Women within Black Power: the Revolution within the Revolution

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My main purpose of this paper is to discover the voices and roles of African American women in the Civil Right and Black Power Movements. It is important that I acknowledge who I am and the background that I come from so that in attempting to define several different populations that I am not a part of, I do not appear to be all knowing or insincere. I would describe myself as a white heterosexual, middle-class, and woman in her mid twenties living and working in a racist, classist, and sexist society. That being said, it is also important that I point out that it is fair and accurate to assert that black women's involvement in the radical social upheavals of the last third of the twentieth century are seriously under studied.

Before I get in to what I am convinced is one of the under-lying factors responsible for why black women and their work go unacknowledged in a majority of studies on the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement and the subsequent works published on the movements and the times, I think it is necessary that I share my own experiences in my initial exposure to the Black Power Movement and how, without furthering my own knowledge, I might mistakenly assume these to be movements based upon male-centered values. Most of what I have and been exposed to when it comes to black liberation pertains to men and the ideas of men. Huey Newton and Stokely Carmichael and Bobby Seal are the names that I am familiar with. The most popular image that comes to mind is that of Tommie Smith and John Carlos giving the black power salute during the playing of the national anthem at the 1968 Summer Olympics. I had heard of Angela Davis but never read any of her work until just a few years ago.

Unfortunately, these preconceived notions of what did and didn't encompass Black Power might on the one hand simply speak to my sheltered upbringing in a white middle-class family where the discussion of political topics weren't the "norm". But, on the other hand I think it points to something bigger, and that is the patriarchal nature of the society in which we reside which tends to dictate the content of not only our education but also what aspects of the history of our society merits study, understanding and questioning.

It is this questioning that has sparked my interest in revolutions occurring within revolutions and how the innermost aspects of a greater revolution or social movement might go unnoticed in the general survey's of its history. It is important to ask how is it that in attempting to do research on the women of the Black Power Movement, it is so much harder than usual to come up with appropriate and accurate and relevant information pertaining to the roles of women- especially in comparison to the copious amounts of literature available on the roles and contributions of the men in the movement and their roles and contributions. I fear that by starting out by focusing on patriarchy and its

implications, I might in fact be contributing to this male-centered and dominated sphere of knowledge simply based on the order in which I present my findings. However, I am convinced that by first pointing out the patriarchal tendencies of our nation as a whole, I will then be able to better refute those findings with the abundance of knowledge that the black feminist standpoint has to offer.

According to Allan G. Johnson, "a society is patriarchal to the degree that it is male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered", and "also involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women" (153). In a patriarchal society, the positions of dominance and authority are by and large reserved for men, and this means, according to Johnson 'that if superior positions are occupied by men, it's a short leap to the idea that men must be superior" (154). Because of the patriarchal nature of our society, and because the oppression of women is at the heart of patriarchal tendency, "women and the work they do tends to be devalued, if not made invisible" (157).

The Panther Party was founded during a period of intense Black Nationalism, therefore it is not surprising that "early recruitment efforts were influenced by a strong male-dominated blend of politics and social theory" and that "cultural nationalists in particular articulated a male-centered worldview" and "argued that women should be relegated to a mystical position as 'mothers of the nation', subordinate to men in all areas except child rearing" (Alkebulan, 100).

Whether Huey Newton's intentions were to exclude women or not, that's precisely what he did in the summer of 1966 as he described the Black Panthers as male-centered via the pronoun "him"; Newton stated that 'the nature of the panther is that *he* never attacks, but if anyone attacks *him* or backs *him* into a corner, the panther comes up to wipe the aggressor or the attacker out' (Doggett, 73). By using male-centered language Newton failed to "redefine masculinity and femininity in terms other than those set forth by the dominant culture" … and because those characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity in this culture (e.g., ruggedness, aggressiveness, bravery, and emotional and physical strength) are necessarily demanded of women involved in revolutionary struggle, Black women in 1960s radical struggle found themselves in a peculiar situation" Perkins, 103).

If women were to be recognized within the movement, they were required to both alter and utilize their femininity in ways that according to Perkins marked "the failure to readjust gender-role expectations, more appropriately the particular circumstances in which activists found themselves also contributed to the devastating perpetuation of racist and sexist assumptions associated with the coextensive myths of Black matriarchy and Black male emasculation" (Perkins, 103).

