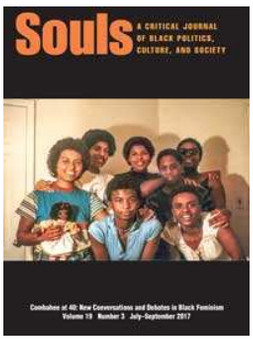

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Souls

A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society

ISSN: 1099-9949 (Print) 1548-3843 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/usou20

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To cite this article: Mary Phillips, Robyn C. Spencer, Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest & Tracye A. Matthews (2017) Ode to Our Feminist Foremothers: The Intersectional Black Panther Party History Project on Collaborative Praxis and Fifty Years of Panther History, Souls, 19:3, 241-260, DOI: 10.1080/10999949.2017.1390378

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2017.1390378

Published online: 16 Jan 2018.

Souls
Vol. 19, No. 3, July–September 2017, pp. 241–260

Ode to Our Feminist Foremothers: The Intersectional Black Panther Party History Project on Collaborative Praxis and Fifty Years of Panther History

Mary Phillips
Robyn C. Spencer
Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest
Tracye A. Matthews

This roundtable describes the creation and evolution of the Intersectional Black Panther Party (BPP) History Project, a feminist collective created by Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest, Tracye A. Matthews, Mary Phillips, and Robyn C. Spencer, four Black women historians who have spent decades researching and writing about Panther women's lives. Our discussion centers around the intellectual legacy of the Combahee River Collective to explore the utility of Black feminist methodologies in studying the BPP; the state of the field; silences in the historiography around queer identities, pleasure, and gendering men; and the impact of the crisis facing Black women in the larger society on our work as scholar-activists.

Keywords: Black feminism, Black Panther party, Black power, Black women, Combahee River Collective, gender, intersectionality, sexuality

Coming Together

> There have always been Black women activists—some known, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown—who have had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique.

ISSN 1099-9949 print/1548-3843 online
DOI: 10.1080/10999949.2017.1390378

> Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters.— Combahee River Collective[1]

> I always feel that it's the collective mind that has the most insight and sharpness…. The intelligence of the group speaks. We figure out what to do based upon the collective consciousness and will as opposed to individualized "I'm gonna do it this way" dictatorial type stuff. We have far too much of that model. —Barbara Smith[2]

In July 2016, Mary Phillips, Robyn C. Spencer, Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest, and Tracye A. Matthews reunited as historians, colleagues, and old friends, engaging in a series of phone calls to discuss the state of the field as Black women studying women in the Black Panther Party (BPP) fifty years after the organization's founding. We came together as a group of Black feminist scholar-activists, academics, and filmmakers forty years after the formation of Combahee and fifty years after the founding of the Oakland Panthers, inspired by their intellectual vigor and commitment to the Black Freedom struggle. Our paths crossed many times in the 1990s as graduate students; we grew together and apart over the years, in the ebbs and flows of our various life paths, both inside and outside of academia. Discussions about our work led to reflections about our coming of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Social and cultural debates about race, class, and gender marked this era spanning the anti-Apartheid movement, the Central American and Palestinian solidarity movements, and renewed anti-police brutality activism in the wake of the Rodney King verdict. Our formative years also included the rise of Afrocentrism; Anita Hill's testimony at Clarence Thomas' Supreme Court confirmation hearings and African American Women in Defense of Ourselves' response; the Tawana Brawley case; Mike Tyson's rape conviction; increased visibility of writings by Black women such as Angela Davis, bell hooks, Michelle Wallace, Elaine Brown, Sista Soulja, Joan Morgan, and Shahrazad Ali; early Spike Lee films; and 1990's gangsta cinema and hip hop culture. Although we lived hundreds of miles apart in Detroit, Brooklyn, and New Orleans, we all relied on Black feminism to be our compass through those times. Reconnecting in the shadow of the #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName movements, we acknowledged that a commitment to Black feminist politics continues to inform and inspire our work.[3]

