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Jordan Elisabeth Matthews

*University of Delaware*

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# **“Ain’t I A Comrade?”<sup>1 2</sup> A Critical Examination of the Treatment of Black Women Members of the Black Panther Party as it Relates to the Goal of Liberation**

Jordan Elisabeth Matthews  
*University of Delaware*

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine the treatment of Black women members of the Black Panther Party, and the correlation between that treatment and the central goals and ideals of the organization itself. This paper uses one key theory for analysis: The Black Feminist Theory, referring to the critical framework which centers Black women’s experiences in connection with their ultimate liberation. Using the perspectives from Black Feminist Theory, this paper looks at the pejorative treatment of the Black women members of the Black Panther Party, and how these experiences have proven contradictory to the goal of collective Black liberation. The significance of this paper is to acknowledge how the mistreatment and de-centering of Black women within the Black Panther Party contributes to the erasure of Black women’s contributions to Black liberation, which directly reinforces oppression against Black women, and hinders the liberation of the collective Black community. With the use of primary documents, peer-reviewed articles, interviews with former Party members, including Regina Jennings and Connie Felder, as well as depictions of Party leadership and acknowledgement, this paper will explore the experiences of Black women members of the Black Panther Party and if these experiences were liberatory in nature.

**Keywords:** Comrade, Black Feminism, Black Feminist Theory, liberation, masculinist, intersectional(ity), Revolutionary Black Feminism, group-centered leadership, transformative education

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<sup>1</sup> “Ain’t I A Comrade” inspired by the oral speech “Ain’t I A Woman” delivered by Sojourner Truth at the Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio in 1852.

<sup>2</sup> Comrade: “a companion who shares one’s activities or is a fellow member of an organization; a fellow soldier or member of the armed services; a fellow socialist or communist” (Wikipedia, 2022).

## Introduction

The Black Panther Party for Self- Defense (BPP), commonly referred to as "The Black Panther Party", was founded in Oakland, California in 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. The purpose of the BPP's formation was to promote self-defense amongst African Americans, specifically against the racialized violence inflicted on Black communities by police officers. The Black Panther Party allowed men and women (known by the BPP as "comrades") to create a strong sense of community, militance and Black Nationalist identity. While the BPP made significant strides toward social and political gain for the collective Black community, its masculinist goals and leadership did very little to acknowledge the participation, the plight, and the needs of its Black woman membership. Using the Black Feminist Theory, this paper navigates how the pejorative experiences of the Black female-membership negates the idea of collective liberation<sup>3</sup>, and aids in the oppression that Black women are subjected to regularly.

## Literature Review

The readings that have contributed to this research depict the lived experiences of Black women, as well as the theories surrounding Black women's liberation, from their own perspective. "Reflecting on Her Life in the Party: Conversations with Connie Felder" by Judson Jeffries (2017) is an interview of former-Panther Connie Felder. Felder became a member of the Baltimore Chapter of the Black Panther Party in Baltimore, Maryland in 1969. In this article, she details some significant experiences during her time with the chapter, including incidents of hostility and misogyny. Similar to Jeffries, in the article "Africana Womanism in the Black Panther Party: A Personal Story" by Regina Jennings (2001), the former Panther speaks on the gender-based mistreatment she experienced as a member of the Chicago Chapter of the BPP. Two excerpts from "A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story", one written by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (1993) and the other by Alice A. Deck (1997), reflect on former BPP chairwoman Elaine Brown, and her journey to leadership within the organization. Brown outlines some of her key memories in becoming chairwoman, including instances of blatant sexual harassment. In understanding the neglect displayed in both accounts from the former-Panthers, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* by Patricia Hill-Collins (1990) is referenced. Hill-Collins' breakdown of common themes and foci within Black Feminist Theory is paramount in understanding the depths of Black Feminism and how it encaptures Black women's needs in totality, from stereotypes and sexuality, to motherhood and activism. Another reading that was crucial in comprehending Black Feminist Theory in relation to tangible outcomes and practices was "The Historical Evolution of Black Feminist Theory and Praxis" by Ula Taylor (1998). This reading, similar to Hill-Collins, discussed origins of the theory and ways in which the concepts were materialized for Black women throughout history. With regard to revolution and radicalism from a Black feminist lens, "We Make Freedom: An Exploration of Revolutionary Black Feminism" by Helen A. Neville and Jennifer Hamer (2001), was referenced. This reading provides a breakdown of the principles of revolutionary black feminism, and what revolution means to Black women in the 21st century. Other readings that assisted in conceptualizing modern solutions to the issues of visibility, de-

