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Dakota Mancuso

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Reproductive Justice and the Black Panther Party

By Dakota Mancuso

Abstract: Despite the multitude of research available on the Black Panther Party (BPP), the group’s widespread social activism programs and their positive effect on the health of communities, is generally understated. These programs, known by the party as “survival programs,” provided a plethora of services meant to increase the standards of living of underserved people, all at no cost. Such programs included a series of People’s Free Medical Clinics, Free Breakfast for Children programs, and several Liberation Schools, including the widely successful Oakland Community School. When looking at these programs within the context of reproductive justice, or the framework of study which holds that people have an inherent right to reproduce, to not reproduce, and to raise children in environments suitable for families, the BPP’s contribution to the said field is undeniable. As such, “The Black Panther Party and Reproductive Justice” seeks to uncover the deep connection between the BPP and the notion of reproductive justice, positing that the party through the creation of its numerous survival programs, acted as an early vanguard of reproductive justice before it was fully conceptualized.

Introduction

While reproductive justice as a theory has only recently begun to emerge as a popular framework in the field of social justice, it has quickly become useful in reassessing some of the most complex debates regarding the African American struggle for civil rights. Reproductive justice is broadly defined as the right to reproduce, to not reproduce, and the access to safe environments to raise families
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in. This framework of study has grown to encompass a wide range of topics, from birth control and fertility access to issues of gender and sexuality, since its original coining by black feminists in 1994. The intersectional nature of reproductive justice, or its ability to address overlapping facets of marginalization affecting communities, has led many historians to reexamine the reputation and nature of leading Black Power and Black Liberation groups. The most notable of these to be studied within the context of their contributions to reproductive justice is the Black Panther Party (or BPP). Such research has shown that the BPP was largely formed around, and arguably guided by the notion of reproductive justice, even before the term was fully conceptualized.

To draw conclusions on whether the BPP can be considered an early vanguard of reproductive justice, this paper will seek to illuminate the current scholarship on the BPP and its unique relationship with reproductive justice as well as the social activism associated with it. What will be revealed is that while the BPP’s memory has been long overshadowed by the party’s vigilante public persona, modern academia has made great strides in revealing the group’s long-overlooked legacy of activism in health, education, and food access.

The Black Panther Party in Academia

When looking at how the Black Panther Party, or BPP, has been remembered by scholars of history, it is necessary to consider discourses that have already been put forth regarding the party. One such work that gives insight into the ways that the party has been framed by academics, is historian Joe Street’s article for the Journal of American Studies, “The Historiography of the Black Panther Party and the Struggle for Human Rights.” According to Street, academic arguments on the party can generally be grouped into three broad categories of study. These categories came about

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chronologically and were centered around particular facets of the BPP’s memory. The first body of study is described by Street as especially surface-level, and only contributing to a commonly referenced neutral overview of the party. Such studies focused on stories of the party’s membership, paying little attention to its influence beyond the experience of individuals in the party.

The second phase of study is characterized by the release of many popular biographical studies of the party’s head and co-founder, Huey Newton (1949-1989). These biographies focused particularly on the impact of Newton’s leadership role in the party. Of its two founders, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale (b.1936), Newton has largely been seen as the more controversial of the two. As a result, Street makes a point that Newton’s biographies have generated much debate in scholarly circles, having injected discussions on how Newton’s persona affected the group from the top-down. Historian Hugh Pearson’s biography of Newton, called *Shadow of The Panther: Huey Newton and The Price of Black Power in America*, is cited as one the most influential writings of this phase. This biography, Street claims, was heavily critical of the pitfalls of the enigmatic leader Newton and was so particularly negative towards the party in general, that it set off a third phase of authorship.

This final contemporary phase sought to develop a more nuanced understanding of the group as being more than just a product of its individual members, or its leadership. Rather, it highlights the BPP’s involvement in African American history and culture in a way which looks past its vigilante public persona created by many of its leading members. Street terms these third phase BPP scholars as “empiricist-activists,” who he concludes emerged out of the over-wrought narratives and harsh critiques of Pearson’s 1994 biography to offer a more well-rounded understanding of the BPP. Such empiricist-activist scholars have placed the Black Panther Party’s public health programs at the forefront of their discussion, looking deeply at the impact that the party’s free medical clinics, community schools, and breakfast
programs had on the shaping of the party, and on the future of public health.\footnote{Joe Street, “The Historiography of the Black Panther Party,” \textit{Journal of American Studies} 44, no. 2 (July 2010): 353.}

