' the conditions... he could not instruct the Party" (Blake, 2011, p. 12). LeBlanc-Ernest (1998) contended that Newton's release from prison on May 29, 1970, "furthered the process of eradicating gender inequality in the BPP" (p. 315). On August 15, 1970, Newton released a letter in support of the Women's and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered (LGBT) Movements that served as a very powerful message for the party in its evolution in embracing

more progressive ideas surrounding gender. He called for members to refrain from exhibiting prejudicial impulses and to judge these groups on “whether they’re operating sincerely, in a revolutionary fashion, from a really oppressed situation” (as cited in Hilliard & Weise, 2002, p. 158).

I say “whatever your insecurities are” because as we very well know, sometimes our first instinct is to want to hit a homosexual in the mouth and want a woman to be quiet. We want to hit a homosexual in the mouth because we are afraid we might be homosexual; and 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. (Hilliard and Weise, 2002, p. 157)

Here, Newton discussed insecurities surrounding gender and sexuality and specifically addresses much of the early rhetoric of Black Power, such as the emasculation and symbolic castration of Black men. The 1965 Moynihan Report exacerbated these ideas by arguing that Black matriarchal households damaged the Black community because they emasculated Black men. The report was problematic because it upheld White patriarchal ideas of dominance and control, ignored the impact of racism, capitalism, discrimination, and poverty, and grossly distorted the lived realities of Black families in society. In “Is the Black Male Castrated?,” in Toni Cade Bambara’s classic text, *The Black Woman*, Jean Bond and Patricia Peery (1970) emphasize that “The Matriarchal fairy tale is part of a perennial tendency among whites to employ every available device in their ongoing effort to demasculinize the black male” (p. 154). They declare, “in reality Black women, domineering or not, have not had the power in this male-dominated culture to effect a coup against anyone’s manhood” (p. 146). Similarly, Michelle

Wallace (1999) highlighted that the sexual politics of the Black Power Movement “was nothing more nor less than the black man’s struggle to attain his presumably lost ‘manhood’” (p. 32). In sum, some Black male activists believed the problematic rhetoric of the Moynihan Report and perpetuated these ideas in their relationships with Black women.

The Black Panther Party’s minister of information, Eldridge Cleaver, illustrated this idea best in his book, *Soul on Ice*. Rooted in patriarchal rhetoric, this text perpetuated the idea that Black men sought after White women out of revenge and condoned violence and aggression toward both Black and White women. Cleaver tried to rationalize his rape acts and his views did not adequately represent the theories and values of the Black Panther Party, which valued women’s leadership and progressive ideas on gender. Huggins and Le-Blanc Ernest (2009) suggest that the party “in reality forwarded the principle of valuing women in a revolutionary organization” (p. 167).

In “A Letter from Huey to the Revolutionary Brothers and Sisters about the Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements,” Newton (1970) articulated a feminist agenda and discussed the problematic nature of hyper-masculine overtones of violence, domination, and homophobia. The custodians to the patriarchal and sexist infrastructure teach women to be docile, submissive, uncritical, passive, and silent, whereas men are socialized to be independent, active, dominant, violent, and tough. Men were considered superior to women, whose duty it was to protect them. Human emotion and vulnerability pose a threat to these ideas of manhood and patriarchy rested on the idea that women rightfully belonged in the home, as a source of comfort and to take care of family duties, domestic work, and child-care. These gender roles express an identity in which “gender is culturally constructed” and attached to biological sex through performances that express behavior patterns and expressions (Butler, 1990, p. 8).

According to Judith Butler (1990), the “acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (pp. 185–186). The fear Newton expressed on the sexual anxieties of castration is based on the threat of a role reversal of gender performances, in which men would lose their privilege. Movement outside of these gendered boxes places a threat to heterosexist privilege, which promotes homophobia and gender discrimination and perpetuates violence against women and the repression of women’s voices. Butler claimed, “When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one” (p. 9). Some in the party did not identify with the heterosexual constructs of gender. Huggins pointed out that “there were lesbian and bi-sexual women and men in the Black Panther Party, nobody cared in the Party. It wasn’t like anybody hid it and it wasn’t a secret. Some women had women lovers and men lovers and I’m one of them... but it wasn’t a big deal. You know why because we thought we were going to die tomorrow” (personal communication, February 20, 2010).