We created the Intersectional Black Panther Party History Project (IPHP), which operates in the tradition of Black feminist collectives like the Combahee River Collective. We replace the hegemonic, competitive individualism of the neoliberal academy with a collaborative praxis rooted in the kitchen table. Black feminists theorized the kitchen table "as a site of restoration and revolution" which has "held a distinct place in Black women's lives" and serves as a site "for nurturing the woman-to-woman relationships that nourish community."[4] The Combahee River Collective's 1974 argument that "it is absolutely essential to demonstrate the reality of our politics to other Black women and believe that we can do this through writing and distributing our work"[5] still rings true. Our work process circumvents communication barriers and expands modes of knowledge production. Through sharing

computer screens, administrative work, expenses, and labor, we have created over a dozen essays and short videos since October 2016. At our kitchen table, we riff off each other in a polyrhythmic discourse akin to jazz and write with one editorial voice. We use FreeConferenceCall.com for audio and screen sharing, social media applications such as Whatsapp and Facebook messenger to supplement the core of our work on Google drive, as well as traditional texting and telephone calls. Our collaborative writing projects begin as a blank Google document and develop through periodic meetings during which we conference call while meeting "in the document" at the same time. As our avatars pop up in the menu bar, we greet each other virtually and the blank page fills with freewriting, brainstorming, and ideas that blend as we jot down parts of our conversation in real time. Our voices and keystrokes become a chorus punctuated by the sound of barking dogs, inquisitive children, and noisy keyboards in the background. If we are not on the phone, we share real time editorial queries by creating comments in the document or using the message function. Through this process, sentences grow and expand into paragraphs. We are empowered to build and rebuild each other's sentences and finish each other's thoughts because we have made the conscious choice to relinquish individual proprietary ownership and prioritize collectivity and trust. Sometimes we differ in interpretation and writing style; however, through our holistic and open-minded approach we attempt to work toward consensus and are intentional about our care, compassion, and mutual respect for each other.

Historian Elsa Barkley Brown defines such a process as gumbo ya ya, "everybody talking at once, multiple rhythms being played simultaneously," and argues for it as a methodology for recovering histories that are simultaneous, co-constitutive, interdependent, and in dialogue.[6] Gumbo ya ya describes our collaborative ethos, the scholarship we create together and our methodology. We share our work with each other and the public to combat marginalization, battle individualism and competition, and model an alternative intellectual praxis. Feminist writer, activist, and Combahee River Collective co-founder, Barbara Smith, describes this methodology as "knowing you can't possibly figure it out all on your own, and that the way you get to a great idea is to dialogue with people who have similar concerns and a commitment to solving the problem. That's a movement perspective. It's not about the 'I'; it's about the 'we.'"[7]

IPHP was formed to be "about the we." As a collective committed to amplifying the history of women, gender, and sexuality in the BPP; to changing the narrative about Panther women inside and outside of the academy; and to nourishing Black feminist solidarity and support among members, we hope to impact a renewed movement for Black liberation seeking lessons from the past. Former Panthers are also part of how we conceptualize the "we." IPHP works alongside Panther women and men, passing the mic as often as possible to center their voices. We have organized and served on panels with BPP members and we continue to amplify their voices on our website, for instance, by publishing short interviews about their responses to Donald Trump's election and the history of the BPP's electoral strategies.

Academia penalizes co-authorship in some disciplines; it requires proprietary claims over research and often places scholarship behind paywalls. IPHP interrogates Panther history in ways that are legible to multiple communities. We write collaboratively for academic and general audiences, use social media platforms, and create visual content, such as documentary video and photography, to counter women's erasure and the selective focus on male bravado in much of the popular images of the BPP. We engage millennials via outlets such as *Vibe Magazine* and the Black Youth Project website. Our work also appears on platforms with an explicit activist focus, such as the online magazine, *Colorlines*. Additionally, we have shared our writing in leading scholarly blog spaces like NewBlackMan (in Exile) and *Black Perspectives*.[8] In June 2017, our publication of the #IPHPTeachBPP resource, a list of curated primary and secondary sources for teaching about the Panthers, elicited conversations with a broader audience: librarians, K–12 teachers, parents, university professors, directors of academic programs, and campus-based social justice projects. Our projects engage multimodal ways of amplifying and disseminating the voices and experiences of Panther women to the public. IPHP's impact includes thousands of views, likes and shares on various social media platforms; working with K–12 students on history projects; receiving positive feedback from teachers for writing in accessible language; and sharing research resources with Panthers. This is liberatory work that aims to break down the boundaries between the academy and grassroots communities.

This roundtable aims to answer Stephanie Camp's call for scholars of Black women to begin "posing different questions of our sources, using new methods to interpret them, and fundamentally changing how we think about politics."[9] We examine Black feminism as a methodological practice; viewpoints and attitudes on feminism from inside the Panthers; modes of pleasure and joy in resistance; patterns of patriarchy and gender discrimination in academia and popular media; and a gendered analysis of Panther men. We address major omissions in the scholarship and suggest paradigm shifts while speaking to our shared experiences as Black women working on Panther women. Our conversations revealed that, despite the flourishing scholarship on Black Power and growing popular interest in and excellent articles on Panther women, there still are many silences and omissions.[10] Mainstream media romanticizes violence, prioritizes the stories of great men, and celebrates hypersexuality and heteropatriarchy while sanitizing and misrepresenting women's contributions.[11] These disfigured depictions echo deeply held masculinist visions of Black liberation. Shifting the scholarly framework from events that resulted in media and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) attention to a broader conception of politics provides Panther women increased visibility as thinkers who shape the organization's direction. Their contributions as care workers and administrators who keep the internal organization of the BPP; face-to-face organizers who operate the community programs; and young people who constantly evolve and experiment with different personal relationships as lovers, family members, and comrades become apparent. This approach requires expanding the Panther chronology to include the long history of the organization in different locales, reimagining life in

