

## Nesting the Black Panther Party in the Zeitgeist of Uncertainty

By: [Omari L. Dyson](#)

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### **Abstract:**

A philosophy professor once asked me during my dissertation phase, "What are you researching?" "The Black Panther Party in Philadelphia," I replied. He smirked and replied, "Aahh, resurrecting the unresurrectable, huh?" I stood frozen—removed of tongue and movement—and at a point allowed my insecurities to seep in, as I pondered my future as a scholar-activist. As I looked at this professor, I asked myself, What exactly did he mean? Was I attempting to crawl up a downward spiral? Would I be jeopardizing my academic career by pursuing this particular subject matter? These questions, of course, were the manifestation of fear. My fear, however, would never compare to that experienced by many of the warriors who sacrificed their lives so that I may have the opportunity to study the subject of my choosing. After months of reflection, I made the decision to "resurrect the unresurrectable." During that time, I was able to expand the parameters of my consciousness in order to fully appreciate the complexity, significance, struggles, and beauty of the Black Panther Party (BPP), one of the most maligned yet celebrated organizations of the twentieth century.

**Keywords:** Black Panther Party | American History

### **Article:**

Sheriff John Brown always hated me

For what, I don't know

Every time I plant a seed

He said kill it before it grow

He said kill them before they grow.

—Bob Marley, "I Shot the Sheriff"

Without ridding yourself of White supremacy, you will have new battles to fight from now on and evermore because it will constantly grow a new battle for you. As a matter of fact, this society will become more supremely racist when it is apparently non-racist.

—Amos Wilson, “The Third Reconstruction”

A philosophy professor once asked me during my dissertation phase, “What are you researching?” “The Black Panther Party in Philadelphia,” I replied. He smirked and replied, “Aahh, resurrecting the unresurrectable, huh?” I stood frozen—removed of tongue and movement—and at a point allowed my insecurities to seep in, as I pondered my future as a scholar-activist. As I looked at this professor, I asked myself, What exactly did he mean? Was I attempting to crawl up a downward spiral? Would I be jeopardizing my academic career by pursuing this particular subject matter? These questions, of course, were the manifestation of fear. My fear, however, would never compare to that experienced by many of the warriors who sacrificed their lives so that I may have the opportunity to study the subject of my choosing. After months of reflection, I made the decision to “resurrect the unresurrectable.” During that time, I was able to expand the parameters of my consciousness in order to fully appreciate the complexity, significance, struggles, and beauty of the Black Panther Party (BPP), one of the most maligned yet celebrated organizations of the twentieth century.

This text extends beyond a historicity of Panther literature to provide readers with a manual on how social transformation was attempted, accomplished, and thwarted across various U.S. cities during the late 1960s and 1970s. In order to capture the magnitude of this book, I am going to utilize an hourglass framework—first, by discussing the current economic crisis vis-à-vis African-descended people; second, by couching this discussion in the context of this volume; and finally, by broadening the dialogue around what the Panthers represented at the local, national, and international levels.

Currently, the United States is in the throes of an economic crisis that has threatened (and will continue to threaten) people’s very humanity. This predicament, like many other national atrocities, was preventable; however, a few people in positions of power allowed the seductiveness of capitalism to guide their behavior, which ultimately has put the livelihood of many American citizens in peril. From severe budget cuts in education to major reductions in the workforce, the reality of a worldwide recession has finally hit home. While the country attempts to find some footing in this quagmire, in-depth analysis uncovers an even more dire situation where blacks are concerned. In June 2009 the nation’s unemployment rate reached 9.5 percent, as approximately 467,000 jobs were lost that month—totaling 6.7 million since the “onset” of the recession in December 2007 (Table 3 highlights the unemployment rates of the states included in this book).<sup>1</sup> When race is injected into the dialogue, the data shows that black unemployment, at 14.7 percent, is nearly twice that of whites, at 8.7 percent, and greater than that of Latinos and Asians, which hovers around 8.0 percent.<sup>2</sup> When gender and race are intersected, black men lead with a rate of 16.4 percent, followed by black women (11.3 percent), white men (9.2 percent), and white women (6.8 percent).<sup>3</sup>