After 1970, Newton pushed members to move past the destructive stereotypes of gender, to refrain from exhibiting prejudice impulses, and to “judge [these groups] somehow, whether they’re operating sincerely, in a revolutionary fashion and from a really oppressed situation. (And we will grant that if they are women they are probably oppressed)” (as cited in Hilliard & Weise, 2002, p. 158). He declared that “the women’s liberation front and gay liberation front are our friends, they are potential allies, and we need as many allies as possible” and that “We must

gain security in ourselves and therefore have respect and feelings for all oppressed people” (as cited in Hilliard & Weise, 2002, pp. 159, 157).

The Black Panther Party “recognize(d) women’s right to be free” (Hilliard & Weise, 2002, p. 158). By the mid-seventies, the party newspaper featured articles on feminist groups, such as an interview with the National Black Feminist Organization’s founding member, Margaret Sloan (*The Black Panther*, Monday, October 6, 1975). The party sent a direct message that they regarded women’s issues as important because Newton situated the Women’s and LGBT movements as revolutionary and interrelated and called for solidarity and coalition-building. For example, the NY Women’s Liberation and the Connecticut Panther Defense Fund worked on behalf of the women of the New Haven 14 during their trial, held a demonstration in New Haven, and constructed a list of 5 demands that included the immediate end to the mistreatment, torture, and isolation of the women; the right to be seen by a medical physician of their choice; adequate prenatal and maternal care and proper nutrition; the removal of armed guards in the birthing room; and the release of the women and all political prisoners. Moreover, they challenged the attack of the state of Connecticut on women in the party who were mothers and also political prisoners, writing, “we insist that a mother is NOT ‘unfit’ because she does not accept the status quo” (N.Y. Women’s Liberation/The Connecticut Panther Defense Fund, 1969). It is often not recognized that the party formed coalitions and support networks with women of color feminist organizations, as Huggins noted, “women in the Black Panther Party worked with all kinds of women’s organizations because the Black Panther Party was a coalition-building organization which is how... it got the name vanguard of the movement” (personal communication, February 20, 2010). Specifically, the Black Panther Party worked with women

in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which was having similar discussions on women and politics of gender.

According to Huggins, in 1978, the party worked with the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA), whose roots stem from the SNCC, to form a coalition to fight infant mortality in Oakland, CA. A position paper presented by SNCC member Frances Beal in 1968 inspired a women's caucus in the group, originally named the Black Women's Liberation Committee (BWLC), which explored the relationship of racism and sexism in the organization. In 1969, the BWLC separated from the SNCC in an effort to increase membership and was renamed the Black Women's Alliance (BWA). As BWA evolved to include anti-imperialistic ideology, they broadened their membership to women from multicultural backgrounds and renamed the group TWWA. Kimberly Springer (2001) noted that TWWA "brought difference of culture, race, and ethnicity into the fight against capitalistic exploitation in communities of color, stereotypes, and drug and alcohol abuse" (p. 166).

To address equality for women, the Black Panther Party created a coalition with the staff and parents of the Oakland Community School and community members to fight infant mortality and the poor treatment many low-income women and families experienced in the obstetrics and gynecology department at Highland Hospital. The staff kept patients and families in the waiting rooms for a long period of time while some women suffered from contractions and even went into labor. Huggins remarked, "that was horrific and we knew that did not happen in private hospitals so we changed the thinking of the county board of supervisors and made them do their job" (personal communication, July 30, 2011). To bring attention to this problem, they attended the county supervisor's meetings to address these health inequalities.

