

# On The Question Of Sexism Within The Black Panther Party

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The May 5, 1993 N. Y. Times Op-Ed page exchange between former Black Panther Party member Elaine Brown and Color Purple author Alice Walker about former Black Panther Party member David Hilliard's book *This Side of Glory* where Alice Walker criticized the Black Panther Party's male leadership as sexist makes glaringly obvious that it's necessary to put the issue of sexism in the Black Panther Party in its correct perspective. Alice Walker, in what is hyped to be an attack on sexism within the Black Panther Party, seems to spend more time attacking what she presumes to be the sexuality of the male leadership, i.e. her allusions to homoeroticism. While Alice plays with the question of what she presumes to be the sexuality of the male leadership, I will attempt to address the issue of sexism. By anybody's definition these are not interchangeable words.

The error everyone seems to be making, supporters and detractors of the Black Panther Party alike, is separating the Party from its time and roots and looking at it in a vacuum. Quite clearly, the Black Panther Party came out of the Black community and its experiences. The membership of the Black Panther Party was recruited from the ghettos of the inner cities. The Party itself was founded in Oakland, California in the spring of 1966 by two Black men who came straight out of the ghetto and met on the campus of Merritt College. It was founded as a response to the rampant episodes of police brutality against the Black community committed by the notorious Oakland Police Department.

Bobby Seale and Huey Newton envisioned the Party (for Self Defense) as just that, a community based organization who sought to defend the community against police brutality and set an example of revolutionary activism. In defining the work of the Party they looked to other struggles around the world and to Mao Tse Tung's Red Book "Quotations of Chairman Mao" for direction. The Eight Points of Attention and Three Main Rules of Discipline were lifted directly from this book. One of the Eight Points was Do Not Take Liberties With Women. This was a monumental step forward in addressing the issue of the treatment of women. The simple fact that the issue was placed in/on the books was a step forward; now we had to make it a part of our everyday lives, the everyday lives of the lumpen who were the majority element of the Black Panther Party.

On October 28, 1967, only one year after the founding of the Black Panther Party, Huey Newton was incarcerated following an incident where a police officer had been killed and Huey was wounded. This, along with the march on the California state capitol at Sacramento with guns, catapulted the Black Panther Party into national prominence.

The ideology of the Black Panther Party developed out of the struggle of people of Afrikan descent in the United States for freedom, a struggle which began on the slave ships and continues today. This struggle is seen through the prism of Marxist-Leninism and scientific socialism. It was an attempt to overcome the romanticism and idealism which was characteristic of Black organizations at the time and replace it with a pragmatic analysis that allowed for "social practice" being "the criteria for truth". Nonetheless, it had its own unique analysis of which class was the vanguard of the struggle for Black liberation.

The Party believed that the only group that was capable of moving the struggle forward was the lumpen proletariat (lumpens) – i.e. the brother and sister "off the block" (the last hired and first fired), the hustler, welfare mother, etc. The Party felt that they were at the bottom rung of the totem pole and had nothing to lose. It was this element that the Black Panther Party recruited from the ghetto and tried to politicize.

How does this relate to the issue of sexism within the Black Panther Party and the movement in general? In order to understand the issue of sexism in the Party it is necessary to review the historical the Black man measured his manhood. The Black women worked right along side the Black man in the field, and she worked in the master's house. The Black man could not defend or protect his family, while in most cases the Black woman was the one who defended or protected the family from the slave master's wrath by any means necessary.

Having been deprived of our Africanism we began to take on the persona of our slave masters on the one hand and fill the void of our lost culture with the slave culture that was foisted upon us. It is this that is the root of the sexism that is plaguing our communities today. Unlike the sexism that is characteristic of the white community though, the sexism of the Black community has its basis in racism and self-hate. The division in the Black community between the Black male and Black female did not just come about on its own. It was carefully thought out and cultivated. After the end of chattel slavery Black men, on the most part, couldn't get jobs. The Black woman had to be the breadwinner as well as homemaker. This, in conjunction with the already festering sore of having to stand by and watch while the woman was raped and made to bear the master's children and then wet nurse the children of the white women, was too much for the Black man to handle psychologically and resulted in the Black man casting the blame for his situation at the feet of the Black woman. As time went on this love/hate/anger triangle began to manifest itself in the sexism that is present today in the Black community.

Which brings us back to 1966 and the founding of the Black Panther Party. Nothing had changed, in terms of the quality of life in the Black community and racism in this country. We were still slaves in every way except we were no longer bound and shackled. We still didn't have a culture. Our Africanism and sense of identity were gone and had been replaced by western civilization, we were busy trying to be like the rest of the people in America. We had taken on the persona of sexist America, but only with a Black hue. It was into this that the Black Panther Party was founded, declaring that we were revolutionaries and a revolutionary had no gender.