On an ethical level, this recession has revealed a moral crisis that is undoubtedly rooted in greed. More than twenty years after the movie *Wall Street*, for many, greed is still good. Certain governmental officials, banks, mortgage and lending companies, and so forth capitalized on a

vulnerable populace, simply because they could do so without fear of recourse or reprisal. But on a deeper level, this event represents something much more sinister when people of color are factored into the equation. Historically, property (that is, homeownership) has been a prize that, until relatively recently, has only been within reach of affluent whites and was tantamount to cultural capital (that is, whiteness), wealth, exclusiveness, and access to resources (for example, education and the ability to shape policy). As Ladson-Billings and Tate submit, “the purpose of the government was to protect the main object of society—property.”<sup>4</sup> Specifically, property was not only a right but a commodity afforded only to rich white men, and seldom attained by others. And, on occasion, when this ideology was challenged, numerous methods (that is, redlining, inflation, racial cleansing, lynching, and repression) were used to stymie the efforts of those who dared to trifle with such sacrosanct mores and customs.

**Table 3.** The shift of unemployment numbers and rates between December 2007 and June 2009

State	December 2007	June 2009	Job losses
Iowa	64,361 (3.8%)	104,123 (6.2%)	-39,762 (-2.4%)
Louisiana	79,974 (3.9%)	140,857 (6.8%)	-60,883 (-2.9%)
Michigan	363,738 (7.3%)	740,067 (15.2%)	-376,329 (-7.9%)
Missouri	160,466 (5.3%)	278,278 (9.3%)	-117,812 (-4.0%)
Texas	506,950 (4.4%)	899,740 (7.5%)	-392,790 (-3.1%)
Washington	157,572 (4.6%)	330,769 (9.3%)	-173,197 (-4.7%)

Source: “United States Department of Labor,” July 21, 2009, Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/lau/>.

By examining various policies administered by the U.S. government, it can be argued that they functioned to reinforce hegemonic relations by legitimizing socioeconomic inequities. When we turn to the subprime mortgage crisis, a close examination reveals that banks deliberately targeted black and Latino people in order to profit. In *Cuomo v. Clearing House Association* (2009), information derived from mortgage lending data illustrates that “national banks had issued a significantly higher percentage of high-interest predatory loans to African American and Hispanic borrowers than to White borrowers.”<sup>5</sup> This predatory lending went unregulated for years and helped fuel the housing bubble, which eventually burst, leaving a disproportionate number of black and Latino people in home foreclosure and thus undercutting any possibility to accrue wealth. As Omali Yeshitela opines: “The wealth loss is staggering, people of color have collectively lost between \$164 billion to \$213 billion over the last eight years with Latinos losing slightly more than African Americans. . . . Before the crisis hit, it was estimated that it would take 594 years for Blacks to catch up with Whites in household wealth. And now, it could take ten times as much, nearly 5000 years.”<sup>6</sup>

Overall, a thorough analysis of today’s social conditions leaves little to celebrate, especially when juxtaposed against the pressing issues of the 1960s and 1970s: unemployment, underemployment, poor housing, segregation, poor education, and crime. These factors, among others, contributed to the rise of the Black Panther Party (BPP) and its numerous branches, chapters, and affiliates across the nation and globe. After examining these facets of society, the

question that emerges is: What has really changed, structurally, in this country? On the surface, some may say we have a “black face in a high place,” but what does this mean in the context of (neo)colonialism (whether some want to acknowledge its impact or not)?<sup>7</sup> Despite some economic gains in the post–civil rights/Black Power era, many black people, among others, continually face challenges that hinder social mobility. We represent a class of de-humanized individuals who are forced to survive under very tenuous conditions.

