University of North Carolina Asheville
Journal of Undergraduate Research
Asheville, North Carolina
Spring 2025

“The Mother of All Man-Kind”: Examining Motherhood in the Black Panther Party

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Abstract

This paper explores the pivotal role of Black mothers in the Black Power Movement, examining the ways that they exemplified or rejected the ideas about Black motherhood that were popular during the 1960s and 70s and within their revolutionary movement. While much of the scholarship on the Black Power Movement has traditionally focused on male leadership figures and their activism, this study highlights the often-overlooked influence of Black women, particularly mothers, who balanced familial duties with radical political engagement. Through an analysis of the Black Panther Party Newspaper, *The Black Panther Intercommunal News Service*, personal narratives, and oral histories, this paper argues that Black mothers were essential to the success and endurance of the movement, while receiving very little meaningful consideration or support from others involved in the Black Power Movement and their organizations at large. These women navigated a complex terrain of opinions about the "Black mother" while at times also making decisions about having children, mothering their children, and participating in militant revolutionary activities. By centering Black revolutionary motherhood, this research bridges the striking love for children that existed within the Black Power Movement and the growing scholarship surrounding female members and leader-ship within this revolutionary movement.

> "We are the mothers of revolutionaries, with us is the future of our people. We, my sisters, are mothers of revolution and within our wombs is the army of the people."
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> - Candi Robinson[1]

During the nineteen sixties, Black[2] motherhood was targeted by a slew of social scientists and government agents and Black women were vilified for their actions regarding their children, which was a part of the larger social upheaval that was taking place at the time. The most prominent example of this attack was found in a 1965 report that came out of the United States Department of Labor, entitled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." This was written by the Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, under then-President Lyndon B. Johnson. Informally known as The Moynihan Report, this piece delved into the dire economic conditions of Black life and placed the blame for such conditions on the role played by the Black mother. In this report Moynihan claimed that it was the masculinization of Black women (i.e. the large presence of Black women in the workforce) and the absence of Black men in the home that produced such undesirable conditions for African Americans. Though largely unsupported and blatantly racist, this understanding of the African American family became pervasive in the white imagination as it was one of the only explanations available for the high levels of Black poverty at the time.[3]

During this same period, Black women and Black mothers were actively challenging these ideas simply by living and mothering in ways that were directly contrary to what Moynihan described. One such group of mothers were the women of the Black Panther Party (BPP), a Black Power organization designed to address the racial inequalities not attended to by the modern Civil Rights Movement.[4] These women, through their every action, were challenging the ideas that Moynihan and his administration espoused while also fighting to establish themselves within their revolutionary movement. Through their choices regarding reproduction, understanding the revolutionary child, and in times of mourning, Black women within the Black Panther Party established a direct, intimate relationship with their children and the children of others that was directly contradictory to what Moynihan believed to be true about Black motherhood. Additionally, these women rejected understandings of motherhood that came directly from their own organizations and those who led them.

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[1] Candi Robinson, "Message to Revolutionary Women" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* August 9, 1969, 22.

[2] Black is understood to represent a shared sense of community and identity, rather than simply denoting skin color or race, hereinafter this term will be capitalized to reflect this understanding.

[3] Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case For National Action," US Department of Labor, (March 1965). https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/webid-moynihan

[4] This term refers to the push for civil rights during the twentieth century. Rather than limiting the work that people of color have done across time, this term frames the most well-known civil rights struggle within the longer tradition of Black resistance. Key elements included voting rights, nonviolent resistance, and legal change toward equality.

The Black Panther Party, like a variety of other American activist groups, is understood by most to be a male-led and male-centered movement. This is largely because the public facing revolutionaries of the Party and the nature of the work they did was gendered and male-dominant. However, this is a dangerous misconception about this group, its membership, and its mission. The American public saw the BPP as male-centered because of the male dominated leadership and power structure. However, women played an essential role in this revolutionary movement, as they have in most, if not all, others. Though most of the well-known Black Panther Party members were notable male leadership such as Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, it is estimated that women represented two-thirds of the Party's membership; and these women were largely responsible for creating and upkeeping the survival programs[5] that the Party is most known for.[6] This is not meant to suggest that women did not play a substantial role in Party leadership but it is true that for the majority of the Party's existence, men held most of the leadership positions both in the Central Committee, the overarching governing body of the Party, and local branches.[7] Regardless, the role of female Panther leadership is very clearly seen in Party publications like the Party Newspaper, *The Black Panther Intercommunal News Service*.[8] Historians and other scholars argue that the eventual failure and dissolution of the Party only came after the departure of Chairwoman Elaine Brown in 1977 and the large group of rank and file women that followed her.[9]

Though women are substantially underrepresented in discussion of the Black Power Movement and even more so when looking specifically at the BPP, Black women documented the ways that they were living and mothering in revolutionary ways. This has a place in larger conversations about the history of Black Power. In addition, on closer examination, the theme of motherhood and Black revolutionary mothering are key themes in BPP publications, BPP discussions, and female members' personal memories. What we see, when we examine biographies, Black women's writings, and oral histories of women in the BPP is that there was a significant disjuncture between official Party publications and the ways that Black Panther women articulated their own life experiences.