Unfortunately, while this contemporary conversation has led to a plethora of new research and perspectives being formed on the party, many historians today still debate whether a concise discourse on the party’s legacy has yet been had. Consequently, modern BPP empiricist-activist writers, Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin, tackle this debate in their book, \textit{Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party}. In it they argue that Panther scholarship in the last twenty or so years has lacked a research-backed synthesis of all the party’s various aspects at once, due largely to historians’ tendencies to simplify the party to its members, armed resistance, and confrontations with police. Thus, in order for a true understanding of the party to be gathered, the two hold that one must examine the party’s membership, their politics, and their actions as wholly interrelated, rather than separate.\footnote{Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin, \textit{Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party} (Oakland: University of California Press, 2012), 4-5.} As a result, to truly answer the question of whether or not the BPP has had a legacy of reproductive justice, we must look at the actual nature of the party’s inception itself, and the very programs and pieces of ideology that the party created and disseminated. Therefore, it is important to consider the connections drawn by historian Jessica Harris between the socio-political atmosphere which the Panthers rose up in, and their desire to reform public health accessibility to create a safer environment for both parents and children.

In her article “Revolutionary Black Nationalism: The Black Panther Party,” she draws parallels between the mantra of black nationalism, and the rise of the BPP as an organization. Her argument holds that the concept and the party acted as interrelated socio-political phenomena, which not only gave birth to the revolutionary nature of the BPP but led it to be inextricably linked
to the tenets of reproductive justice. Harris notes that after a period
known as Classical Black Nationalism, which began in the early
nineteenth century and continued into the Depression (1929-1939),
a new wave of African American activism began to coalesce in
response to the Civil Rights Movement’s (1954-1968) nonviolent
ideology. This new wave of thought precipitated the creation of
many activist groups and was heavily influenced by the notion of
black nationalism, or “the recognition of the need for cultural and
racial solidarity,” as Harris defines it. These groups ranged from
educational nationalists who wished to create black-serving
schools and universities, to revolutionary nationalists who sought a
complete political upheaval by the oppressed against a perceived
oppressor. The Black Panther Party, a group that sought to
completely reform the federal government based on that
government’s perceived tyranny, is placed firmly by Harris in the
revolutionary nationalist category. With this in mind, all the
BPP’s actions, and even their public appearance, should be
examined in the context of their desire to reform the existing
government to protect marginalized communities from state
violence.

Scholars like historian Amy Ongiri, in her book on black
nationalism and the Black Power movement, titled Spectacular
Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement
and the Search for a Black Aesthetic, offers a strong explanation
and context to the party’s aggressive-style uniforms and
revolutionary nature. She argues that such costuming was a
reaction to contemporary armed movements like those of Che
Guevara (1928-1967) and the Cuban Revolution (1953-1959). Furthmore, Ongiri notes that such international revolutionary
groups heavily influenced the party, and widely espoused the idea
that armed propaganda, even if used by a small group, could be an
effective tool to incite the masses into a war of the people set

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4 Jessica C. Harris, “Revolutionary Black Nationalism: The Black Panther
against civil wrongs. In noting this, Ongiri goes against the common misconception that the Black Panther Party’s appearance was somehow proof of them being a domestic terrorist group and instead directs the conversation to answer the deeper question of why the Panthers carried themselves as they did. Granted, the party’s appearance was one that was intentionally aggressive and eye-catching, as the Panthers often gathered in matching leather jackets, sporting brown berets, and wielding large weapons openly. The “Seattle Black Panther Party History and Memory Project,” which was compiled by the University of Washington, offers several strong images of this aggressive appearance. One such photo is included below in Figure 1, which depicts members of the Seattle chapter of the Black Panther Party, as they protested a bill that sought to make the open exhibition of guns in public “in an intimidating manner” completely illegal.