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<sup>3</sup> Liberation: "the act of setting someone free from imprisonment, slavery, or oppression; release; freedom from limits on thought and behavior" (Wikipedia, 2022)

centering of Black women, and structural oppression within Black spaces were “Ella Baker and the Origins of ‘Participatory Democracy’” by Carol Mueller (2004), “A Conversation with Ericka Huggins” by Lisa Rofel and Jeremy Tai (2016), and “Race and the Schooling of Black Americans” by Claude M. Steele (1992).

## **Methodology**

This paper uses one key theory to analyze the relationship between the treatment and experiences of Black women members of the Black Panther Party, and the organization’s objective of liberation: the Black Feminist Theory. This theory, which contains concepts and ideas originating in the early to mid-19th century, focuses on the diverse experiences of Black women, with a particular consideration for the intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality. The Black Feminist theory is used in this research because it provides a valuable perspective on the needs and desires of Black women, as well as how Black women’s liberation is visualized. More specifically, this paper also uses viewpoints from Revolutionary Black Feminist Theory, a subset of BFT that focuses on a radical transformation of the systems of power to end oppression. Using the works of Black feminist theorists like Patricia Hill-Collins and Ula Taylor, as well as the Revolutionary Black Feminist Theory introduced by Helen A. Neville and Jennifer Hamer, this paper examines some of the Black Panther Party’s downfalls with regard to the protection and uplifting of its Black women members. Through the insights gained from these readings, as well as concepts like group-centered leadership and transformative education, this paper critically analyzes the goals of the Party in direct relation to the pejorative experiences of its Black women membership.

## **What Were the Experiences of Black Women Members?**

For many Black women of the mid-20th century, racism was the most preeminent form of oppression. At a highly racialized time where civil rights laws had been freshly ratified, the Black Panther Party appealed to many Black women’s’ desires for safety and collectivism. Because they were the most outwardly defensive organization at the time, they appealed to younger Black people who detested the previous movements centered around equality and non-violent responses to racist attacks, for example the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the preliminary days of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). According to former-Panther Regina Jennings, racism was “the number one assault on black people.” (Jennings, 146). Many women had developed a “race first” mentality that prioritized racial oppression over other forms of oppression like gender and sexuality. They believed that the issues of oppression and goals to improve conditions for the Black community were “life and death” (Jennings, 151). Arguably, the adoption of the “race first” ideology acted as a precursor to the external misogyny that many Black women later experienced while in the Party.

One of the primary ways that Black women members of the Black Panther Party experienced gross mistreatment was the common phenomenon of retaliatory transferring of female members out of their chapters. According to Jennings (2001), she experienced retaliation by her former “captain” after denying his romantic advances. Jennings became a member of the East Oakland Chapter of the Black Panther Party in 1968, and was transferred to the BPP headquarters after a failed reporting of the incident. She states that there was no

formal system of checks and balances for officers of the Party, which subsequently led to a lack of accountability and restitution. The blatant sexual harassment, paired with the withholding of formal consequences, depicts the lack of concern of safety and comfortability of Black women members of the Black Panther Party. However, Jennings' experience was not an isolated incident. According to Jeffries (2017) in his interview with former-Panther Connie Felder of the Baltimore Chapter of the BPP, one of the defense captains of her chapter issued her unauthorized transfer to one of the offices in Harlem, a predominantly Black neighborhood in New York City. This unsanctioned transfer was in response to Felder's prospect of becoming defense captain herself. However, she'd been challenged and decided to concede to the male-member who would, unbeknownst to her, transfer her out of the chapter. This flagrant abuse of authority and the lack of accountability of BPP members created a culture of harmful behavior with no repercussions. It contributed to the silencing of Black women, and the idea that one could rid themselves of their 'problems' by simply removing women from the space.