Feminist historians are becoming increasingly focused on intersectionality, thus gendered scholarship on the Black Power Movement has increased. However, this body

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[5] This term is used to refer to the programs that the Party had set up to assist with the basic needs of Black people. These include but are not limited to the Free Breakfast for School Children Program, The People's Free Clothing Program, and The People's Free Ambulance Program. Author Unknown, "The People's Community Survival Programs" *The Black Panther:Black Community News Service,* October 9, 1971, 9.

[6] Stephen Shames and Ericka Huggins, *Comrade Sisters: Women of the Black Panther Party* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: ACC Art Books Ltd, 2022), 23 and Ashley D. Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2017) 81.

[7] Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992) 135.

[8] Linda Lumsden, "Good Mothers with Guns: Framing Black Womanhood in *The Black Panther,* 1968-1980," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 86, 4 (December 2009): 900-922, 900. https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900908600411.

[9] Linda Lumsden, "Good Mothers with Guns: Framing Black Womanhood in *The Black Panther,* 1968-1980," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 86, 4 (December 2009): 900-922, 904. https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900908600411.

of history is largely focused on gendered differences in the movement and how women attempted to (and did) create spaces for themselves in a male-dominated arena. As a result, little attention has been paid to the role of child-rearing and motherhood as a part of this revolutionary movement. Several works focus on revolutionary motherhood and others examine women in the Black Power Movement but very few, if any, focus centrally on Black Power motherhood.

Historians examine how womanhood and women were framed or existed in particular spheres of the movement. These works provide important insight into the limits that Black Power groups imposed on their female members. For example, Linda Lumsden's work "Good Mothers with Guns: Framing Black Womanhood in *The Black Panther,* 1968-1980" focuses on the changing narrative about the female revolutionary in the Party's newspaper, *The Black Panther.* Lumsden paints a persuasive picture of how media influences reality in the case of Panther women and how evolving ideas of womanhood created gendered liberation in a racial movement.[10] However, this article does not give much space for discussion of motherhood as it relates to Panther womanhood and leaves questions to be answered about how the two relate and are intrinsically connected.

Some scholars do focus on ideas of motherhood and more specifically Black motherhood. However, these usually focus more on how motherhood can be used for other means or how it is represented rather than how it exists within this particular movement. One example of examining how Black motherhood is represented exists in Nathan Full's "The Power to Overcome: The Resistance and Resiliency of Black Motherhood." In it, Full argues that because of the constructions of Black motherhood created by white people and the consequences thereof, Black women experience motherhood differently than white women and have historically had to overcome much that deals with child rearing and its relationship to race and gendered ideas of race.[11] Other sources deal with the connection between motherhood and politics. Some, such as Jennifer Nash in her piece, "The Political Life of Black Motherhood," makes the argument that motherhood, but in her case specifically Black motherhood, is inherently political.[12] She makes this argument through a thorough examination of literary examples of Black motherhood. Similarly in, "Visible Black Motherhood Is A Revolution" Danielle Fuentes Morgan makes the claim that Black motherhood is inherently a form of resistance because of its relation to the criminalization of Black bodies and Black children.[13] Though much more contemporary than the time period of focus for this paper, this article brings up several interesting and important points that directly relate. Not only arguing that Black Motherhood, especially visible Black Motherhood, is a direct counter to racist notions about absent parents but also that Black parent and child relationships have largely been deemed as inconsequential or unimportant in the context of police violence and community brutality.

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[10] Lumsden, "Good Mothers with Guns," 900-922.
[11] Nathan Full, "The Power to Overcome: The Resistance and Resiliency of Black Motherhood," *Theses, Dissertations, and Capstones* (2017) 1136.
[12] Jennifer Nash, "The Political Life of Black Motherhood," *Feminist Studies* 44, 3 (2018):699-712.
[13] Danielle Fuentes Morgan, "Visible Black Motherhood is a Revolution," *Biography* 41, 4 (Fall 2018): 856-875.

On a different note, *An Amerikan Family: The Shakurs and the Nation They Created*, explores the Shakur family and their experiences within the movement, including prominent female members, Afeni and Assata Shakur.[14] While this book is valuable for providing context and insight into the lives of Aenfi and Assta, the focus is placed on the male members of this family, relegating the women to roles as secondary actors. Motherhood is mentioned as it is related to both of these women but it is not explored in any meaningful way.

The other sources consulted for this project are larger works that focus on women in the Black Power Movement in its entirety, or in the larger Modern Civil Rights Movement. *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and The Black Panther Party in Oakland* discusses women's contributions to the Black Power Movement in Oakland, California, the birthplace of the Party.[15] Ashley Farmers' book, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era*, on the other hand, presents a full picture of women in the Black Power Movement, in a variety of organizations, and how they changed their organizations and themselves to create revolutionary change.[16] *Want to Start a Revolution: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* is a collection of essays that contextualizes the lived reality of Black women across time within the Modern Civil Rights Movement.[17] While Black women have been centered in recent scholarship of this movement, more specific aspects of their lives, such as motherhood, need more attention. All three of these books highlight the public experiences of women's revolutionary activism. What is missing is connecting women's public revolutionary work with their private and intimate lived experiences. Yet, while for many women motherhood was an essential piece of these lived experiences, this theme does not show up in the historical literature.