Although not explicitly tackled in this text, we, as researchers, are shaped by the times. This, I believe, is the stark reality of this book; we, like our Panther predecessors, have sacrificed our time, lives, and families to tell a story that continues to face vilification, silencing, and misrepresentation with the general purpose of miseducating the public. As researchers, we usually find an intrinsic motivation to uncover documents and testimonies from our history because it is empowering, transformative, and liberating. The realities found are not to be quantified and reduced to the following statement: “65 percent of Panthers were repressed.” Such an analysis lacks vivacity and does not capture the realness of an experience as expressed about the shoot-out between police and Panthers in New Orleans on September 15, 1970. Our duty is to share such experiences with the masses in order to inform, educate, and transform the reader.

Although rewarding, developing a sequel to *Comrades: A Local History of the Black Panther Party* is a challenging task, especially when trying to locate former Panthers after a span of four decades. And if one is fortunate enough to find them, the hope (from my experience) is that they share the “perfect testimony” that is accurate and errorless. Unfortunately, such thinking is flawed, especially since memory loss may threaten the veracity of stories/experiences. Furthermore, the Panthers’ perspective is oftentimes limited to their tenure in a particular branch or chapter; whether they worked aboveground or were a member of the underground; or the responsibilities for which they were charged and their exposure to certain information, to name a few. Because of these potential threats, among others, it is vital that a methodological dialogue occurs across various sources (primary and secondary) in an effort to mitigate any such threats to dialogical validity.<sup>8</sup>

Again, the purpose of *On the Ground* is not to fix a Panther identity. Rather, it is to expand one’s consciousness about the experiences of Panthers and the work they performed as well as the opposition they faced (by agents of the state) around the country. Our objective for this project was to establish particularization as we compared Panthers across time and context.<sup>9</sup> In so doing, some of the themes/stories gathered can be transferred to other branches and communities to compare, contrast, and guide future research, but others cannot. Therefore it is crucial to understand how a context such the Houston branch was characterized by three waves of activism (that is, a fledgling BPP formation, People’s Party II, and a full-fledged branch of the BPP), but may not be representative of other locales. In addition, some of the authors highlighted the impact that the Newton-Cleaver split had on the organization. After this point, we witness a Detroit cadre focusing as much energy on urban guerrilla warfare as they were on the community survival programs, while Des Moines’ conflict with national headquarters contributed to their severance and impetus to develop the Black Revolutionary Communist Youth, further extending their service offerings. Along the same lines, those in Seattle reorganized their group as a legitimate nonprofit organization by filing for 501 C 3 status. These nuances are just a few examples that this book exposes about the BPP and, like its precursor, this book attempts to capture the rich identity (identities) of the organization—reinforcing the fact that each chapter and branch had distinct characteristics relative to social context yet at the same time shared many interesting commonalities. Furthermore, when

the dialogues of community members, police officers, and even children (impacted by the work of the Panthers) are incorporated, an even richer story emerges.

To further expound, I had a conversation with the Reverend Wesley Campbell, director of the Science Bound Program at Purdue University, who shared his experience with the Panthers in Chicago. He recalled that when he was a second grader, the Panthers took children from the projects and fed them breakfasts in the morning, snacks in the evening, and dinner when needed. “Not only did they nourish our bodies, but they tutored us after school, protected us from gangs, promoted the importance of exercise, taught us self-defense, and helped us to love ourselves.” One evening Rev. Campbell’s experience changed when he witnessed two Panthers (one of whom was bearing a rifle) resting on a porch after being chased by the police near DuSable High School. “I did not know what triggered this chain of events, but what I do know is the end results. I knew that the Panthers had guns and the police were trying to shut them down for some reason.” He continued: “After the Panthers were shut down, I noticed how gangs such as the Blackstone Rangers and the Disciples took over. Before, the Panthers were able to prevent the spread of gangs, but now, there was no one left to regulate that.”<sup>10</sup> This impromptu dialogue with Rev. Campbell is valuable to understanding how children (now adults) conceptualized Panther efforts. Although Rev. Campbell’s story was isolated to Chicago, it is remarkable to see how this story transfers to other locales, illustrating that the Panthers successfully initiated programs to meet the needs of youth by providing them with nourishment (mind and body), security, self-image initiatives, and positive models that were proactive and self-governing.