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Figure 1. An example of the Black Panther Party’s use of “political theater” in a demonstration outside of the capitol building in Olympia, Washington on February 28th, 1969. Courtesy of the Washington State Archives.8

Ongiri helps to give logical reasoning behind such displays as the one above, by arguing that the party’s ideological push for the protection of the black community, and later the wider marginalized community, were acts of political theater meant to highlight the changes that needed to be made. Therefore, both the party’s health activism and their open carrying of arms, were meant to publicly show their resistance to the institutionalized racism that African American people faced in the United States.9 As such, many reproductive justice scholars today have theorized

on how institutionalized racism affected African American reproductive rights and overall human dignity, by depriving them of access to community-based resources like healthcare, food, and education. Since access to all these resources lie at the heart of reproductive justice and are necessary to make parenting possible, scholars have firmly proven that the BPP had an active hand in upholding reproductive justice by highlighting and stepping in to fill the deficits in their communities. Ultimately the party’s solutions to these inequalities would develop out of their self-defense programs and political theater, later turning into their community outreach or “survival” programs.

In his book *Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and the Unmaking of the Black Panther Party*, Curtis Austin discusses these community service-based survival programs with scrutiny. Austin argues that the Panthers were, from beginning to end, influenced by violent rhetoric, both as it had been used against African Americans, and by African American nationalist leaders in their responses to unequal treatment under the law. This constant atmosphere of violence he notes, coupled with the failure of authorities to act in their defense, led African Americans to have few choices but to organize and defend themselves publicly in groups like the Panthers. Austin also draws a clear connection between party co-founder Huey Newton’s first public stand-off with police and the beginning of the party’s tradition of open resistance to state institutions. Furthermore, he marks it as the root cause of their rapid growth and equally rapid decline. Looking at the way that the stand-off went down, the threat of racial profiling by police against African Americans becomes evident.

The stand-off which took place in 1967 during the early days of the Panther organization, was a result of multiple Panthers, including Huey Newton, openly carrying weapons outside their

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office and into a car. Austin notes that this was well within the bounds of their second-amendment rights at the time, however, this was of little importance to the authorities. While driving away, the men were targeted and confronted by a police squad car which quickly pulled them over. The scene as Austin describes it, was another example of political theater, with police attempting to illegally confiscate the Panthers’ weapons, and Huey Newton verbally resisting the seizure. He dramatically cited his rights under the law, all the while holding his gun defiantly. Newton called to the crowd that was forming around him to observe the injustices taking place, but before the situation escalated further, the police retreated, knowing they had nothing to charge the men with.\textsuperscript{12} This event would become huge news in the community, and show the people that Huey Newton and the Panthers were willing and able to use their knowledge of the law and their constitutional rights, to aid them in their fight against repression. The success of this confrontation thrust the Panthers, and Huey Newton especially, into the limelight as being openly opposed to police brutality, and other systemic issues which riddled inner-city communities. Such sudden fame allowed Newton to build a platform for followers interested in what he and his party had to say. This gave him a unique opportunity to fight injustice with a pen, just as much as he did with a gun.

As a result, it is important to also give attention to Huey Newton and his many literary works which sought to outline his and his party’s motives. In Newton’s autobiography, \textit{Revolutionary Suicide}, he describes in detail his upbringing, and how he came to be the founder of the Black Panther Party, illustrating for readers a life influenced heavily by the negative race relations present in his community. In the autobiography, Newton says that he chose the Panther as the symbolic mascot of the BPP based not only on its overtly fierce nature, but the notion that a panther would only attack if it was backed into a corner.\textsuperscript{13} Knowing this, it is hard to

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{12}] Austin, \textit{Up Against the Wall}, 57.
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conceptualize the BPP as anything but a response to the conditions that were present at the time.

Thus, other conditions like the slew of communist revolutions that took place during the 1960s, and the underlying Cold War (1947-1991), all certainly influenced the development of the party, and how it was received by the public. In his own memoir of the Black Panther Party, *War Against the Panthers: A Study of Repression in America*, which was finally published in September of 2000, years after his death in 1989, Newton recognized that the party was different from other black nationalists at the time for one leading reason. He states that the party sought to embody socialism, which Newton called “inter-communalism,” as it was espoused by international revolutionaries. He notes that it was this adherence to inter-communalism which not only differentiated the party from other groups, but also caused the BPP to face off so heavily against the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) due to Cold War fears of communism. Ultimately, it was what gave them the reason and ability as a party, to expand their activities from armed self-defense to social activism via their survival programs. As a result, the BPP’s socialist leanings motivated them to replace poorly functioning government services, whether they be law enforcement or health care, with free programs led by “the people” instead. It becomes clear then, that the BPP had a deep-rooted ideology that was heavily related to the protection of the overall well-being of the community, and that this ideology was one that was spread top to bottom from its leadership to its members.