For some women their role as mothers drew them into revolutionary work while others did not become mothers until after the beginning of their involvement in the Black Power Movement. For example, in a series of letters that was published in the *The Black Panther,* one woman, who is identified as "Marilyn Fletcher (A Mother)," wrote:

> I used to have a typical black middle class understanding of the Black Panther Party and what it stood for, but…I am now able to decide certain things for myself… I have no intention of allowing my daughter to live in a society as exists today… I now recognize the Black Panther Party as the leader of a revolution that has been building after many years of persecution and substandard living. I am ready to join and fight for my daughter's freedom.[18]

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[14] Santi Elijah Holley, *An Amerikan Family: The Shakurs and the Nation They Created* (New York, New York: Mariner Books, 2023).
[15] Robyn C Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and The Black Panther Party in Oakland* (Duke University Press, 2016).
[16] Ashley D. Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).
[17] Dayo F Gore, Jeanne Theoharris, and Komozi Woodard eds., *Want to Start a Revolution: Radical Women in The Black Freedom Struggle* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
[18] Marilyn Fletcher, "Letters to Chairman Bobby from Seattle Liberation School" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* September 13, 1969, 8.

This excerpt demonstrates that, for Fletcher, the most important element in inciting her activist work comes from her desire to ensure that her child grew up and lived in a more racially equitable world than the one that was available to her. The Black Panther Party presented itself as a positive space for mothers to join in activist work while also helping their children with their development,[19] but was this true in practice? Women would have to juggle their roles as militant Black Power activists and mothers within a revolutionary context that did not always support women in their capacity as mothers and was more concerned with the development of their children.

Within the BPP and other Black Power Organizations, children were seen as being the backbone of the revolution as it was them who would push the movement forward. As a result of this understanding, the Black woman, particularly early on in *The Black Panther's* publication, was seen as essential to the revolution because she could support and uphold Black men and because of her ability to bear the children of the revolution.[20] The invocation of motherhood here was done in a very specific manner that often drew on the imagery of the Black woman as "the mother of all man-kind."[21] It was being conveyed by some women, but more often by men, that women's revolutionary value comes from their ability to bear children.[22] This attitude did shift as time passed and the Party became increasingly open to female leadership and began to acknowledge the essential role played by Black women in the movement[23] but the emphasis on the woman as the bearer of the future of the revolution never truly ceased in the minds of male Panther leadership.[24]

Similarly, early issues of *The Black Panther* include articles or letters written by women who invoke the idea of the "revolutionary child." In the July 26, 1969 issue of *The Black Panther* in an article entitled "To Parents of Revolutionaries," a woman who identified herself as J. Coleman[25] wrote in reference to her mother:

> She also hopes to separate me from my revolutionary husband, however she is badly mistaken for no matter where she sends me I will have our

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[19] Ida B. Watson, "Check it Out Sister" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* September 27, 1969, 15.

[20] Author Unknown, "Support the Revolution" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* July 3, 1967, 2; Gloria Bartholomew, "A Black Woman's Thoughts" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* September 28, 1968, 11; Linda Green, "The Black Revolutionary Woman" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* September 28, 1968, 11.

[21] Author Unknown, "Support the Revolution" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* July 3, 1967, 2; Gloria Bartholomew, "A Black Woman's Thoughts" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* September 28, 1968, 11; Linda Green, "The Black Revolutionary Woman" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* September 28, 1968, 11.

[22]Author Unknown, "Black Women and The Revolution" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* March 3, 1969, 9.

[23] Lumsden, "Good Mothers with Guns," 900-922, 905.

[24] Author Unknown, "Genocide in America: Black Girls Tricked Into Sterilization" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* July 7, 1973, 5, 12. This idea is evident whenever the paper discusses attempts to control the reproduction of Black women through sterilization, birth control, or abortion.

[25] This name does not appear on the fairly comprehensive list of Panther women and did not appear anywhere else in my research. I am identifying her as a woman because of her allusion to being capable of pregnancy and her mention of a husband; this is a time before The Party officially accepted and was tied to any faction of the LGBTQ+ community.

> revolutionary child and revolutionary spirit (and my revolutionary husband) will fight on.[26]

Coleman wrote this while discussing her mother's feelings about her membership in the BPP and her relationship. It is unclear if Coleman was pregnant at this time or if she was asserting that any child born to her and her "revolutionary husband"[27] would be a revolutionary, or a child of the revolution; it is also a possibility that she was not making any connection to the man at all and believed that any child born to her would be raised to be a revolutionary child. Regardless of Coleman's intent here, what is being conveyed is the idea that women themselves, or at the very least the women that were being represented in early issues of *The Black Panther,* saw value in their ability to bear the next generation of revolutionaries.