the BPP, and searching for spaces in the archives where Panther women gathered. The work of recovering BPP women's history requires sensitivity and an awareness that does not mute BPP women's voices; a methodology that centers oral history and incorporates Panther women who increasingly are accessible through social media and commemorative events. We believe that including these elements in Panther historiography would transform the analysis of the BPP's greatest achievements, generative debates, lived experiences, and lasting legacies.

Framing a Black Feminist Methodology

> Feminism is … very threatening to the majority of Black people because it calls into question some of the most basic assumptions about our existence, i.e., that gender should be a determinant of power relationships. —Combahee River Collective[12]

> Coming out of the civil rights era, Black feminism was a contentious, debatable, demonized and divisive notion. It was perceived to be a pro-white, anti-male doctrine that would destroy Black families and prohibit unity. —Beverly Guy Sheftall[13]

The Black feminist movement unfolded in the Black Power era, creating a deeply interwoven, but sometimes contentious tapestry. What does a Black feminist lens offer the study of women, gender, and sexuality in an organization like the Black Panther Party?

Mary: I think a Black feminist lens offers the Panthers a sense of humanity. Feminism frames our understanding of our lived realities as it affects our whole community. It offers a richer and timely discussion, considering the modern-day lynchings occurring nationally and the movements currently in action. The same kind of questions that the Panthers were grappling with, we are still interrogating today. Black feminism is not just about liberating Black women, but the entire community. Feminism adds a level of complexity and analysis of gender, offering a much richer discourse on the Panthers, which is critical given that the Panthers are still very demonized in the mass media.

Tracye: All the conversation[s] we've been having about the gaps in the scholarship are about what a Black feminist lens would add. Specifically, we consider issues of gender and sexuality as central to the story and not marginal and argue that any analysis is incomplete without it. We look at not just women's presence, but their intellectual contributions; not just their physical labor or reproductive labor, but their mental labor.

Angela: This perspective looks at Panther women's individual experiences; exploring it not just as freeing the person, but the community. Panther women were young when they joined the BPP and evolved over time. It is important to show the ways their ideas engaged the broader contemporary feminist conversation to understand the type of impact their lives had; the influence on the broader community. If we can show coalition building, the intellectual part of it, our analyses might expand in breadth and depth. Also, tracing the evolution of women's lives from their youth to conceptualize how feminism did or did not impact their actions, or inform their sense of who they were and how they worked, can inform how women are organizing in a multigenerational manner now.

Robyn: A Black feminist lens could elicit different political questions. How did gender intersect with class? What role did formal education or "street smarts" play in women's ability to have voice? What did it mean for women to travel nationally and internationally as organizational representatives? These are all questions that are central to understanding women's experiences. Sexual politics have remained relatively unexplored: How did Panther women navigate relationships in the context of notions of "sexual freedom" and increased dialogue about, and access to, birth control? What was it like to become a parent within a collective organization? How did women impact, navigate, and shape the Panthers' changing stance on marriage?

Angela: It is critical to make sure we have the perspectives of both men and women. We must expand the types of questions we ask because membership in the BPP was a multifaceted experience. BPP life was a new normal. They were trying to fashion a revolutionary vehicle. They were in the BPP from as brief as a few months to over a decade. How did they grow over time? For those who are now in their sixties and seventies, that time in the BPP was one part of their full lives. New questions give us access to what might be considered taboo spaces; just asking the tough questions, or the questions that might make most people feel uncomfortable to talk about publicly. The experiences of Panthers as parents have yet to be told. How were families impacted? For example, how did children deal with their parents' incarceration and exile?

Mary: We also need more research on the kinds of coalitions and sisterhoods that women formed with each other in the Panthers as well as their relationship-building with feminist organizations.