As I argued in my work on the Philadelphia Panthers in *Comrades*, the organization, as a whole, was a metonym for education. Not only did the Panthers raise the consciousness of the public via critical thought (that is, “conscientização”), observation, and participation, but they also instilled a sense of humanity in the lives of oppressed individuals/groups.<sup>11</sup> This is not an attempt to embellish, because even at moments of critique (for example, feminist, womanist, queer, and so forth), the Panthers fueled others to become fully human in their own right.

The Panthers, through their community survival programs, provided a form of education that exposed America’s contradictions and its insatiable appetite for materialism at poor people’s expense. As James Baldwin once commented,

To any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible—and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people—we must be prepared to “go for broke.” Or to put it another way, you must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance. There is no point in pretending that this won’t happen.<sup>12</sup>

The Panthers were able to transcend the dominant ideology and, as a result, found themselves face-to-face with the seamy side of American repression.<sup>13</sup> This reality helps to explain why some Panthers decided to engage law officials on the battlefield. In some cases, though, when some Panthers were unsuccessful in such clashes, they found themselves attacking members of their own group. This is how power and oppression work—one’s inability to conquer his or her colonizer (that is, oppressor) will cause individuals to redirect their frustrations inward, hence destroying themselves and those closest to them.<sup>14</sup> Some clear examples of how this process manifests itself in oppressed communities are witnessed in cases of drug/alcohol abuse, child

abuse, domestic violence, and black male-on-black male homicide. These, of course, are acts of reactionary suicide that can be attributed to oppression (for example, police misconduct, segregation, miseducation, and glass ceilings in the workplace).

As the Panthers performed numerous limit-acts to overcome their limitsituations,<sup>15</sup> they used lived experiences to develop consciousness and galvanize individuals to transform society. By controlling for repression, when Panther practices are theorized by way of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, we witness how they focused on meeting the basic needs of the community in order to foster growth. From Maslow's perspective, if an individual's deficiency needs (physiological, safety, belongingness and love, and esteem) are unmet, that person will not be able to maximize his or her growth needs (need to know and understand, aesthetic, and self-actualization).<sup>16</sup> If an individual's needs are unmet, he or she will be robbed of reaching higher points of spiritual growth and purpose and, in turn, will react negatively. The individual's frustrations and hostility will be directed against himself or herself and/or his or her family, partners, children, and/or community. The diagram below provides a pyramidal view of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and its application to the survival programs of the local branches and chapters of the BPP.<sup>17</sup> Through their community survival programs, the Panthers laid the foundation for self-actualization (or one's motivation to recognize his or her full capabilities). Internally, the Panthers also reached higher levels of awareness as their ideology advanced across four stages: black nationalism (1966–1968), revolutionary socialism (1969–1970), internationalism (1970–1971), and, finally, intercommunalism (1971–).<sup>18</sup> The development of the Panthers' revolutionary ideology is a testament to their ability to adopt and grow with the changing political landscape within the United States and throughout the world. Intercommunalism, specifically, was introduced at the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, on September 4–6, 1970. Here, the Panthers sought to fuse ties with all oppressed groups in order to rewrite a nonexclusionary constitution. Whether community members and/or those served actually achieved self-actualization is a subject for future research and not within the purview of this essay.

Throughout their existence, the Panthers were dialectical materialists; the theory behind their resistance was to respond to the present conditions of oppression. Rather than accept Marxist historical materialism, which strictly relies on history to determine future direction when it is applied rigidly, the Panthers assessed each event within its specific context. Huey P. Newton states, “as dialectal materialists we emphasize that we must analyze each set of conditions separately and make concrete analyses of concrete conditions in each instance.”<sup>19</sup>