Men and women did not agree on the role of women's reproduction in the BPP. When men discussed women's role in the party, it was reduced to reproduction rather than that being seen as one of many revolutionary actions taken on by women.[28] While childbearing was seen as an inherently revolutionary action, women themselves were less focused on that aspect of their work than their male counterparts. It is clear from careful examinations of the written works of individual Panther women, opposed to official Party publications, that the vast majority of female members did not center their participation around revolutionary child rearing. Instead, they understood their roles to be similar to those of their male counterparts, with slightly different, gendered expectations. For example, upon her entry into the Party, Elaine Brown was told by Ericka Huggins:

> As women, our role was not very different from that of the men, except in certain particulars… as women we might have to have a sexual encounter with "the enemy" at night and slit his throat in the morning.[29]

This illustrated the gendered understanding of revolutionary work and the role of female sexuality. Brown went on to say, "We also had the task of producing children, progeny of revolution who would carry the flame when we fell, knowing that generations after us would prevail,"[30] which makes clear, through the use of the word "also," that women understood child rearing as an additional revolutionary act to be taken with and on top of their other, less gendered work that only they had the power to undertake.

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[26] J. Coleman, "To Parents of Revolutionaries" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* July 26, 1969, 6.

[27] It is unclear if Coleman and her male partner were legally married or not. The term revolutionary husband could refer to unofficial marriages, similar to the marriage of New York Panther Leadership Afeni and Lumumba Shakur; these were often recognized in revolutionary circles but were not legally recognized. Some could even be characterized as illegal as Afeni was Lumumba's second wife. Santi Elijah Holley, *An Amerikan Family: The Shakurs and the Nation They Created* (New York, New York: Mariner Books, 2023) 63-64.

[28] Author Unknown, "Support the Revolution" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* July 3, 1967, 2; Gloria Bartholomew, "A Black Woman's Thoughts" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* September 28, 1968, 11; Linda Green, "The Black Revolutionary Woman" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* September 28, 1968, 11.

[29] Brown, *A Taste of Power,* 136.

[30] Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 137.

The conception of children was another aspect of motherhood that was at the forefront of Party discussions of mothering and revolutionary childrearing. So, there was an increased focus on when to have children and who to have children with, however, this focus did not always rest with the women themselves. Elaine Brown dedicated space in her memoir to discussing the gendered expectations of BPP membership and how this extended to sexual encounters. Brown recalls her first experiences hearing this firsthand,

> 'Marsha, tell the Sister here what a Brother has to do to get some from you,' Bobby [Seale] commanded… 'First of all, a Brother's got to be righteous. He's got to be a Panther. He's got to be able to recite the ten-point platform and program, and be ready to off the pig and die for the People… Can't no motherfucker get no pussy from me unless he can get down with the party,' she added without prompting… 'A Sister has to give up the pussy when the Brother is on his job and hold it back when he's not. 'Cause Sisters got pussy power.'[31]

This demonstrates that Panther women understood that even choosing sexual partners could, and should, be used in order to influence the revolution. Though this excerpt says nothing about revolutionary child rearing, it can be assumed that because of the Party's early, negative stance on birth control,[32] producing children of the revolution was a considerable driving factor for this Party policy concerning sexual encounters. So, in a sense, while the revolution was attempting to provide Black people with more bodily autonomy and self determination, women had to give up bodily autonomy in the name of revolution or risk going against the Party line regarding sexuality. Other women in the Party detail similar understandings and convey unique understandings about the choice to have, and when to have, children.

In her memoir Assata Shakur details her experience becoming a mother while in prison on a variety of charges. Though Shakur was not a member of the Party during the actions that led to her imprisonment nor during her incarceration, she was a member of the Party earlier in her life[33] and the father of her child was a long-time party veteran at the time of his arrest; additionally Shakur was a suspected member of the Black Liberation Army (BLA), another organization of the Black Power Movement which was completely underground and decentralized, allowing it to become the deadliest Black Power Organization in history.[34] Shakur details her struggle with the question of whether or not to engage in sexual relations with her male co-defendant during one of her many criminal trials. In doing so, Shakur gives us a glimpse into the differing ideas that Black men and women held surrounding child rearing. She writes about how during her 1974 trial for her alleged involvement in the September 1972 robbery of a bank in

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[31] Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 189.
[32] Author Unknown, "Concerning Birth Control" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* May 31, 1970, 5.
[33] Shames and Huggins, *Comrade Sisters*, 99, 150; Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago, Illinois: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987-2001).
[34] Holley, *An Amerikan Family*, 88. The BLA was the only organization that the BPP advertised to their members.

The Bronx, New York State, she was held outside the "kourtroom"[35] with co-defendant Kamau Sadiki in an unsupervised room that allowed them close physical contact with each other. As the trial continued, the two grew closer and they discussed the idea of having intercourse, which was certainly possible but not without potential consequences. She describes her hesitation to act on her feelings for Sadiki because of the possibility of pregnancy while they were both facing lengthy prison sentences, and potentially life in prison.[36] In response to her hesitation, she wrote:

> Kamau said, "if you become pregnant and you have a child, the child will be taken care of. Our people will not let the child grow up like a weed." I thought about it. That was true, but the child would suffer. "All our children suffer," Kamau said. "We can't guarantee our children a future in a world like this. Struggling is the only guarantee our children will ever have for a future. You may never have another chance to have a child.[37]

She goes on to describe that she had never desired to have a child and questions who will take care of her child once it is born. She also details a difficult internal conversation about her ancestors and the turmoil of bringing a child into the world while enslaved before concluding:

> i'm not letting these parasites, these oppressors, these greedy racist swine make me kill my children in my mind, before they are even born. I'm going to live and i'm going to love Kamau, and, if a child comes from that union, i'm going to rejoice. Because our children are our futures and i believe in the future and in the strength and rightness of our struggle.[38]

When she wrote about different opinions regarding child rearing, Shakur offered us a glimpse of the difficult internal and external debate of when and why to have a child. Though not exemplifying the realities for all women and their partners, this example allowed us to begin developing an understanding of what was significant for women and men in regards to the choice to have a child. For Sadiki, this choice is centered around continuing to push the revolution forward, even if it is from behind bars, and ensuring that his and Shakur's legacies continue to live on after they themselves have passed. Sadiki, in this excerpt, makes it clear that opportunity, or rather lack thereof, to have children in the future was a significant driving force behind his wanting to partake in intercourse with Shakur. Whereas, Shakur herself is more concerned with

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[35] Shakur frequently replaces the letter "c" with a "k" and her choice of language remains unchanged to provide authenticity to her narrative. The same is true with her choice to leave the pronoun "I" uncapitalized, with the exception of when it is the first word in a sentence.

[36] Kamau Sadiki is currently serving a life sentence for the 1971 murder of an Atlanta Police Officer and a ten-year sentence for armed robbery. Following Assata Shakur's escape from prison the FBI asked Sadiki to assist them in recapturing Shakur, after he refused, the 1971, formerly closed, case was reopened. Sadiki was convicted, due in large part to the testimony of police informants, and sentenced to life in prison. He is currently suffering from a number of medical issues that are being neglected by prison staff. Free Kamau Sadiki, https://freekamau.com/.

[37] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 92.

[38] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 93.

the well-being of the child once it is born. These differences illustrate that Shakur, and likely other women like her, understood child rearing to be a long-standing commitment rather than a one time act, while Sadiki was more focused on the conception of the child with what appears to be very little time devoted to thinking about what life might look like for a child born into the conditions Shakur and himself were living in. This is an understandable thought process based on the understanding of raising children that was prevalent at the time, in which the mother is almost solely responsible for the continued wellbeing of the child and the father's responsibilities can cease once the child has been conceived. This underscores the understanding that motherhood was a lifelong endeavor while fatherhood could be more fluid and less demanding.

The significance of the child and revolutionary childbearing in the minds of revolutionary leaders was predicated on the understanding that few, if any, would live long enough to see the revolution through to the end and that certain responsibilities would fall to the future generations. Brown and Shakur both make allusions to the role of the child as continuing the work of their fallen parent(s). This assertion was echoed by a variety of male and female Party members, especially as government intervention increased following the development of J. Edgar Hoover's COINTELPRO program, which was designed to control and constrain revolutionary, counter-culture movements.[39] While Black Power women were not often the subject of government intervention that resulted in their death, the men of the Party, especially those seen as being particularly effective, were often assassinated as the result of government attempts to dismantle the Black Power Movement. Consequently, there are several instances of men being murdered while expecting a child or shortly after one had been born to them and their partner; sex and conception then became wrapped up in the mortality of Party members and their fear of that mortality. For instance, Ericka Huggins dreamt of the death of the father of her child and upon telling him this she recalled, "If it had been a hilarious statement, he would have laughed… But it wasn't funny, and it wasn't stupid. So his response let me know that he knew also that he was going to die soon." John Huggins was murdered just two weeks later; their daughter, Mai, was only three weeks old.[40]

Other Party members also understood the fear of imminent death and how this might affect the revolution. As such, while there was emphasis placed on women in their roles as mothers, there was also urgency around producing children as a way to preserve a generational legacy. Noticing and identifying this in real time in a letter written to then-political prisoner, Landon R. Williams, a woman who identified herself as "Comrade Marsha"[41] wrote:

> The swines are such fools not to notice that whenever revolutionaries are jailed or murdered, a revolutionary child is born. Bunchy is dead, but a son was born to him. Papa has to leave for a while, his child will be born in

[39] Ashley D. Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).
[40] Ericka Huggins, "An Oral History with Ericka Huggins" conducted by Fiona Thompson, 2007, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2010, 32.
[41] It is unclear if Marsha is her first or last name, so it is not possible to narrow down who the author may be.

> July; Doc has four; Bobby has one; and you have given the people Kijana, a warrior and your daughter.[42]

This alluded to the idea that children are gifts given by men to the revolution, rather than them being seen as individuals. It also overlooks the role of the mother in its entirety as she is not mentioned as contributing to the creation of the child or as an actor in the revolutionary movement continuing the work of her fallen or imprisoned comrade.