Tracye: We need more theorizing in the work. In my dissertation, I wrote about what it means to live collectively, engage in open relationships, endure violence against women, debate birth control, and the gendering of state repression and self-defense. Today's researchers operate in a different space and the field largely has been defined without these issues at the center. The Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture at the University of Chicago hosted a screening of Stanley Nelson's film, "The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution."[14] I organized a post-film panel with BPP members from the Illinois Chapter and present-day organizers. A young woman involved in the Black Youth Project 100 discussed her organization's praxis of centering a Black feminist queer lens. I felt like I was back in 1991 because there was so much resistance from people in the audience saying homophobic and anti-gay comments like, "They're trying to take over our movement with this queer stuff," and "Well, that's a distraction from the real issue of racism." It's exciting to witness today's young Black organizers pushing back and forcing people to have these essential conversations. We must consider gender and sexuality when we talk about Black people so that we're all included in that conversation.

Robyn: The literature has not moved forward in certain ways because there's the presumption by scholars, Panthers, and the general public that gender and sexuality are not the key questions to ask about this organization. Consequently, few consider how Panther men and women pushed back against sexism. Even as we look at our contemporary movements and hold them accountable for sexism and transphobia, '60s movements

serve as cautionary tales of homophobia and misogyny rather than as sites of liberatory politics. For example, what would it mean to move from noting that Huey Newton spoke in support of the gay and lesbian liberation movements to research what it might have been like to be queer in the Black Panther Party?

Angela: I feel that studying what Panther women experienced gives you courage in the face of a society that doesn't validate us, our history and our power. With #BlackGirlMagic[15] and #SayHerName, we demand our humanity. The need for and the power inherent in this naming reminds me of a BPP woman who, in 1977, wrote a letter to Huey P. Newton expressing her loneliness, the community's image of BPP women as "robots or some type of Black humanoid," and "terrible misconceptions of the Black Panther woman."[16] That made me sad when I read it because Panthers devoted so much of themselves. They sacrificed, yet felt invisible. This is powerful. We name ourselves now in ways that Panther women didn't then. We have that space now and addressing LGBTQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer] issues in the BPP, would reaffirm what many LGBTQ activists experienced and are feeling today.

Inside Panther Women's Views on Feminism

> I would say that the women who were drawn to the Black Panther Party were all feminists. —Ericka Huggins, BPP Member[17]

> I am not a feminist, I am a revolutionary. I am a scientific socialist. I believe that we have to struggle on all fronts against those attitudes which threaten to destroy us as a people. —Safiya Bukhari, BPP Member[18]

> We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism. —Combahee River Collective[19]

There is a diversity of opinions and experiences within the Black Panther Party on the issue of feminism. How did Panther women respond to questions about women, gender, and revolution?

Angela: I didn't always use the word feminism when I interviewed Panthers. Primarily, I asked about sexism in the BPP, about women's involvement (or noninvolvement) in the contemporary women's movement. I also asked about divisions of labor in their chapters with respect to men and women. They engaged each of my questions in a straightforward manner. The responses were mixed, reflecting the multifaceted experiences of women in the BPP during different time frames and in different geographic locations, chapters and branches. Some women did verbalize the race and gender contradictions they had to navigate. All interviewees noted that women were the core of the BPP's programs. Some also shared stories that reflected patriarchy.

Tracye: There was a totally distorted idea about the experiences of women in the BPP when I began my research. The popular memory of the BPP usually characterizes the organization as the greatest bastion of sexism and violence against women that existed in that time period. Kathleen Cleaver, the

first woman on the BPP Central Committee, was one of the people that initially questioned my focus on gender. She took some offense to being questioned about a woman's role by arguing that BPP men and women had the same responsibilities. She ultimately became one of my biggest supporters. I published an article, "'No One Ever Asks What's A Man's Role in the Revolution,'" the title of which is a quote from Cleaver. We've been on panels together since then and she talks about lifting up the voices of women in the BPP all the time. She went on to participate in a support group for Panther women.[20] From Cleaver's perspective, it was about how you frame the questions in a way that lets people feel comfortable giving their interpretation and analysis without shutting down.

Mary: No matter how I clarified my own personal ideas about feminism as a researcher, some Panthers still pushed back. Some Panther women stated, "We do not embrace the word feminism," which opened a rich and informative discussion about racism in the women's liberation movement. Those conversations enhanced my work. I became very careful in how and when I used the word "feminism." Figuring out how to talk about feminism and practicing open-mindedness to varying perspectives on feminism among Panther women proved rewarding and exciting for me as a Black feminist.