In their essay "Is the Black Male Castrated?" authors Jean Carey Bond and Patricia Peery assert that the transference of values from the oppressor to the oppressed has in turn pitted the Black man against the Black woman. I think that it is safe to say that "adherence to values that perpetuate the patriarchal

order (resulting in, among other things, the objectification of women's bodies and the devaluation of women's work) hurts African Americans by undermining the solidarity needed to mount unified (i.e., across gender) resistance to shared racial oppression" (Perkins 104).

In Francis Beale's piece *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female*, she acknowledges the obstacles the movement faced in achieving solidarity by agreeing that black men have indeed been castrated by capitalism and racism. However, she also points out that women have been just as negatively affected in that they are seen as contributors (by way of that myth of matriarchy) to the problem, rather than simultaneous victims. Beale asserts that the rise in power for black men was not resented but rather welcomed by black women as a sign indicating the eventual liberation of *all* black people. And yet with the rise of black power, Beale acknowledges that it was black males who have "exerted a more prominent leadership role in our struggle for justice in this country… where he rejects [the systems] values and mores on many issues" … [and yet]… "when it comes to women, he seems to take his guidelines from the pages of the *Ladies' Home Journal*", relegating black women to the position of a "scapegoat for the evils that this horrendous system has perpetrated on black men" (148). Beale also asserts that not only is it "fallacious reasoning" to assume that "in order for the black man to be strong, the black women has to be weak" but it is also "counterrevolutionary" to pursue freedom from oppression while simultaneously telling black women to step back into a domestic, submissive role (Beale, 148).

Beale advocated for a true people's revolution that strives for the building of a nation that involved *everyone*- men, women, and children, "each with a highly developed political consciousness", one in which "every member of the black nation… is as academically and technologically developed as possible" (149). Beale's words represents the work of women in the black power movement as she states that "revolutionaries are not determined by sex and that unless women in any enslaved nation are completely liberated, the change cannot really be called a revolution as the "total involvement of each individual is necessary" in order to eliminate *all* forms of oppression (154-155).

Another author writing during the same period as Beale was Mary Ann Weathers, who urged the women and men within the movement to acknowledge that black women's liberation "is not anti-male" but rather "pro-human for all peoples". She challenged the black liberation movement to *embrace* women's liberation as "a strategy for an eventual tie-up with the entire revolutionary movement consisting of women, men, and children" (Weathers, 158-159).

Beal and Wethers hold a significant place within black feminist thought but they were not alone. It is important to highlight as well the less well known women within the movement and their involvement in the Panther Party and greater Black Power movement. Bringing in examples of specific women, their roles, and their theory, can serve as a way of challenging not only what the Black Power Movement and Black Panthers stood for but also what our society teaches

us and instills in us in general regarding gender privilege both then and now. Paul Alkebulan, author of *Survival Pending Revolution: The History of the Black Panther Party* offers an excellent introduction to the descriptions of some of the female members of the Black Panther Party in stating that, "Female members expected their organization to be on the cutting edge of social change. They were bitterly disappointed when male chauvinism and traditional gender roles proved to be more resilient than expected. At the same time, however, female Panthers were full of revolutionary fervor. They were confident that changes in gender relations would eventually occur" (Alkebulan, 114).

Only after great internal struggle have "women achieved positions of trust and responsibility" and "consistently demanded respect while pointing out contradictions between rhetoric and practice" (Alkebulan, 116). Tarika Lewis, also known as Matilaba, was acknowledged by the Panthers to be their first female member in 1968 and her artistic abilities allowed her to transcend the traditional gender roles typically assigned Panther party women such as clerical work, food preparation, and kitchen clean up. The Black Panther Party's first female political prisoners included Erika Huggins (who subsequently became the first woman to lead a party chapter and eventually started a liberation school and breakfast program), Jeannie Wilson, Francis Carter, Rose Smith, Loretta Luckes, Peggy Hudgins, and Maude Francis. Following their arrests, in 1969 Eldridge Cleaver wrote a letter to Ericka Huggins praising "the courage and commitment of Panther women" and calling on men "to drop all manifestations of chauvinist behavior and regard women as equal partners in the struggle" and simultaneously encouraged women to do "whatever they want" to avoid being relegated to an inferior position" (Alkebulan, 105). Safiya Bukari was a party member from 1969 up until 1983. She worked in liberation schools, breakfast programs, sold papers, and taught PE classes. She was an organizer for welfare rights in Harlem and pleaded the Fifth Amendment when asked to testify against other Panthers. While in prison for bank robbery, "she and other inmates started Mothers Inside Loving Kids (MILK) to help convicts safeguard parental rights by being able to spend time with their children" (Alkebulan 106-107).