**The Black Panther Survival Programs**

Huey Newton’s use of law and social action to stand up to inequities represented an early realization that while armed revolution was unlikely, political change was still necessary. As

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14 Huey P. Newton, *War Against the Panthers: A Study of Repression in America* (Santa Cruz: University of Santa Cruz, 1980), 17.
such, Newton found it important to create programs that would deal with problems facing the community today pending the actual full armed revolution of tomorrow. His party did this by providing for the immediate material needs of the African American community and by raising their political consciousness.\textsuperscript{15} Paul Alkebulan argues in his book \textit{Survival Pending Revolution: The History of the Black Panther Party}, that this emphasis on taking immediate action would cause the party to shift its means of protecting the community from brandishing weapons, to protecting it via providing accessible public health.

Deemed “survival programs,” because they were specifically centered around helping community members survive the constant threat of institutionalized racism, such initiatives are seen today as what allowed the party to confront the resource insecurities facing minorities for generations. According to Alkebulan, the party’s many community action programs also embodied one of the party’s underpinning ideologies, one of which was publicly espoused by Huey Newton in his essay titled “The Black Panthers.” There, Newton is quoted as saying that in the view of the BPP, the “American government and its institutions are illegitimate and have no right to exist, because they failed to meet the needs of the whole population.”\textsuperscript{16} This statement, more than anything, should be indicative of the party’s survival programs being sources of reproductive justice activism. This is because it is a clear example of the party stating their intentions to use their own survival programs to replace institutional ones which they considered as preventing African Americans from leading safe and healthy lifestyles. To observe how the programs are detailed, and how their ideology was codified, one should look at the BPP’s newspaper, the \textit{Black Panther Intercommunal News Service}, and their ideological mantra, the Ten-Point Program. These publications are seen by BPP scholars as vector points from which the party spread information among its party membership and


\textsuperscript{16} Newton, “The Black Panthers,” 29.
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community, as well as powerful indicators of the motives behind the party’s activities.

Black Panther scholars like Roman Meredith, note that in publications of the Black Panther Intercommunal News Service, “The Panthers defined human rights primarily in terms of social and economic rights, and endeavored to give acknowledgment to the gross disparities in living conditions, education, health care, and employment that the US civil rights movement had left largely untouched.”17 This is supported in turn by scholar Garret Broad who notes that this attention to human rights is codified in their Ten-Point Program that listed “land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace, and an end to police brutality,” as just some of the leading demands of the party.18 Their adherence to such community-focused ideals in their Ten-Point Program, and the personification of matching ideology in their survival programs, offer strong evidence for the party’s championing of reproductive justice.

The party’s survival programs are referenced specifically in a 1973 issue of the Black Panther Intercommunal News Service, where the programs are introduced in a long-annotated list that showed their official names and briefs on their declared functions. The programs listed vary from the more well-known People’s Free Medical Clinics and Free Breakfast Program to lesser-known programs such as the Free Pest Control Program and the Intercommunal Youth Institute. According to each program’s note, these operations were described as intending to provide an array of services to those in need, from offering shoes and employment via the David Hilliard Free Shoe Program and the People’s Free Community Employment Program to providing

transportation/escort services to the elderly, via the Seniors Against Fearful Environments (S.A.F.E) Program. With each program addressing a different and yet equally necessary part of healthy living, the survival programs were clearly a strong push by the Black Panther Party to support early conceptions of reproductive justice. Therefore, by examining the survival programs firsthand, invaluable insight is gained into how the party used these programs to champion health activism. Since they are arguably some of the most well-remembered and influential of their “survival programs,” the following sections will focus primarily on the People’s Free Medical Clinics, the Oakland Community Schools, and the Free Breakfast Programs.

**People’s Free Medical Clinics**

The first of the Black Panther Party’s People’s Free Medical Clinics (or PFMCs) were formed in 1968 by chapters in Kansas City, Seattle, and Chicago. They were meant to act as more effective and accessible alternatives to Medicare and Medicaid, as well as President Lyndon B. Johnson’s (1908-1973) Great Society community health centers. While groundbreaking, these clinics were not alone, but rather, were a part of a wave of social changes that were taking place in the context of the Vietnam War. This response was characterized by an African American push to create publicly funded clinics as alternatives to often segregated government healthcare programs. Today free medical clinics are rather numerous nationwide, with the present number standing at about 1,200 across the United States.