Tracye: Yes, I had similar experiences. But, even if they didn't use the word "feminism" during the Party's era, the organization was in conversation with the women's liberation movement and the burgeoning Black feminist movement that was going on around them. It's exciting to see a new generation of scholars doing work on what Black women in a wide range of Black Power organizations were doing in this period, and how friendships, social networks, joint causes, and protests where they interacted, provided opportunities to learn from each other.[21]

Robyn: There is a deep resistance to Black feminist analysis of Black power organizations and movements. I soon realized it wasn't just the nomenclature and the loaded history behind the word feminism; the definition of the term was being challenged. Sometimes Panthers asserted there was no difference between women and men's experiences in the organization. Just like color-blindness ("I don't see color"), this perspective can obscure more than it reveals. I soon realized that some interviewees who were sharing other internal tensions and fissures were unwilling to open gender politics to public scrutiny. Of course, Black Power organizations have become the poster child for patriarchy in ways that contemporaneous movements and organizations equally roiled by debates about gender have not. This has everything to do with the demonization of the Black Power movement.

Mary: Sometimes, my dialogue with Panthers about feminism would shift to a conversation about academia's western bias. Has Black Studies really decolonized academia? Has Women's Studies centralized Black women? Often, I discussed my experiences navigating the discipline of Black Studies as a woman.

Tracye: And did that lead you to conversations about gender as well? I mean your experience as a Black woman in that space?

Mary: Yes, it did open a conversation about sexism and misogyny in Black Studies that they could relate to as freedom fighters. Some Panthers challenged me as a researcher and interrogated my role as an academic;

however, they often came back around to discussing feminism. It was important that we established a sense of trust and developed a mutual relationship.

Joy and Pleasure Politics

> What if pleasure was the centerpiece of the Black feminist political agenda? And what if pleasure was understood as far more than a set of corporeal sensations and as the result of a set of sexual practices? What if pleasure were understood at its broadest as a good, fundamentally linked to subjectivity, and experienced in a multiplicity of ways, including those that were not sexual? —Jennifer Nash[22]

> I saved my culture, my music, my dancing, the richness of Black speech for the times when i was with my own people. —Assata Shakur[23]

The Panthers came of age during the Black Arts Movement, the funk music revolution and debates on a range of topics from revolutionary spirituality to sexual freedom and popular culture. How does self-care, sex, joy, humor, pleasure, music, and culture offer a different window to understanding Panthers' experiences?

Robyn: There has been a joylessness in how scholars have portrayed what it meant to be a Panther; that was belied by the oral history interviews I conducted with members. They talked about politics but they also talked about pleasure. As scholars, the pleasure was not always something that you knew how to write into the record. It is hard to quantify and find the words for the level of fulfillment that one could get out of involvement with a political organization. But it was clear to me that comradeship helped to combat loneliness and isolation. While some members of the organization joined with the support of family and friends, for others, full-time membership frayed family ties; therefore, they joined in need of community. The community that these Panthers created was neither a bastion of joy nor absent of hierarchy and dysfunction. Yet, the common political work became a crucible for deep and lasting human connections. Pleasure nurtured people's commitment as they grew to feel part of something larger than themselves. They derived enjoyment on a deeply emotional level from the music, art, and poetry members created; and from organizing at a time of the cultural explosion of the Black Arts movement.[24] Panthers described a joy in feeling like they were co-creating a new world that was almost so close that they could touch, feel, and breathe it. For many, it became their life purpose. Members describe a profound feeling of hope and possibility that complicates the traditional depiction of them as angry. Yes, they were angry but so were Civil Rights movement activists and the literature has painted only one segment of the movement as angry. Panthers were angry but they were also joyous, they were motivated, they enjoyed their work, especially when it involved children. They enjoyed political travel and as young people coming of age during the sexual liberation movement, they enjoyed their bodies. Being aware of this sensibility changes how one sees the movement.

Angela: It's almost ironic that joy and humor are written out of the record because Bobby Seale was a stand-up comedian, right? They were community organizers, but they also were people. They had personalities. They had minds. They interacted with each other. They found joy even in the intellectual engagement that they had with each other. Even in struggle, having this body of people that you could bounce ideas off and have these conversations with was satisfying for them. I found it interesting hearing Panthers talk about what it was like when they left the BPP and the difficulty they found in re-incorporating themselves into society because they thought differently than people who had not been in the organization. Some former members felt that the people around them didn't understand them. They had spent time in this cauldron, anticipating a revolution and working toward a major change on the horizon. Then they were expelled or chose to leave the BPP. There is lots of evidence of the sense of camaraderie, although not all members had that experience. There are photos of the early years in collections of photographic essays and in archival records that show Panther families together, nuclear or not, hugging each other. For instance, in Stephen Shames' photographic essay from the late 1960s and early 1970s, *The Black Panther,* we see Panther Austin Allen on the bed with other Party members' kids climbing on him.[25] Photo essays and autobiographies reflect this as well as photos in the Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation Records at Stanford University.[26]

When we think about the historical period, music was a big part of Black Power and Black pride, with a rise in cultural nationalism and Black people celebrating themselves.[27] I think about all the different bands that performed concerts the BPP promoted. A variety of local musicians performed at the Son of Man Temple/Community Forum (SOMT). The SOMT was a space the BPP created for the community to gather weekly and explore and celebrate ideas and strategies for freedom through music, dance, and guest speakers.[28] Joy was present in different forms. The Panthers worked hard, but also made time for celebrating birthdays, hosting parties, and hosting events honoring community members. They especially celebrated and honored the children.