This is not to say that there was nothing wrong with the way Black women were treated in the community and the Party. But we should not simply decry the role of women in the Black Panther Party, we should analyze the development of the situation and make the necessary moves

to correct it. As I said earlier, the members of the Black Panther Party were recruited from the community. Whatever was going on in the community and society as a whole was reflective in the interaction of the members of the Black Panther Party. The simple fact that the Black Panther Party had the courage to address the question in the first place was a monumental step forward. In a time when the other nationalist organizations were defining the role of the women as barefoot and pregnant and in the kitchen, women in the Black Panther Party were working right along side the men, being assigned sections to organize just like the men, receiving the same training as the men. Further, the decision as to what a person did within the ranks of the Black Panther Party was determined not by gender, but by ability.

In its brief history (1966-1973)<sup>1</sup> of seven years women had been involved on every level in the Black Panther Party. There were women, like Audrea Jones, who founded the Boston Chapter of the Black Panther Party, women like Brenda Hyson, who was the OD (Officer of the Day) in the Brooklyn Chapter of the Black Panther Party, women like Peaches, who fought side by side with Geronimo Pratt in the Southern California Chapter of the Black Panther Party, Kathleen Cleaver who was in the Central Committee, and Sister Rivera who was one of the motivators behind the office in Mt. Vernon, NY. By the same token there were problems with men who brought their sexist attitudes into the organization. Men who refused to take direction (orders) from women, and we had a framework established to deal with that but because of liberalism and cowardice ,as well as fear, a lot of times the framework was not utilized.

On the other hand, some women sought to circumvent the principled method of work and utilize their femininity as a way to achieve rank and statue within the Party.

They also utilized their sexuality to get out of work and certain responsibility. This unprincipled behavior within the Party (just as on the streets) undermined the work of other sisters who struggled to deal principlly. Thus, there were three evils that had to be struggled with, male chauvinism, female passivity and ultra femininity (the I'm only a female' syndrome).

The advent of the Women's Liberation Movement during the late 60's sought to equate what was happening with white women in this society to the plight of Black women. The white women were seeking to change their role in society vis-a vis the home and the work place and to be seen as more than just a mother and homemaker. They wanted to be afforded right to the work place or whatever role they sought to play in society. But our situation was different, we had been working outside of the home and supporting our families. We had been shouldering the awesome responsibilities of waging a struggle against racist oppression and economic exploitation since we had been brought to these shores on the slave ships. Our struggle was not a struggle to be liberated so we could move into the work place, but a struggle to be recognized as human beings.

Sexism or the degeneration of the relationship between the Black man and woman to antagonism and brutality is a by product of this history. While I am clearly against the way this history plays out in our community, 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 that threaten to destroy us as a people.

It is extremely important that we remember that even though the Black Panther Party had a built in process to deal with male chauvinism within it's ranks, the members of the Party were

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<sup>1</sup> The Black Panther Party split in 1971. From that time until 1976 there existed an East Coast and West Coast Black Panther Party but, for purposes of this writing, the Black Panther Party was destroyed in 1971.

products of the society in which they lived. We struggled against these tendencies whenever possible, but they were reinforced by the society in which we lived.

In order to create a new society we have to create a new being. If we simply change the color of the oppressor we have not moved forward. It is easy to decry the sexism of the leadership of the Black Panther Party from afar, without having struggled along with them. While the Party was dealing with the issue of politically educating its ranks it was also feeding hungry children, establishing liberation schools, organizing tenants, welfare mothers and establishing free health clinics. Simultaneously, the Black Panther Party was under attack from the local, state and federal government. Offices of the Black Panther Party from California to Louisiana, from Texas to Michigan, all across the country were under physical attack and Panthers were being killed and imprisoned. We were not just theorizing about struggle, we were involved in constant struggle on all levels.

Finally, I would like to remind you of two things. The first is, we must remember that everybody that is Black is not involved in the Black Liberation Struggle and therefore, their critique of the struggle or elements of the struggle is not done with the motivation of curing the sickness to save the patient. They seize opportunities like the one involving Elaine Brown and David Hilliard's books to vent their personal beliefs and agendas. Alice Walker's suggestion that the male leadership of the Party fear of their perceived homosexual love for each other, whether they had been lovers or not, accounted for their macho sexist attitudes toward women, raises the tantalizing question of whether this maybe an example of people coloring the facts with their own leanings.

The second thing is that while the primary struggle that the Black community faces is one against racist oppression and economic exploitation, we must still deal with the problem of male chauvinism and sexism as well as domestic violence in our communities. These problems are not just problems that exist in the Black community, but in the whole of society. The problem for us is that we are having to deal with them simultaneously with the primary struggle. The Black Panther Party put into place a mechanism for dealing with this  $\text{\textcircled{S}}$  starting with political education and ending with bringing the responsible parties up on charges for disciplinary purposes. Mao The Tung said, "[S]He who is not afraid of death by a thousand cuts, lives to unhorse the emperor".

It is with this thought in mind that we use the weapon of criticism and self-criticism to correct the way we deal with each other. It is through study and practice that we strengthen our own self-esteem and therefore gain the courage to challenge chauvinist and sexist attitudes that we encounter as we struggle. And finally, it is through our social practice that we set the example to our community and advance the struggle. We must remember that the Black Panther Party may not have completed the task, but we did put the question on the floor.

It is extremely crucial that, as we struggle against our primary enemy, we remember that ours is a collective struggle, a struggle for human rights for all of our people, men and women, and as long as one of us is oppressed none of us is free.

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