The shared fight against infant mortality with the party and the TWWA represented a link with feminist organizations and a commitment to the liberation struggle. This relationship promoted discussions of gender within and across groups over the correct approach among party members and Black feminists in same-sex groups, as Huggins recounted:

black feminists actually challenged women in the Black Panther Party not understanding who we were and what we were doing and we were going to work with the entire black community and that we didn't have the space and time to debate on who was right and who was wrong. We would point out the ignorant behavior, attitudes, and ideology but we just kept doing what we were doing. We didn't have the time to stop and just focus on that one thing because we had a common oppressor, men and women that we needed to be focused on. That didn't mean we didn't agree with many of the things people were saying. (personal communication, February 20, 2010)

Unlike the TWWA, party members worked on the ground, living “under fire... in a life of war,” due to the FBI's Cointelpro efforts to destroy the group (Huggins, personal communication, February 20, 2010). As an armed, Black radical political organization that served Black and poor communities, the BPP experienced high levels of governmental repression and violence on a daily basis. The hard work of many women in the community deprived them of the luxury to debate and write about theory. Women acted on the ground as soldiers ready to die for the liberation just like the men. Huggins commented, “We didn't have the time to write. We had given our lives. We thought we were gonna die. Every single one of us. That's how we were living” (personal communication, February 20, 2010). Some women in

the party did in fact agree with feminism, but had a different approach to it, as women organizing alongside men in the BPP, which I refer to as Black power feminism. Black Power feminism not only challenged ideas surrounding male chauvinism, but also required a refashioning of Black Power politics that valued the concerns and needs of Black women as equal comrades in the party. Despite the differences between the TWWA and the party, they formed a coalition based on their shared interests and commonalities, in which case they did not have an antagonistic relationship, but exhibited Black Power through a feminist-centered perspective (Huggins, personal communication, February 20, 2010).

Black Power, as a theory, declared a strong sense of self-pride, a validation of blackness, and the critical assessment of the realities of the oppressed people in the United States and around the world. Black feminism actively challenges and disrupts patriarchal theories and practices and promotes the elimination of gender norms. Black Power feminism embraces both of these frameworks concurrently. Stephen Ward (2006) made the point that “TWWA’s feminism was not simply a critique of Black Power politics but, rather, a form of it” (p. 120). His work on the Third World Women’s Alliance and their relationship to Black Power politics “calls for an understanding of Black Power-era feminism” (p. 143).

I forward Ward’s argument by bringing attention to the practice of Black power feminist politics in the BPP. The Black Panther Party expressed Black power feminism through community networks established with organizations such as the TWWA. Huggins claimed that the party and the TWWA based their action-oriented coalition on the premise that “we wanted babies not to die” (personal communication, February 20, 2010). The progressive tendencies of the party actually served to confuse the police and federal agents, as Huggins reflected:

I'd say after 1971 when Huey was released from prison, because of the male dominated infrastructure in society, law enforcement and the FBI thought that men were running the Party. We were invisible to the government because we were women. (personal communication, February 20, 1010)

As minister of defense, Newton's letter on the Women and LGBT Liberation Movement helped shape the party's commitment to the idea of power coming from the broad community of the oppressed, which remained open to the concerns of women and other marginalized groups.

According to Huggins:

Here is a heterosexual African American man leading an organization, the Black Panther Party who is saying that we have no rights to oppress others with our thinking and judgment. Huey Newton always listened to the women in the Party. He not only listened he acted upon what he said why because we ran the Party, we kept the Party's programs alive (personal communication, February 20, 2010).

In 1971, Newton responded to a question on the relationship of women in the movement, in a series of conversations with developmental psychologist and professor Erik H. Erickson at Yale University, with the following:

it is very important to relate to and understand the causes of the oppression of women and gay people. We can see that there are contradictions between the sexes and between homosexuals and heterosexuals, but we believe that these contradictions should be resolved within the communities. Too often, so-called revolutionary groups have tried to resolve these contradictions by isolating

women and gay people, and, of course this only means that the revolutionary groups have cut themselves off from one of the most powerful and important forces among the people... the vanguard has to include all the people and understand their defects. (Erikson & Newton, 1973, p. 43)

Newton's evolution in his theoretical understandings of gender promoted a more genuine and honest sense of manhood that demonstrated a free expression of selfhood. Women's membership in the party became a catalyst for an engagement of feminist politics.