Tracye: I think the other thing that people often forget is that these were young people. They were 18, 19, 23, 25 and were building community, a new society. They were experimenting, trying to practice what it might be like to be in a different sociopolitical space. For those who were living in collective in Panther pads and for people who were making a full-time commitment, they were with these people all the time, negotiating everything from sex to cooking to childcare. Their experiences were as rich as any other human existing in such an amazing period in history with all these movements going on simultaneously. But they were young people, also; enjoying themselves and enjoying the commitment and each other's company. In many instances, they were up against the world; but even during such high levels of repression, there had to be an outlet. That outlet could be music, sex, relationships, and/or raising children. Life didn't stop because of the repressive context; life went on. In many cases, the FBI and other state agencies exploited their humanness, their gender dynamics and their experimentation with non-monogamy. The gender and sexual

politics in their intimate spaces also influenced the rest of their politics and impacted how they engaged and fought against repression or not.

Mary: Even as a student activist during my undergraduate years, I did not read about moments of joy in Panther history. It was as if political activism and happiness did not mix. I love the times of joy that occurred in the BPP. I remember being so excited studying the Panthers in graduate school when I came across these moments in autobiographies because the historiography did not really explore links between joy and political activism. I recall conversations with Ericka Huggins when she discussed her love for the children at the Oakland Community School (OCS), the Panthers longest-running community Survival Program. I remember she remarked, "we fed them, we loved them, we hugged them."[29] I started learning about Elaine Brown's music, the influences of Motown, and Emory Douglas and his artwork.[30] It was a huge moment for me. In the class that I teach on the Black Panthers, I have my students analyze music from Elaine Brown and the Panthers' funk quartet, The Lumpen, as well as the poetry and artwork. Their eyes lit up when I played music from The Lumpen. It allows students to better relate to the Panthers. Their interest in the Panthers increased because they could clearly see moments of fun. One semester, I remember a student connected Elaine Brown's music with hip-hop. We had such innovative discussions about the Panthers. They could see themselves reflected in the work of the Panthers because they were able to see their humanity.

Angela: I think especially when it comes to women, often the joys are gendered joys. The joys that the women had are harder to tease out and that becomes the difficulty. I think their relationships to mothering were quite unique in terms of how they saw it; "revolutionary motherhood" could be a source of joy as well as a source of work. That's why I like the poetry and the art of the women who were drawing in the paper and the women who were writing in the paper. I think the Party newspaper was a good mirror for some of that. There is something to be said about pursuing a line of inquiry about women as culture creators in the BPP.

Robyn: Some people found lifelong love within the organization and life-long friendships and political commitments. It's important to note that at one point Panther marriages were mentioned in the newspapers. And you can just feel the affection all these years later that people have for the chairman Bobby Seale and minister of culture Emory Douglas. I have noted more ambivalence around women in leadership. There's something gendered about how these relationships have aged over time and many fault lines exploited by COINTELPRO [the FBI's counterintelligence program] still exist.

Angela: I was just thinking about where we find the women in the BPP. I can remember, for example, interviewing Katherine Campbell who joined in San Francisco.[31] She sang in the choir. The Black Panther Party's Son of Man Temple had a choir. That was her space. Of course, we know Elaine Brown: songwriter, singer, poet. Ericka Huggins, poet. M. Gayle (Asali) Dickson, Gloria Abernathy, Tarika Lewis—all graphic artists, Tarika Lewis: musician. Women were creating culture while they were working in the BPP, using those gifts, those talents, and those skills in the service of the movement. It seemed to me that the culture creators, the female culture creators, occupied a space that was very non-hierarchical.

You had leaders and you had rank and file in the general organization; however, they were creating culture which had no hierarchy. Perhaps if we take a closer look at the kinds of work they did, the subjects they chose, the way in which they did what they did, it might yield a narrative about how women as culture creators impacted the BPP in a way that was the same or different than others. One of the things that I think about is the whole Blaxploitation period: *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*[32] and other films; Huey Newton's attraction to that film[33] and some BPP men dressing the way they saw people dressing in these films and adapting that attitude. I've had former male BPP members tell me about it, but I've never engaged any women in that conversation and neither have they brought it up. Women talked about other things in their experiences; they didn't talk about Blaxploitation films. I don't know if either of you have interviewed women who did spend some time talking about the impact that they felt popular culture had on dynamics within the BPP.