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Like other free clinics throughout the country, the BPP’s PFMCs were staffed by teams of professional volunteers, whose expertise included obstetrics, and gynecology, as well as the little-studied field of Sickle Cell Anemia screening. In addition, such clinics also advocated for open discussion on black social relations, including gendered relations between black males and females, and the complexities of challenges facing black youth. These are significant facts, as the creation of such health and social services are all strong indicators of the Panthers’ intentions to produce safe environments for young people to grow in, and to ultimately be secure enough to raise their own families.

Many former Panthers have written on the topic of the People’s Free Medical Clinics, however, the personal experience of Quentin Young (1923-2016) during his work within the BPP’s Chicago-based PFMC, sheds a more intimate light on the story of the party’s free clinics. Writing in Everybody In, Nobody Out: Memoirs of a Rebel Without a Pause, which was published in 2013, Young details his time as a Panther member working alongside volunteers in the Spurgeon ‘Jake’ Winters clinic - which like other PFMCs was so-named for a martyred Panther killed by police. His account is powerful in its recollection of the nature of volunteers at the clinic, noting that they were “skilled and dedicated young lions and lionesses who simply liked the idea of organic unity with their patients, and who could treat upwards of twenty to thirty patients daily.”


and exceptional teamwork which made maintaining the health and respect of community members their highest priority.

Other scholars who have written extensively on the Black Panther Party and their People’s Free Medical Clinics, in particular, are historians Alondra Nelson and Mary T. Bassett. Bassett, in her article, “Beyond Berets: The Black Panthers as Health Activists,” describes her experience in getting to volunteer as a medical worker in the Black Panther Party’s Franklin Lynch People’s Free Health Center. Much like the testimonies of Quentin Young, Bassett’s writing offers a powerful and intimate look into the inner workings of the party’s free medical clinics. In her article, Bassett describes how she came to join the Black Panther Party as a medical volunteer in the 1970s, after being interested in the way that the party was directly countering systemic poverty and violence. While there, she served as the leader of part of the first Sickle-Cell Anemia screening programs in the clinic, which she notes the Black Panther Party started after learning that sickle-cell anemia was a neglected genetic disease based on the fact that it presented itself most often in African Americans.25 In the article Bassett even includes an image of one such PFMC that serves as a strong visual of just how small these operations were, especially considering the revolutionary effects that these clinics had. The image, which is shown below in Figure 2, depicts the clinic as a small, ramshackle trailer, which looks rather unassuming on the outside.

Knowing that such People’s Free Medical Clinics were small, self-staffed, and self-funded operations, and yet had a large impact, is what arguably has led modern researchers to home in on the topic. Alondra Nelson in her text *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination*, strives to dig deeper into the legacy of the party’s PFMCs, and their roles as “patient advocate” centers. In an interview with writer Denise Hawkins where Nelson is questioned about the extent of the PFMC’s services, Nelson notes that the clinics acted

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as places where patients could have several facets of their well-being attended to, “from getting their blood pressure checked to getting help in dealing with pests at home, or even landlords who were giving them a hard time.”

Understanding that the presence of such problems in households made it so that maintaining a family became unsustainable, underlines the broad nature of reproductive justice as being more than access to food and water. Rather, reproductive justice is a term that has come to encompass access to dignified spaces where both parents and children can flourish. This level of community engagement and its effects are something that is often overlooked when considering the Black Panther Party. When the group’s actions are looked at more deeply within such a context, however, it is clear that the BPP sought to make reproductive justice more accessible to communities that otherwise lacked it. This push by the Panthers to feed and care for the health of the people in their cities through programs like the PFMCs, cannot be ignored as a conscious drive toward this end. This is especially true when one realizes that the party’s survival programs became one of the fundamental requirements for chapters being brought into the fold.