The daily operations of the Black Panther Party exhibited progressive gender politics and, as Huggins stated, that particularly "the theory that the women came up with, that helped to dismantle sexism within the Black Panther Party was because of what we saw right in front of us" (personal communication, February 20, 2010). The party maintained programmatic initiatives through a critical awareness of human rights. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1992) discusses race as a pervasive tool that affects the "social and power relations" of class, gender, and sexuality (p. 3), which serves as a "metalanguage in its discursive representation and construction of power relations" (p. 5). The interlocking relationship of race, gender, and class pushes forth a "political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual black women's lives" (Combahee River Collective, 1995, p. 233) and Black Power feminism mandates a conscious engagement of race, class, and gender. The Black Panther Party reflected a "metalanguage," particularly in the leadership of Huggins in her analysis of the social and political realities of the oppressed. Huggins commented that, "we didn't come to our theory because somebody put some books in front of us... we looked at history... and we decided that we all are worthy of being regarded highly that we are of value" (personal communication,

February 20, 2010). Huggins and Le-Blanc Ernest (2009) suggest that the party, as “in reality[,] forwarded the principle of valuing women in a revolutionary organization” (p. 167). As such, women worked at the forefront of the party’s community programs, particularly the Intercommunal Youth Institute/Oakland Community School.

Intercommunal Youth Institute/Oakland Community School

The party organized their educational programs with the development of the Intercommunal Youth Institute (IYI) in 1971. Huggins and LeBlanc-Ernest (2009) commented, “The outcome was two-fold: to provide a safe place for BPP members’ children during a time when BPP offices and homes were subject to raids, shoot-outs, firebombings, and FBI COINTELPRO surveillance, and to serve as an informal home-based community school” (p. 168). The IYI was founded, according to Huggins, in 1973, after several grandmothers went to Newton and requested that the party use its educational initiatives to “serve the whole community” in Oakland, California (personal communication, February 20, 2010).

A group of party members wrote the curriculum and the designated site was purchased and renamed IYI, Oakland Community School (OCS) by the 1973–74 term, with an enrollment of 50 children. Parents paid no tuition and the party accepted students on a “first-come, first-served basis” (Huggins & Le-Blanc-Ernest, 2009, p. 172). Students at OCS originated from a variety of social and economic backgrounds, but most were from poor and working-class families. OCS served elementary-aged school children and categorized them into 12 levels based on age, mathematics and language skills, and scholastic education. Students were then placed in 7 groups based on their strengths and needs. OCS carried a generic curriculum of core academic

areas, including math, science, writing, reading, art, physical education, environmental studies, and history, and Spanish foreign language classes (Huggins & Le-Blanc-Ernest, 2009, p. 170).

Subject areas such as political science, art, theater, and dance remained “highly conscious” of socio-political issues, but for the most part utilized a standard curriculum (Huggins, personal communication, February 20, 2010). Instructors taught 10 students on average and “The student population ranged between 50 and 150 from 1974 to 1979, yet each continued to receive an education tailored to his or her specific needs and learning styles” (Huggins & LeBlanc-Ernest, 2009, p. 170). OCS did not use letter grades, but “Instead, their families received carefully written academic and social evaluations, encouraging the child’s effort and highlighting areas of improvement” (Huggins & LeBlanc-Ernest, 2009, p. 176). Consequently, “children enrolled in the school performed 3 to 4 years in advance of their public peers” (Jones & Gayles, 2008, p. 110).