Robyn: I remember less about women talking about how they may have engaged with popular culture, or for example, how the music they were listening to may have had an impact on them.

Mary: It didn't happen a lot, but there were very brief moments that I remember it entered the conversation. In my conversation with Elaine Brown, I'll never forget it, she talked about how much she loved Janelle Monae. She mentioned it at random. It surprised me but it was a great moment because Monae was just hitting the music scene at the time and I really liked her music and style too. Brown mentioned Monae's consciousness, her aesthetics, and her dress and compared it to her politics during her tenure as Chair of the BPP.

Engendering Men and Encountering Resistance

> We need to hear from Black men who are interrogating sexism, who are striving to create different and oppositional visions of masculinity. —bell hooks[34]

> Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. —Combahee River Collective statement[35]

Panthers often are represented in scholarship and in popular media as the archetype of unrepentant sexist masculinity in the Black Power era. How does the study of women, gender, and sexuality complicate depictions of Panther men? What are the consequences for us as Black women raising these questions with men inside and outside of academia?

Tracye: We need to study further the question of Panther men, how they understood their gender performances, how that changed over time and what influences the women in the BPP had on men's ideas about Black manhood and Black womanhood. Angela and Mary published an article recently[36]; however, there's not enough work on that aspect. Usually, when people say gender, they immediately think we're only going to talk about the women. But, we must pursue whether and how Panther men changed their own ideas about gender, with the

understanding that their answers will be influenced by the location and time they were in the BPP. I asked men I interviewed about their ideas regarding gender and sexism. There were articles in *The Black Panther* newspaper about creating a new Black man and a new Black woman. What did that mean to them? How did they deal with women as equals within the BPP, if only nominally for some men? How was that different from how they were brought up? How did that influence their ideas about leadership, manhood, family, and so on?

Robyn: I think this is so important because of all the contemporary conversations about toxic masculinity. I can see examples of a broad vision of masculinity in the Panthers. Was it named as such? Did the BPP understand themselves to be creating something different as they involved men in social reproduction and involved women in self-defense? Panther women pushed for more egalitarian conditions, whether it be regarding cooking or sleeping arrangements; or who was going to take care of the kids and when. And of course, Panther women were not a monolith. We also need to ask how did the women change over time because there were women with different understandings about gender politics, from all parts of the country, joining the organization.

Tracye: The photographs and film footage of the brothers in the Free Breakfast for Children Program serving food with aprons on, it's such powerful imagery and needs to be explored further in contrast to the more popular or well-known images of men with guns.[37] How do we make sense of these two things? What is this telling us? The men that I interviewed had lots to say about the impact that women had on their thinking, on their behavior, on everything.

Angela: We're talking about how the Panther men talk about women's power and influence. Academics often expect empirical evidence, but that stands in opposition to the people who lived this experience saying, "We are telling you, this is what it was." As scholars, we must find the proper balance, the best practices for recovering, writing, and honoring all Panthers' experiences. Especially in the case of women whose work is often "hidden," traditional methods of collection do not always square with Panthers' lives and their impact.

Robyn: People don't ask men about women. You ask a man about the shoot out or the FBI repression; but to explicitly ask men about how they were influenced by women ideologically, how they got leadership from women, it's not done. You ask the man about "warfare," whether it be the militant patrols or the political activities and then you ask women about the domestic: "Tell us about community programs. Tell us about being a parent in the organization." Everyone should be asked about all facets of their experiences. Until that changes, the literature is not going to shift and the stories that so many of these Panthers hold will be taken to their graves.

Mary: There's a disconnect between the lived realities of women in the BPP and scholarly assessments of their experiences. Often, women serve as tokens on academic panels. We are situated as an afterthought. This reflects the sexism and patriarchy of society at large and it is gut-wrenching. On panels, sometimes I feel like I am fighting for my life defending the contributions of women in the Black Panther Party. The sexism is so profound within academia that it causes great difficulty as a woman doing work on women. There's a constant effort to

discredit, to reduce, to minimize, to completely erase the impact of BPP women when I am asked questions such as: "Did women really do this?" "Well, how many women were there really in the BPP?" It's completely dismissive to an organization lifted by women. If we look at the data and records, women are dominating the archives. When we visit these different archives, women are strongly represented in the community survival programs, all over the memos, and in the newspaper.