Sexual harassment and intimidation was another common form of mistreatment of Black women within the Black Panther Party. According to Jennings (2001), following the denial of the aforementioned romantic advances by her former defense captain, her report of the sexual harassment that followed to the "central committee" was regarded as "foolish" and "counter-revolutionary" (Jennings, 151). Additionally, according to Dunbar-Ortiz (1993), former-Chairwoman of the Black Panther Party, Elaine Brown, experienced death threats from fellow member Eldridge Cleaver after non-reciprocated romantic feelings and his official split from the BPP. This type of behavior created an unsafe environment for Black women members, where their gender and sexuality were weaponized against them in, sometimes, life-threatening ways.

Another customary form of mistreatment that many Black women members of the Black Panther Party experienced were threats of, and actual, bodily harm. According to Deck (1997), "...Elaine [Brown] was subjected to a brutal beating by a male Panther during which she believed she was going to die. This beating, along with a variety of other physical assaults at the hands of other Panther men, left her wondering what her many songs indicated about her reliance on the power of men." (Deck, 2) Brown shared that this type of abuse was viewed as necessary punishment within the BPP, and compared it to other revolutionary organizations whose punishment she considered much worse. In Connie Felder's interview with Jeffries (2017), she mentions that, following her return to her home chapter in Baltimore, Maryland after receiving news that her transfer to Harlem had been unapproved, the Harlem office had been shot up the day after she'd returned, resulting in the death of her friend and fellow Panther. Although it was never confirmed that her defense captain ordered her to Harlem with the intention to have her killed, the events surrounding the unauthorized transfer imply that may have been the case.

### **The Central Goals of the Black Panther Party**

The detailed experiences of Regina Jennings, Connie Felder and Elaine Brown shed light on some of the various ways in which Black women were disparaged by an organization founded to aid in the liberation of the collective Black community. These experiences, while considerably heinous, can be connected to the central themes of the Black Panther Party and the inconsideration of Black women as members of the collective. The key goals of the BPP are

most illustrated through the well-known 1966 'Ten-Point Program', which denotes the following demands:

- “1) We Want Freedom. We Want Power to Determine the Destiny of Our Black Community...
- 2) We Want Full Employment for Our People...
- 3) We Want an End to the Robbery By the Capitalists of Our Black Community...
- 4) We Want Decent Housing Fit For the Shelter of Human Beings...
- 5) We Want Education for Our People That Exposes The True Nature of This Decadent American Society...
- 6) We Want All Black Men to Be Exempt From Military Service...
- 7) We Want An Immediate End to Police Brutality and the Murder of Black People...
- 8) We Want Freedom For All Black Men Held In Federal, State, County and City Prisons and Jails...
- 9) We Want All Black People, When Brought To Trial, To Be Tried In A Court By A Jury of Their Peer Group or People From Their Black Black Communities, As Defined by the Constitution of the United States...
- 10) We Want Land, Bread, Housing, Education, Clothing, Justice and Peace...”<sup>4</sup>

While these liberatory ideals seem to support the upward mobility of the Black community, they fail to acknowledge the systemic oppressions that impact Black women specifically. There are two major points of the Ten-Point Plan that specify accommodations for Black men, one advocating for Black men’s exemption from military duties, and another pushing for the release of Black men from the prison industrial complex. This plan neglects hardships like sexual violence, intimate-partner abuse, disparities in the labor market, the overrepresentation of Black women within the prison system and the lack of legal protection of the Black LGBTQ community, just to name a few. In other words, the primary ideals of the Black Panther Party are masculinist<sup>5</sup>.

In addition to the absence of women-centered issues in the Black Panther Party’s central goals and ideas, the use of the term “comrade” can also be considered a tool of oppression. The BPP’s use of the word in reference to its members derives from the earlier Communist movements led by Fidel Castro and Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara. The term was meant as a unifier amongst the members of the BPP, as it designated them soldiers fighting toward a common cause. However, it can be implied that the term “comrade” de-gendered the members of the BPP, contributing to the erasure of the needs of its Black women membership.