According to Nelson, BPP co-founder Bobby Seale released a directive to the party in 1970 which said that “community service work of all Party chapters should minimally consist of a Free Breakfast for Children Program, and a health clinic.” In calling for such programs to be present in all party chapters at a base level, Seale’s directive further supports the argument that health activism, in the form of tackling reproductive injustice through their survival programs, was not just an

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afterthought of the BPP. Rather, it was a top-down pillar of their ideology. The openings of such clinics were widely circulated among BPP members in their newspaper as a sort of rallying cry for change. Such programs also served to empower the African American communities affected by them by creating a sense that African Americans had an active hand in their own progress and were not simply reliant on the U.S. government which chose to treat them as second-class citizens. These ideas of the party’s survival programs being made by African Americans, for African Americans, are personified in one of the party’s many hand-outs given in meetings. An image of one of these pamphlets was included by Alondra Nelson in her book. The image, which is shown in Figure 3, depicts an African American medical professional tending to an African American child in one of the party’s People’s Free Medical Clinics.
Figure 3. Boston’s Franklin Lynch PFMC, as depicted on page 91 of Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination, by Alondra Nelson. Courtesy of It’s About Time Black Panther Archive.29

29 It’s About Time Black Panther Archive.
At the bottom, the hand-out reads:

A person’s health is their most valuable possession. Improper health care and inadequate facilities can be used to perpetrate genocide on a people. The present fascist, racist government used its facilities for that purpose – the genocide of poor and oppressed people. The people must create institutions within our communities that are controlled and run by the people in order to insure [sic] our survival. With this in mind, the Black Panther Party announces the opening of our first Free Health Clinic in the Bay Area. ALSO…FREE FOOD & CLOTHING ON OPENING DAY. 30

By including this flier in her book, Nelson, like other Panther scholars, such as Alkebulan and Ongiri, makes the argument that the party’s survival programs represented a definitive reaction to state negligence and state violence against marginalized communities. This claim is further strengthened by the fact that the party was not only reacting to medical discrimination but was acting against educational and economic disparities as well. This push towards socio-political equality is further illuminated by the party’s creation of their own education programs, known as Liberation Schools.

Liberation Schools and the Oakland Community School

As the party leadership realized the value of social change made possible by their survival programs, they turned to educating the community through Liberation Schools, the first of which was founded in 1969. These liberation schools, which began as places to promote African American heritage and Black Panther ideology, eventually became a model for the Panthers’ most successful

30 Nelson, Body and Soul, 91.
instructonal endeavor: the Oakland Community School, or OCS for short. The Oakland Community School, which provided students with three meals a day, a well-rounded curriculum, and even qualified for state funding, would become well-known for its achievements.

The OCS, which is described in detail by Alkebulan in *Survival Pending Revolution*, offered quality private school education, referrals for preventative healthcare, accessible bussing, and even three meals a day, all the while not charging any tuition. To Alkebulan, by giving these children free food and free learning, the BPP was not only making education more accessible to minority groups who were poorly served by the American government, but were also instilling a much-needed sense of self-worth in children’s lives. It would go on to be admired publicly by then California Governor Jerry Brown (1905-1996), who said it had “set the highest level of elementary education in the state.”

Alkebulan notes that “the State Department of Education also cited the OCS as offering one of the most important models for elementary children in the inner city.” What is powerful about this is the way that the Panthers were consciously giving attention to not only the physical, but intellectual needs of their community’s children. By doing this, they were creating places for marginalized students to have a safe space to learn without fear of racial provocation, which was something they often were otherwise denied. The need for a safe space to protect youth against racial violence, which was not being readily addressed by the state, is worth noting. This is because the BPP’s survival programs would, unfortunately, go on to become targets for police harassment and bigotry, even though they were intended only for the betterment of the community.

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33 Alkebulan, *Survival Pending Revolution*, 34.
34 Alkebulan, *Survival Pending Revolution*, 34.
**Free Breakfast Program**

Scholars Bloom and Martin have been leaders in analyzing the many attacks on the party’s survival programs, and most specifically their Free Breakfast for Children programs. Their work has illuminated the existence of police raids against the party’s survival programs and proved that the black community had good reason for establishing their own institutions. In their book chapter, titled “Breakfast,” in their work *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*, Bloom, and Martin note that for the Panthers, “attacking the serious problem of childhood hunger was a way to win people’s hearts and minds.”