In 1969, Roberta Alexander spoke against the ongoing struggle in the Panther Party against sexism and male chauvinism while simultaneously making sure to point out that Panther women "didn't consider themselves feminists in the same mold as the National Organization for Women" as they "wanted a completely new society with drastic changes in the political and economic structure" rather than advocating for integration into the existing system (Alkebulan 108). Belva Butcher and KIiilu Nyasha assumed positions of authority and responsibility in the Black Panther Party in 1969 and 1970. "Butcher organized PE classes in Oakland housing projects before being promoted to field secretary and sent to Connecticut to build political support for the New Haven 14" along with Nyasha in 1970-71. Artie McMillan was the first secretary of national headquarters and "believed that although female voices were not initially heard in

the Panther Party, women, through hard work, eventually brought their own strength to the organization" (Alkebulan 109).

It wasn't only within the Black Panther Party that women were coming to the forefront and assuming revolutionary and activist positions. Women were also very vocal in the Black Religious Movement. "One of the first women theologians to challenge the male-centeredness of the Black theologies during the movement was Theressa Hoover" who in 1974, through her essay on "Black Women and the Churches: Triple Jeopardy", pointed out the absence of women's voices in the "struggle-oriented elements of Black theology". Pauli Murray, co-founder of the National Organization of Women (NOW), voiced her concern over Black women's invisibility in the Black Episcopalian Church, stating "there is no difference between discrimination because of race and discrimination because of sex (Rogers 8)". In her paper on "The Liberation of Black Women", Murray accused the National Committee of Black Churchmen's "famed" 1970 Declaration of Independence of ignoring "the personhood and contribution of black women to the cause of human rights". Challenging the Black Religious Movement, and especially the "patriarchal Black church" and its "male-centered theologies… generated a new wave of Black women theologians and preachers" (Rogers 9).

Another example of revolutionary behavior can be also seen in the instance of the 160 black Catholic nuns who, at the third annual National Black Sisters' Conference in 1970, "sported Afros and wore dashikis" after being encouraged to be "reborn into involvement in the liberation of black people as celibate, black and committed women" (Roger 12). Through their appearance, the sisters were able to demonstrate their frustration with the idea and constraint that "entering and order meant ceasing to be black and looking on what you grew up with as uncouth" and sought to confront the racism *and* sexism that threatened to "further divide and alienate Americans from one another". According to Angela Davis, "the status of women in any given society is a barometer measuring the overall level of social development", and whether that society is a nineteenth century community of slaves, or small pockets of female revolutionaries asserting their gender equality within the Black Panther Party, "without consciously rebellious black women, the theme of resistance could not have become so thoroughly entwined in the fabric of daily existence" as "the status of black women within the community of slaves was definitely a barometer indicating the overall potential for resistance" just as the status of black women within the Black Religious Movement served as a barometer for the possibility for change within a system that was overly characteristic of the patriarchal governing system which it sought to defy.

After acknowledging some of the individual women of the black liberation movement and their contributions it might be too easy for some to come to conclusions that one of the reasons why these women and their voices and efforts are not chronicled and documented in "main-stream" historical surveys is

because they embody the very means to challenge all that governs us on a daily basis. I am most certainly convinced that that is part of it. I would like to think that, as a white/straight/female, "their" rhetoric and "their" movement speaks more to me than any other, and so perhaps that is why there is some big white man's hand coming down on it all, preventing the masses from being exposed to the fact that there were, and still are, large numbers of men, and predominately women, that advocate for true freedoms for all from this racist, classist, sexist, capitalist society in which we reside. Perhaps a majority of the people does not wish to be free from these sometimes invisible, sometimes blatantly obvious, oppressions that still exist and operate. Either way, I think the first step is to acknowledge and respect the ideas and actions that came from the women of resistance movements as being profound and pertaining to "all peoples."

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