Because of this understanding of imminent mortality, there was also the assumption and promise that when a revolutionary was martyred, the Party and other revolutionaries would be responsible for the care of their child.[43] However, this was not the case for most of the Panther women who lost their partners. One of the most popular Panther leaders, Fred Hampton, was assassinated by members of the Chicago Police Department just 25 days before his partner, Akua Njeri (formerly Deborah Johnson), gave birth to their son, Fred Hampton, Jr.. Scholars and filmmakers have focused intensely on how Hampton, Jr. has followed in the footsteps of his father while ignoring Akua Njeri's continued participation in racial justice work throughout her life. Despite losing her fiancé and father of her child in an incredibly violent police raid due to their participation in the Illinois Chapter of the BPP, her dedication to the Party and her comrades did not cease. Conversely, Njeri has spoken about the lack of support she received following Hampton's murder and the difficulty of being a single mother in the movement. In an interview given years later Njeri said, "After the murder of Fred Hampton, I was not embraced or supported by the people who I had fought side by side with." She also asserted that the BPP did not have the appropriate "apparatus" to care for the children that were born into the Party and that she was then forced to place the responsibility of caring for her child with her mother so that she could continue her revolutionary work.[44] Therefore, the Party and its male members were pushing for the production of children that it could not support.[45]

The Party was using the symbol of the Black mother in a variety of ways while simultaneously not supporting the Party members who were mothers. The Black mother was invoked as a symbol when *The Panther* sought to assert the militancy of the organization in general. There is no shortage of imagery of militant women in the art of the *Paper*, in fact it could be argued that this imagery appears on most of the back covers. Linda Lumsden argues that this imagery was used intentionally by Party editors in order to "make armed women more palatable to readers," while also asserting that women could justifiably commit acts of violence in order to protect their children.[46] While this was at least partially true and certainly had this effect on readers, this was likely also simply a representation of the lived reality for Panther women. Because of the mass incarceration of Black men during this period and the pervasive nature of violence inflicted against Black men, especially militant Black men, among other things, many of

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[42] Comrade Marsha, "A Letter to Landon" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* July 5, 1969, 9.
[43] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 92.
[44] There are a number of other examples of Panther mothers resting the care of their children in the hands of their mothers and this raises a variety of interesting questions regarding revolutionary grandparenthood. *Burning Spear*, 12m.
[45] *Burning Spear*, 12m-12n.
[46] Lumsden, "Good Mothers with Guns," 908.

the women in the BPP were single mothers who were simultaneously mothering children and engaging in militant activities, such as weapons training.[47] This illustrates an aspect of the multimodality of Black revolutionary motherhood as mothers are expected to be ever present in their children's lives while also actively being a part of revolutionary struggle.

Children were often incorporated into the revolution as part of their mothers revolutionary lives because of the pervasive nature of single motherhood and the extent to which childcare responsibilities fell on women. This created an environment in which Party offices were often filled with the children of members and there became increased attention paid to the communal child care that the Party was engaged in. This is made evident when looking at the photographs of Panther photographer, Stephen Shames, in his recent book with Ericka Huggins, that includes photos of Panther women as well as interviews with them and/or their children. There are several photographs in the book that focus on projects that were designed for children, but others show that children were present for general meetings and rallies as well.[48] This is echoed in the experience of Afeni Shakur (no relation to Assata Shakur). Following her acquittal in the Panther 21 case, Shakur worked for Bronx Legal Services. The managing attorney at the time, Richard Fischbein, recalled, "Afeni would come to work every day, many days she would bring Tupac."[49] This underscores the burden of childcare that was placed on Black mothers, even those that were not operating as single parents.[50] Additionally, a friend of Afeni and Mutulu Shakur, Yaasmyn Fula, remembered doing Party work, "often with a young Tupac in tow,"[51] illustrating the desire to incorporate children into revolutionary activities, especially if they were going to be present anyway. Later on in the Party's tenure, leaders and the *Paper* editors became more concerned with broader issues affecting Third World individuals; and thus drew comparisons between the working Black mother and mothers from other anti-colonial struggles, such as those in Vietnam and Palestine.[52] In doing this, there were a variety of rallies held to support Third World struggles and one such rally was advertised as having free child care provided. This increased the attendance of Panther mothers who were then able to include their children in this revolutionary activity. The Party then connected the sacrifices of Third World mothers with those made by Black mothers in the U.S.

Because the Central Committee was the overarching governing body of the Party and all of its branches and members, it can be beneficial to look at the members of the Committee as potential examples of how the Party wanted their members to behave. As a result, identifying how women on the Central Committee were expected to outwardly project their motherhood and were treated in regards to their motherhood presents a partial understanding of the official Party view of motherhood. Due to the fact that the construction of race in America, especially the construction of Blackness, was not only racial but also gendered, the BPP was a gendered organization and this was particularly

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[47] Lumsden, "Good Mothers with Guns," 910.
[48] See Appendix.
[49] Holley, *An Amerikan Family*, 123.
[50] Afeni Shakur was engaged in a relationship with Mutulu Shakur, the father of her second child, during this period. Holley, *An Amerikan Family,* 123.
[51] Holley, *An American Family*, 175.
[52] Kansas City Chapter, "Revolution and Women" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* March 15, 1970, 5.

and most strikingly evident when looking at the Central Committee and its members. A variety of both high ranking and rank and file members have underscored the gendered divisions in the Party, which differed greatly from branch to branch depending on a variety of factors. Regardless, most former members seem to agree that while officially, sexism may have been frowned upon, it was not nonexistent.