Unfortunately, however, the FBI and police also saw this community outreach strategy as something different. To many government officials, especially those in the city of Baltimore, the programs were seen “as a front for indoctrinating children with Black Panther propaganda.” This would, unfortunately, result in a series of smear campaigns against the party and their programs, and would even lead to unfounded police raids of the programs’ premises while children were present. Bloom and Martin note that this was especially damaging in the case of the Baltimore BPP chapter, which faced “an excessive amount of violent repression,” that would leave “children feeling terrorized by police who would enter with guns drawn.” Such unjust actions taken by police against the free breakfast programs were well-recorded by the party in the *Black Panther Intercommunal News Service.*

For example, in the first edition of the third volume of the party’s news service, there was a story titled “DES MOINES BREAKFAST FOR CHILDREN RALLY ATTACKED BY PIGS,” which demonstrated just how determined police were to dismantle the party. In the column, the author of the story notes

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37 Bloom, *Black against Empire*, 186.
that the “pig power structure [did] not want the ‘Free Breakfast Program’ to go on because [said] program exposes the system for what it really is.” Recorded incidents like the one above make clear the fact that these programs were making headway in socio-political change for the marginalized community in areas where the government was not. When the party sought to firmly take up the cause of reproductive justice with their own hands in this way, it became clear that it was an open breach of the status quo. This was something that the government could not allow, as it highlighted their own shortcomings. The BPP’s survival programs represented a threat to the long-standing paradigm which had allowed the federal government to exact its oppression on minorities without regard. Ultimately, it was because the BPP sought to revolutionize the nature of public service so that it was provided for the entirety of America, not just those traditionally given political preference, that the government felt extremely threatened.

Conclusion

While the Black Panther Party’s legacy goes far beyond armed revolution, it is important to note that the group’s hardened and almost mythic persona was not unfounded, but rather quite the opposite. The truth of the matter is that the BPP was involved in as many illegal and dangerous activities during its existence as it was positive ones. Members of its leadership, most notably Aaron Dixon (b.1949), who was the head of the Seattle branch of the BPP, have in their own words and interviews come out publicly in agreement with the party’s dual nature. In his memoir, My People Are Rising: Memoir of a Black Panther Party Captain, Dixon describes how the party in Seattle was responsible for firebombing and sniping campaigns against racist and innocent businesses alike. He even goes so far as to admit that such campaigns led to

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newspapers publishing a chart of the ten cities most affected by such acts, with Seattle topping the list for firebombing, and coming in second only to Detroit and Chicago, for sniping - something which Dixon notes he and his fellow Panthers were proud of at the time.\textsuperscript{39} With this being said, it is important still to recognize that the party, by giving special attention to reproductive injustices as they did using their survival programs, deserves a well-rounded memory, rather than one that is wholly positive or negative.

It is still undeniable then, that the Panthers in essence were making life more livable for African Americans, both by making the lack of reproductive justice in their communities known and by seeking to tackle such injustices by any means necessary. In doing so, they not only caused such inequalities to be brought to light but empowered African Americans to become self-actualized commanders of their own destinies. Their revolutionary use of donations to create People’s Free Medical Clinics, Liberation Schools, and Free Breakfast for Children Programs, cannot be ignored as an express indication of their devotion to individuals who had long been made unable to live and raise children safely in their communities. This push for community-based survival programs by the party to provide solutions to people’s day-to-day needs beyond the issues of segregation and police brutality, can then clearly be understood as direct opposition to the established black-white power dynamic. When considering that such a dynamic had led to generations of social and physical insecurity which modern-day reproductive justice seeks to address, it is fair to say that the Black Panther Party acted as an early proponent of reproductive justice. Ultimately, it was the realization by the party and its leaders, that their communities’ social inequities went deeper than just surface-level problems, that allowed the Black Panther Party to not only be so significant in their own time but what also makes them still relevant today.

Reproductive Justice

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Dakota Mancuso

Author Bio

Dakota Mancuso is a California State University, San Bernardino alumnus, who graduated in 2022 with a Bachelor of Arts in history, with an emphasis in education. Now pursuing his Master of Education and his elementary teaching credential, Dakota aspires to be a middle school social studies and language arts teacher. His research as an undergrad in Professor Alicia Gutierrez-Romine’s history capstone course led him to become interested in the critical field of reproductive justice, and in turn, its relationship to the African American Civil Rights and Black Power movements. This interest led to the development of the research paper “The Black Panther Party and Reproductive Justice,” over the course of a year, which with the editorial help of Professor Alicia Gutierrez-Romine and History in the Making editor Rossandra Martinez, has been published in print. The paper, which seeks to unearth how the work of the activist political organization, the Black Panther Party, acted as an early pioneer of modern reproductive justice, intends to highlight the more positive side of the party’s history which has so often been neglected in academia.