Angela: To advance this scholarship, we must engage each other and challenge each other, asking "why did you include one type of information and exclude another?" and "don't you think certain inclusions would improve the approach and analysis?"

Robyn: If you critique a scholar and point out that they have decentered women and ignored a path that could push their work into richer terrain, often they simply graciously acknowledge that as not part of their project or note that gender is not really something that they deeply engage. If you look at a book like *Black Against Empire*,[38] I ask, "what would it mean to replace the iconic image of Huey Newton and Bobby Seale with guns with the photo of a man in an apron serving breakfast?" In the pathbreaking documentary film on the Panthers, *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution*,[39] what would it mean not just to have a segment on women, but to use a woman's story to drive the narrative, to look at the BPP through the eyes of a woman? Some of this is simple marketing and attention to what sells; but why does it sell? These choices reinscribe a historical narrative where women are marginal, where male images and stories are universalistic and women's images and stories are particularistic. The same issue of accountability sometimes prevails in how Panther history is remembered. Panther men are very open about how much women influenced them but when you talk about resistance to women, that's where the erasure happens. Critically reexamining problematic behaviors and beliefs is a difficult task for any human being. I'm often hard pressed to find all these sexist Panther men that the women talk about. I haven't met too many of them because many Panther men, like the men who study them, have too often adopted a language of inclusion without a politic of inclusion. And while "adding" women is now standard, the question of how Panther women transformed this history, how their lives change the questions we ask and the archives we consult to look for answers remains a challenge.

Conclusion: Carrying the Combahee Collective Spirit Forward

> We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon that fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. —Combahee River Collective[40]

> Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters, and our community, which allows us to continue our struggle and work. —Combahee River Collective[41]

The Combahee River Collective's legacies are rich and deep, varied and complex like the river that was the site of resistance led by Harriet Tubman and that inspired

its name. IPHP is in motion, evolving a radical pedagogical praxis that includes sharing our personal and political lives as well as our scholarly concerns. Through this process of self-revelation, we learn from each other's experiences, validate our words, and support each other. We strive to interrogate our own subject positions as cis-gender Black women with a certain amount of class privilege, and how that might impact the questions we ask and even our ability to ask them. We push each other to be unafraid to ask questions from a position of solidarity, allyship, and co-struggle, even as we acknowledge that missteps and mistakes are part of the journey. We accept the challenges and opportunities presented by new generations of activists to queer our ideas about gender binaries, and by scholars like Cathy Cohen, who have argued against "the normalizing tendencies of hegemonic sexuality rooted in ideas of static and stable sexual identities and behaviors."[42] While the 40th anniversary of the Combahee River Collective has resulted in conferences, panels, and books, its on the ground organizational legacy, style of work, and collective ethos is also worthy of further analysis.[43]

IPHP continues to build on Black women's intellectual traditions via its next major project: a primary source reader documenting BPP women's experiences through the lens of gender and sexuality. Inspired by the Combahee River Collective's intersectional analysis, this reader will reflect the ways Panther women addressed political struggles within Black communities as well as with the larger society, and will have wide-ranging implications for changing the narrative around Black women's and Black men's political activism. Panthers recognize the impact of this work inside and outside of the academy. W. E. Dunbar, a brother in the Illinois chapter of the BPP, stated: "I'm realizing how your studies [IPHP] will illuminate the future for young black women [and men] who are looking for role models, who are looking for stories that they can emulate."[44]

As Black women, IPHP members are subject to many of the same crises facing all Black women in U.S. society. Black women's marginalization in historical literature and popular media is directly connected to the demonization and devaluation of Black women in the larger society. Many of the Panther women that we study are still fighting for "land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace"[45] in 2017, a year when "sexual violence is the second-highest reported form of police violence and … most of the victims are black and Latinx women."[46] Today hashtags such as #BlackWomenAtWork, #ProtectTransWomen, #SayHerName, #SheResisted, #BlackLivesMatter, and #IfIDieInPoliceCustody have emerged as umbrellas for collective storytelling to bring visibility to the unfathomable violence targeting cis and trans Black women. As academics, we understand our positions of privilege; however, we maintain a stake in the well-being and liberation of marginalized Black communities. Some of our members are involved in movements for alternative education, to free political prisoners, and to use art to shift paradigms. IPHP realizes that we and our loved ones are vulnerable to violence from the state, from the streets and from intimate partners. We navigate the impact of failing schools, crumbling neighborhoods, mass incarceration, immigrant detention and precarity on Black

women's ability to survive, thrive, and agitate. We remain committed to transforming "the conditions of our lives."[47]

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