### **The Black Feminist Lens**

With regard to the lack of concern for Black women’s needs by the Black Panther Party, it is vital to identify what these needs would be, according to Black Feminist Theory. According to Hill-Collins (1990), Black Feminist Theory is defined by five main tenets: the defining and

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<sup>4</sup> (1966) The Black Panther Party Ten-Point Program, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/primary-documents-african-american-history/black-panther-party-ten-point-program-1966/> Accessed 15 May 2022)

<sup>5</sup> Masculinist: “characterized by or denoting attitudes or values held to be typical of men; an advocate of the rights or needs of men.” (Wikipedia, 2022)

solidifying presence of Black women as an oppressed group; the intersection<sup>6</sup> of identities, specifically race, social class positioning, gender identity and sexuality; the acknowledgement of Black women's experiences and responses as both common and unique; the production and controlling of the images and narratives of Black women's lives; and ability to build and maintain platforms of social change. Using the perspective of the ideals outlined by Hill-Collins (1990), the Black Panther Party failed to create space where Black women had control over their lives in the following ways: They were defined on their own terms, their interconnecting statuses were represented entirely, the diversity and commonalities of their lived experiences were acknowledged, their narrative was completely under their management, or they had the chief authority over initiatives geared towards social change that would impact them specifically.

Furthermore, the major themes of Revolutionary Black Feminism, according to Neville and Hamer (2001), are: revolutionary vision regarded as dynamic, racial, gender, and sexual oppression are reshaped over time, oppressions against Black women are both structural and ideologic, and there exists a connection between theory and praxis. The first tenet implies that "revolutionary vision" (Neville and Hamer, 439) is not static, but ever-changing based on the social and political state of society. The second tenet asserts that, as capitalism is constantly reconstructed in the United States, so are the interlinkages of race, gender and sexuality. The third tenet states that oppression is structural, meaning social, political and economic institutions act as white supremacist tools to enforce inequality. In conjunction with structural oppression, RBF states that oppression is also ideological, meaning that it involves one's ideas, concepts, values and beliefs. The final tenet of RBF is praxis, which refers to applying the theory to the tangible world. Revolutionary Black Feminism can be applied to the Black Panther Party in that it highlights the lack of progressiveness in the design of the organization's objectives. Neville and Hamer (2001) reference the institution of United States chattel slavery, with the understanding the strategies used to fight for abolition could not be the same strategies used in modern revolutionary movements. With that being said, perhaps the Black Panther Party's goals were not a "one size fits all", and should have been tailored to serve all of its members, rather than those with the most power.

## **Conclusion**

Although this paper analyzes the intraracial gender-based inequalities of The Black Panther Party, an organization no longer active in the same capacity, the impact of these occurrences have further contributed to the erasure of Black women, both in history and modernity. This is a significant problem because, not only is this erasure a disservice to the contributions and effort Black women in social justice movements, but it upholds standards of white supremacy that deny Black women access to the power over their own lives, and dictates their inherent inferiority. When considering contemporary solutions, it is paramount to think of group-centered leadership and transformative education. According to Mueller (2004), group-centered leadership, coined by late civil rights activist Ella J. Baker, involves taking direction

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<sup>6</sup> Intersection(al/ality): "the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage" (Wikipedia, 2022).

from members of the collective community and/or organization, as opposed to designated leaders. Modern liberation groups, who may or may not have similar goals or leadership styles to the BPP, could benefit from assessing the needs of their entire organization to ensure that each person's needs are being represented and met. This prevents the silencing of more marginalized sub-groups, as well as any unchecked abuses of power. With regard to education, former-Panther Ericka Huggins, in her interview with Rofel and Tai (2016), mentioned the concept of "transformative education" (Rofel and Tai, 237). According to Huggins, this simply means that, in educating younger generations, one is also constantly learning. This holds value because, within the BPP, the erasure and ignorance of the most marginalized Black community members contributed to a state of discontent and indifference. In maintaining an open mind while providing education, (because, again, as stated by Neville and Hamer [2001], the world and its conditions are not static), this allows for increased representation, diminishes the possibility of ahistorical recounts, and provides space for the Black community to evolve in their fight toward liberation. As stated by Steele (1992), "If racial vulnerability undermines Black school achievement... then this achievement should improve significantly if schooling is made wise—that is, made to see value and promise in black students and to act accordingly." (Steele, 9)

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