OCS teachers and staff, larger party membership, and parents raised money for the school through fund-raising efforts, private donations, and support from the county, city, and the state. Moreover, the school’s nonprofit entity, Educational Opportunity Corporation (EOC), applied for grants and funding sources (Huggins & LeBlanc-Ernest, 2009). The campaigns of Brown and Seale brought attention to OCS’s unique educational pedagogy of whole body education, which addressed the mental, physical, and spiritual needs of a student. The Oakland public school system, on the other hand, was seen as a warehouse of White patriarchal knowledge that relied on rote memorization instead of the critical understanding of ideas based on the realities of race and class in America. OCS educated the whole body of a student, as Huggins recalled:

We fed them, we loved them, and we hugged them. If their hair was jacked up in the morning we combed it, if they were having trouble at home we intervened, if

they were creative and didn't know what to do with it we found someone who could support them in that creative pursuit. If you love somebody, you care about all the parts of them not just one part. (personal communication, April 16, 2010)

OCS grounded their curriculum in dialectical materialism, where students were challenged to think about complex ideas and to interrogate phenomena. OCS instructors used a flexible curriculum to make sure the course material reflected the “learning styles of each student and the instructors’ own teaching style” (Huggins & LeBlanc-Ernest, 2009, p. 173). Instructors, furthermore, encouraged students to think critically, ask questions, and articulate their ideas. They were “taught how to think and not what to think” (Huggins & LeBlanc-Ernest, 2009, p. 170). Huggins, who served as director of the school from 1973 to 1981, recalled:

We taught it with an awareness that we didn't know everything.... Everything sparkled at the school because we cared about their ability to engage their world fully and we didn't just care about their mind. In other words [we cared about] their mental intelligence, we cared about their physical intelligence, their emotional intelligence, their spiritual intelligence, their abstract intelligence, and their creative intelligence. I mean most schools only focus on what the mind can do. Our curriculum expressed our beliefs in all of the intelligences. (personal communication, February 20, 2010)

As a result of their whole body teaching approach, OCS's student enrollment increased to roughly 90 students within a month. From 1974 to 1979, on average, about 150 students enrolled yearly (Huggins & LeBlanc-Ernest, 1990). Initially, it was primarily party members that

comprised the OCS faculty, but, over time, teachers from the Oakland public system started working there as well. Huggins pointed out that “teachers... quit their jobs and took a pay cut to be at Oakland Community School” (personal communication, February 20, 2010). The teachers and staff held weekly meetings, where they addressed concerns at the school, and served as a space for teachers to discuss their own prejudices and cultural biases. Huggins commented, “We worked with our own internalized racial hatred, our internalized sexism, and our internalized or overt homophobia because we were working with fresh new human beings and we didn’t want to pass on any of that crap” (personal communication, February 20, 2010).

Huggins’s responsibilities as director included overseeing the daily functions and operations of the school. She also helped write the curriculum, facilitated staff meetings, trained staff members, and hired and fired instructors. According to Huggins, “I just made sure that the school’s programs served the children and that we were doing the best that we can to serve them” (personal communication, April 16, 2010). Huggins wanted both students and teachers to learn in the educational process, for teachers to spark curiosity in students and a “sense of wonder to them as teachers” (Huggins, personal communication, February 20, 2010). This teaching method created an environment in which the students and teachers “were learning together” (Huggins, personal communication, February 20, 2010). Huggins focused great attention on the teachers and the way they engaged the material with the students particularly interested her. Huggins describes the way a history teacher discussed slavery to his third and fourth graders by having them utilize their bodies:

The teacher said now today children we’re gonna lie on the floor in the way in which the slaves were placed in the ships so we can feel it. I will never forget this. Just seeing these little children lying close like sardines in a sardine can had to

almost crouch side-by-side the whole class of maybe twenty of them and they were silent for a little while 'cause he said just lay there for a minute or two and then he told them to get up and get back in their seats and say what they experienced. I wanted to cry because they're compassion and their understanding was so profound. (personal communication, February 20, 2011)

Huggins worked with Donna Howell, formerly of the Boston branch, who was the school's assistant director. In addition, the staff included department heads, instructors, and administrative staff, which were all organized by their skills, regardless of gender. For example, "It was not uncommon to see a male teacher brushing a child's hair or soothing tears. As well, it was common to see female staff making decisions that impacted facility use, programmatic details, and finances. No duty was beyond any person" (Huggins & Le-Blanc-Ernest, 2009 p. 172).