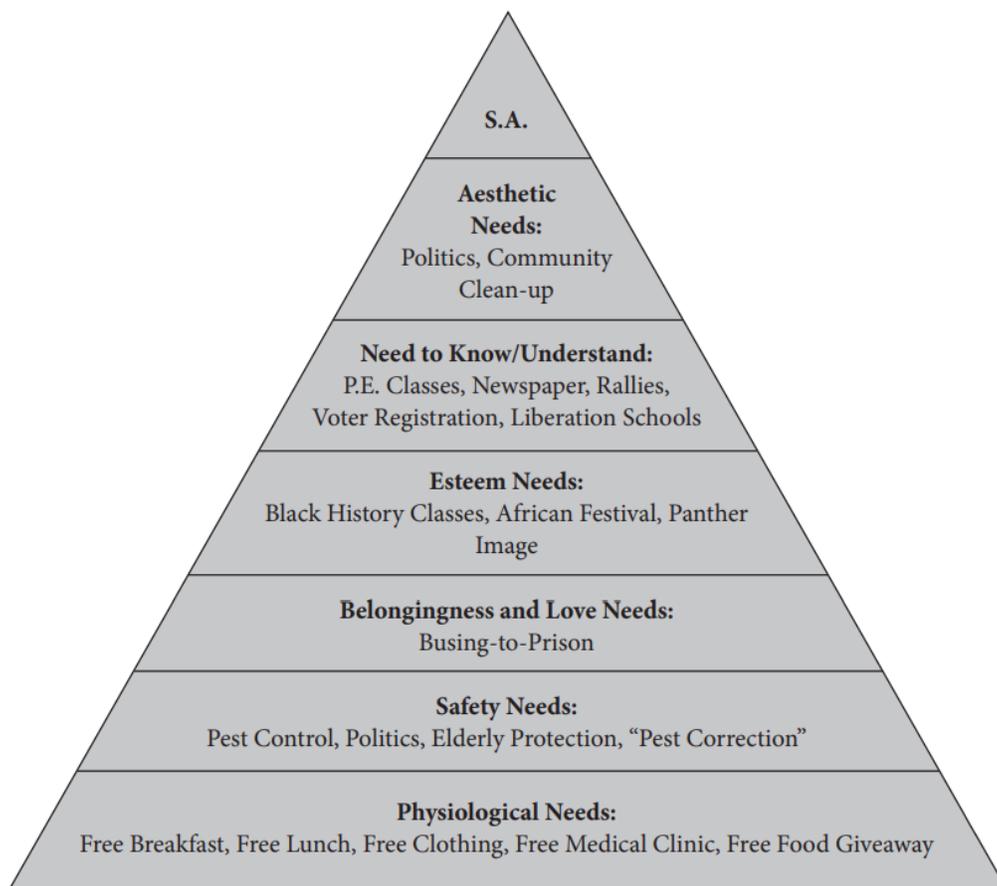
As this society continues to grapple with rising unemployment (especially in Michigan, a state that suffered huge job losses due to layoffs from Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors), home foreclosures, high student loans, poor housing, high interest rates from credit, and lack of health care, one wonders how these forces will (re)shape U.S. public education. Alan Greenspan states, “I have voiced concern about the state of our elementary and secondary education while lauding the world-class university system we have built over the generations. It should be clear, however, that unless the former can be brought up to world class, the latter will either have to depend on foreign students or sink into mediocrity.”<sup>20</sup>

The current educational system is far removed from humanity, culture, history, and real-world applicability. As a result, we find poor students of color performing worse than their white counterparts in reading, writing, and math. Furthermore, research has shown that there remains a gap in overall academic achievement between black and white students.<sup>21</sup> The explanation for this is linked to generations of oppression, a lack of wealth, and increasing poverty.<sup>22</sup> As President Barack Obama expressed at the 100th convention of the National Association for the Advancement

of Colored People (NAACP) on July 16, 2009: “The state of our schools is not an African American problem; it’s an American problem. If black and brown children cannot compete, America cannot compete.”<sup>23</sup>

Our duty (as researchers, academicians, and activists), as the Panthers demonstrated, is to work to enhance the life chances of not only children but also adults by reeducating them and meeting their basic needs. We have an obligation to attack policies that continue to disenfranchise and marginalize the oppressed. Our responsibility is to dig deep within ourselves and find a commitment and passion to love one another through service. If we fail to do so, our hopes of attaining liberation will be even more remote than it was over forty years ago when the BPP was founded.