How *The Black Panther* went about discussing Party leadership in terms of their parenthood was starkly gendered because women were seen as mothers first and revolutionaries second, whereas this was not the case for men who were fathers. Part of this rift is likely because it was understood that women were being revolutionary actors in their role as mothers, while men had to derive their revolutionary importance through physical action. That is not to suggest that women were viewed as being inherently revolutionary, but rather that men were not seen as being revolutionary simply because of their roles as fathers. For example, Ericka Huggins, one of the first members of the Party to give birth during the Party's tenure, was a high ranking member in a variety of positions including *Paper* editor and administrator of the Liberation School.[53] Shortly after Huggins and co-founder of the Party, Bobby Seale, were falsely arrested for ordering the murder of Alex Rackley, the *Paper* immediately published articles calling for their release.[54] In these editorials Huggins is referred to as a mother that needs to be returned to her daughter and thus should be released. Interestingly, Seale is never referred to as a father who needs to return to his child, a son named Malik Seale, but is instead referred to as a revolutionary that needs to be released so that he could continue to lead the revolution. While both were parents and high ranking party members, each is seen as fulfilling a unique role in the revolution - that of a true revolutionary and that of a mother. During his incarceration, numerous articles were dedicated to detailing Seale's role in the Party but the only reference to his child is one he made himself in a letter to his wife that ended up being published.[55] It could be argued that the Party focused on Huggins as a mother because they understood the importance of the mother on a child's development or because she was a single mother to her child.[56] However, a major concern of the *Newspaper* and of male party leaders was the importance of positive Black male role models for young children growing up in the revolution (boys particularly) which muddies that assertion.[57] Rather, it is likely because the Party wished to play on white sympathies regarding the mother and child connection in order to pressure for Huggins' release.

The Party only directly linked women, such as Huggins, who were closely tied to their motherhood in the minds of writers, editors, and likely readers, when it was not

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[53] During Huggins' 14 years in the Party she took on an assortment of roles, in various places, and at various different times. Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 370.

[54] Author Unknown "Pre-Trial Motions are Just Beginning of the Fascist Conspiracy Against Bobby and Ericka " *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* November 7, 1970, 8-9.

[55] Bobby Seale, "A Letter to my Wife" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* August 30, 1969, 16.

[56] While Huggins was a single mother to her child there is discussion from other women involved in this revolutionary moment about a program that was designed specifically with the intention of taking care of Mai during Ericka's incarceration. Shames and Huggins, 19.

[57] Author Unknown, "A Portrait of a Revolutionary" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* November 30, 1972, 7.

only reasonable, but also beneficial for them to do so. To again use Huggins as an example, in the January 30, 1971 issue of *The Black Panther,* in which the main story is entitled "Thoughts on Ericka Huggins and Revolution," and Ericka and her daughter, Mai appear on the cover. The article mentioned Mai only once in the body of the story, even though there is an entire section entitled "About Ericka and Mai".[58] Instead, the focus is on Huggins' ability to cope with her fiancé, and father of her child's, sacrifice in the name of revolution, which took place roughly two years prior to Ericka's arrest and the publication of the article. Though the *Paper* presents a fragmented understanding of the connection between Ericka Huggins and her daughter, in her own work and interviews Huggins has continuously reiterated the idea that during this period there was nothing more important to her than her daughter and her daughter's wellbeing.[59] The *Paper* interestingly juggles invoking the idea of mothers and their children and ignoring it all together. Though there is never a direct explanation given for this, it can be assumed that this was done in an attempt to play on sympathies in order to force change while simultaneously protecting the privacy of both mother and child, likely for safety reasons.

There are a variety of stories that exemplify why the Party and its members may have been worried about the safety of the Party's children, especially in Huggins' case. Prior to her arrest for her alleged involvement in the murder of Alex Rackely, Huggins was arrested, with other members of the Los Angeles Chapter of The Party and her daughter, following the murder of her husband, John Huggins and friend, Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter. In describing the incident, which took place while her child was just three weeks old, she describes the hostility of the officers towards her and her child and her understanding that the officers were willing to harm her daughter in order to achieve their desired outcome. Not only was she arrested with her child in her arms, but the then three week old, and unnamed daughter was patted down for weapons upon their entrance into the police station and officers wrote an arrest report for her.[60] While this illustrates the performative domination often employed by police officers and other state actors, Huggins' response to this domination exemplifies the love she had for her child and her instinct to protect her. Therefore, while the *Paper* used mothers as symbols of militancy, those symbols did not always reflect the lived realities of these women and their radical activities. Because of the vulnerability that came with children existing within this revolutionary context, the more militant actions that the *Paper* was attempting to make more palatable were often not applicable in practice.

Safety was not a concern just because of the experiences of Panthers themselves, but rather was borne from the pervasive existence of state sanctioned and vigilante violence enacted against Black people. One major focus of *The Black Panther* was reporting on the violence that was done to the Black community, whether physical or otherwise, though usually in the form of police brutality or judicial railroading. The idea of the Black mother was often invoked in both contexts, one of which is made evident by the four-page, first ever issue of *The Black Panther,* in which the subject of the issue is the story of a 22 year-old Black man who was murdered by a member of the California, Contra Costa County Sheriff's Department and quotes from the young man's

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[58] Mike Green, "Thoughts on Ericka Huggins and Revolution: Introduction to a Series of Essays about Ericka Huggins" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* January 30, 1971, 10.
[59] Huggins, "An Oral History with Ericka Huggins," 50; Brown, *A Taste of Power*.
[60] Huggins, "An Oral History with Ericka Huggins," 49-55.

mother.[61] The *Paper* was quick to draw on imagery of and sympathy for this grieving mother in order to incite outrage in its readers, but does not go into detail about what, if anything, was being done to assist the mother in her time of mourning. The theme of the grieving Black mother is one that appears frequently in quite a few issues of the *Paper* and is consistent throughout the time it was published. In reporting on acts of violence against Black people, the *Paper* relied on the families of the victims to express the sadness they were feeling about the loss of their loved one, thus encouraging others to get angry about the current state of the Black American. However, closer examination reveals the Party did little to support these mothers in any meaningful way- instead their trauma was played on and used to encourage others to join the revolutionary movement.