The use of meditation, yoga, and the development of a Youth Committee addressed disciplinary concerns. The OCS educators established a meditation room in 1979 and "Every day after lunch the entire staff and students sat quietly for a few minutes to 'honor their own innate greatness'" (Huggins & Le-Blanc-Ernest, 2009, p. 173). Students learned proper breathing exercises, which taught them "internal locus of control" and provided them with a way to center their energy (Huggins, personal communication, April 16, 2010). Yoga also helped students refocus their energies by using their bodies, which, along with meditation, was essential to students learning discipline and control over their whole body. Huggins asserts that students at OCS navigated the world with a strong sense of self and that they were "really calm, able to

engage lots of different people, [and] able to retain information” (personal communication, April 16, 2010).

As a liaison between the administration and the students, the OCS Youth Committee addressed student concerns and was a “peer-run committee of children, older children [in particular] fourth and fifth graders” (Huggins, personal communication, April 16, 2010). This committee, which was advised by an adult, held hearings for students in violation of school rules and the student and the chairperson would come together to form a balanced agreement to rectify the problem. The Youth Committee modeled restorative justice, in the sense that the community did not shun or stigmatize the student for his or her wrong-doing, as in the criminal justice system, but embraced him or her with the creation of a carefully designed mutual agreement in an effort to repair the harm. The Youth Committee also handled the “operation of an in-school youth store; the publication of a bimonthly newsletter edited and written by students; hosting KIDS, a children’s radio program” (Jones & Gayles, 2008, p. 107).

OCS offered a plethora of activities for children, including martial arts, creative writing, calisthenics, math bowl, science fair, field trips, language arts bee, theatre, dance, poetry classes, art, vocal music, and a jazz band. The Oakland Community Learning Center (OCLC), which provided a variety of extra-curricular activities and volunteer opportunities, tied the school to the community. Many public figures visited and supported the school, including Rosa Parks, James Baldwin, and Don Cornelius, who also supported the school financially (Jones & Gayles, 2008). Le-Blanc-Ernest and Huggins (2009) note that OCS was so popular, parents often enrolled their family members and children while still in the womb (p. 177). As director of OCS, Huggins represented the school as a member of the National Association of Alternative Schools and was elected the first African-American woman on the Alameda County Board of Education in 1976.

That same year, the Alameda Board of Supervisors recognized OCS “for its outstanding contribution to the education of poor and disadvantaged youth” (Jones & Gayles, 2008, p. 111).

The California State Department of Education designated OCS as a model elementary school the following year and OCS even received accolades from the California state legislature. The Panthers created the school as a pilot model with the hopes that it would be replicated within the U.S. educational system; however, this did not mature because the party closed the school officially in 1982 due to the mismanagement of funds.

Analyzing the impact of Huggins’s incarceration on gender politics in the party, her spiritual maturity and her work as an educator at OCS provides a window into the experiences of women in the Black Panther Party, illustrating the direct connections between Black Power politics and Black feminism. Furthermore, her feminist leanings influenced the direction of the party. Black Power Feminism recognizes Black Power as intricately linked to Black feminism and this body of thought challenges dominant perceptions of Black Power and Black feminism as oppositional and mutually exclusive. This research allows us to begin to analyze the relationship between Black feminism and Black Power in more complex and nuanced ways and rescues Black Power from its hyper-masculine and patriarchal dominant narrative and repositions women as pivotal to the movement. Correcting the way in which scholars historicize Black Power and the Black Panther Party, I place women central as theoreticians and leaders. As a member in the party, Huggins believed in the liberation of all oppressed people, including women. Huggins centered her theoretical understanding of Black Power on feminism through her participation in the party and progressive articulations on gender. She put into practice Black Power feminist politics in intentional and conscious ways on behalf of the progression of women in the Black liberation struggle.

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