**Figure 1.** Hierarchy of Needs and Panther Survival Programs



Notes:

1. Kelly Evans and Alex Frangos, “Rising Job Losses Damp Hopes of Recovery,” Wall Street Journal, July 3, 2009.
2. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, July 2, 2009, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t02.htm>, accessed July 27, 2009; Brandon A. Perry, “Unemployment Alarming Trend among Blacks,” Indianapolis Recorder, July 17, 2009.

3. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics; Perry, "Unemployment Alarming Trend among Blacks."
4. Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate, "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education," *Teachers College Record* (1995): 47-67.
5. "Supreme Court Ruling to Combat Predatory Lending," *Indianapolis Recorder*, July 17, 2009.
6. Omali Yeshitela, "The Economic Crisis of the United States, Part 1," *RBG Tube*, 2008, , accessed June 15, 2009.
7. Alex Spillius, "Barack Obama Tells Africa to Stop Blaming Colonialism for Problems," *Telegraph.co.uk*, July 9, 2009, [dindianocean/5778804/Barack-Obama-tells-Africa-to-stopblaming-colonialism-for-problems.html](http://dindianocean/5778804/Barack-Obama-tells-Africa-to-stopblaming-colonialism-for-problems.html), accessed July 10, 2009.
8. Paula Saukko, *Doing Research in Cultural Studies: An Introduction to Classical and New Methodological Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2003).
9. R. E. Stake, "Case Studies," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2000), 236-248.
10. Wesley Campbell, interview by Omari L. Dyson, July 29, 2009.
11. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum International PublishingGroup, 1970).
12. James Baldwin, "The Negro Child—His Self-Image," October 16, 1963, in *Sources: Notable Selections in Education*, ed. Fred Schultz (Guilford, Conn.: Dushink, 1998), 174-180.
13. Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Alan Wolfe, *The Seamy Side of Democracy: Repression in America* (New York: David McKay, 1973).
14. Amos Wilson, *Black-on-Black Violence* (Bronx, N.Y.: Afrikan World InfoSystems, 1990); Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963).
15. "Limit-acts" are actions directed at negating and overcoming a social barrier, rather than passively accepting it. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.
16. Abraham Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (New York: Viking Press, 1971); Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954).
17. On the pyramid, I used "pest correction" to refer to Panther use of survival-war tactics to contest any de-humanizing attacks on the part of local police (that is, pest). And, as Russell Shoatz (former member of the Black Unity Council [BUC] in Philadelphia and political prisoner) stated in *The Making of a Political Prisoner: The Autobiography of Russell "Maroon" Shoatz* (1999), "corrected" was a Panther euphemism for the assassination of a law official.

18. Judson L. Jeffries, Huey P. Newton: The Radical Theorist (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002); Maslow, Farther Reaches of Human Nature.
19. Erik H. Erikson and Huey P. Newton, In Search of Common Ground: Conversations with Erik H. Erikson and Huey P. Newton (New York: Norton, 1973), 26.
20. Alan Greenspan, The Age of Turbulence: Adventures in a New World (New York: Penguin Books, 2008).
21. Libby Quaid, "Achievement Gap Still Splits White, Black Students," Yahoo News! July 14, 2009, [http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090715/ap\\_on\\_re\\_us/us\\_black\\_white\\_achievement](http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090715/ap_on_re_us/us_black_white_achievement), accessed July 14, 2009.
22. Gloria Ladson-Billings, "From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools," paper presented at the Ninetieth Anniversary American Education Research Association Conference, Chicago, April 2006; Ladson-Billings and Tate, "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education," 47-67; John U. Ogbu, Cultural Models and Educational Strategies of Non-dominant Peoples (New York: City College Workshop Center, 1989).
23. Martha T. Moore, "President Notes Racial Progress to NAACP," USA Today, July 17, 2009.