The experience of Mrs. Georgia Jackson was an example of this form of exploitation by the BPP. Mrs. Jackson was the mother of two young sons who dedicated themselves to, and lost their lives for, the Black revolutionary movement. The words of Mrs. Jackson were used in the *Paper* to promote the martyrdom of her eldest son, George. Mrs. Jackson made a call for others to follow in Georgie's revolutionary footsteps. This call was not an emotional plea for sympathy or for justice, rather it was a method designed to draw others into the revolutionary fold.[62] Other than the call to action that is presented in the letter, we know very little about Mrs. Jackson. She is not given space to mourn the loss of her son in any meaningful, public way and instead was embracing the revolutionary ideology that her son(s) believed in. Mrs. Jackson was a quintessential example of a Black mother who selflessly gave up her children for the revolution;[63] rather than speaking openly about her grief, Mrs. Jackson's experience was framed by the revolutionary discourse of the BPP publication.

Panther women found immense value in their revolutionary work, which was directly tied to their roles as mothers. Nevertheless, a large number of Panther mothers left the Party out of concern for their children. The four of the five female Party members discussed thus far- Afeni Shakur, Elaine Brown, Ericka Huggins, and Assata Shakur- all made conscious efforts later in life to prioritize their children over their revolutionary participation. Both Afeni Shakur and Ericka Huggins departed from the BPP following their respective infamous court cases. For Shakur, this came after she gave birth to her son, the late rapper Tupac Amaru Shakur, just one month after her acquittal in the Panther 21 trial.[64] Huggins, on the other hand, spent just over two years incarcerated and away from her daughter and made the choice to leave shortly thereafter.[65] Both women were intensely affected by their incarcerations and did not return to the Party following their acquitals, but rather chose to prioritize time with and their responsibilities to their children. Elaine Brown departed from the Party during her tenure as Party Chairman out of fear for her and her daughter, Ericka Brown's,[66] safety following a string

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[61] Author Unknown, "Why Was Denzil Dowell Killed" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* April 25, 1967, 1-2.

[62] Georgia Jackson, "We Must Learn How to Fight" *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service,* September 25, 1971, 12.

[63] Morgan, "Visible Black Motherhood is a Revolution," 867.

[64] Guy, *Afeni Shakur: Evolution of A Revolutionary*, 98-123.

[65] Mary Fracnes Phillips, *Black Panther Woman: The Political and Spiritual Life of Ericka Huggins.* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2025), 215-217.

[66] Named for Ericka Huggins. Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*, 206.

of violent incidents.[67] Finally, while Assata Shakur left the BPP years before she became a mother, she was in prison for her connection to radical Black Power politics for the first few years of her daughter's life; and after noticing how severely "[her] child [was] suffering" because of her incarceration, Shakur escaped from prison and fled to Cuba, where she is still in exile today.[68] All of these women and so many others like them, displayed a strong connection between their motherhood and revolutionary work but found that they did not have the support necessary to commit equally to both roles. As a result of the lack of an "apparatus"[69] to respond to the childcare needs of Panther mothers and the dangers associated with militant, revolutionary work, these women had to abandon their revolutionary work in order to appropriately care for their children. Each came to this realization for different reasons but the underlying theme remained that the Party was unprepared and seemingly unwilling to meet the needs of the militant mothers that it had willingly employed as symbols.

In reexamining the role of Black motherhood within the Black Panther Party and the broader Black Power Movement, it becomes clear that these women were not only participants in revolution-they were the foundation of it. Panther women demonstrated that motherhood itself could be and is a radical, revolutionary act. By asserting what it meant to be a mother in the face of state violence and systemic oppression, BPP mothers directly challenged the harmful stereotypes laid out in the Moynihan Report. Their presence and contributions fundamentally disrupted both white supremacist and patriarchal assumptions about the capacities and roles of Black women.

Whether through bearing and raising children, choosing revolutionary partners, or navigating the immense emotional labor of loss and resistance, these women operated at the complex intersection of gender, race, and political ideology. Their stories, told through personal memoirs, oral histories, and the pages of *The Black Panther* newspaper, reveal both the possibilities and limitations of revolutionary struggle in a deeply unequal society. Future scholars will have more to say about these women, their children, and their role in the larger revolution. Ultimately, to fully understand the legacy of the Black Panther Party, one must understand the central role that Black motherhood played- not just as a metaphor or symbol, but as lived reality, burden, and power. The revolution, it seems, was not only carried in the clenched fists of protest but also in the cradling arms of Black mothers who dared to imagine and fight for a freer future for their children.

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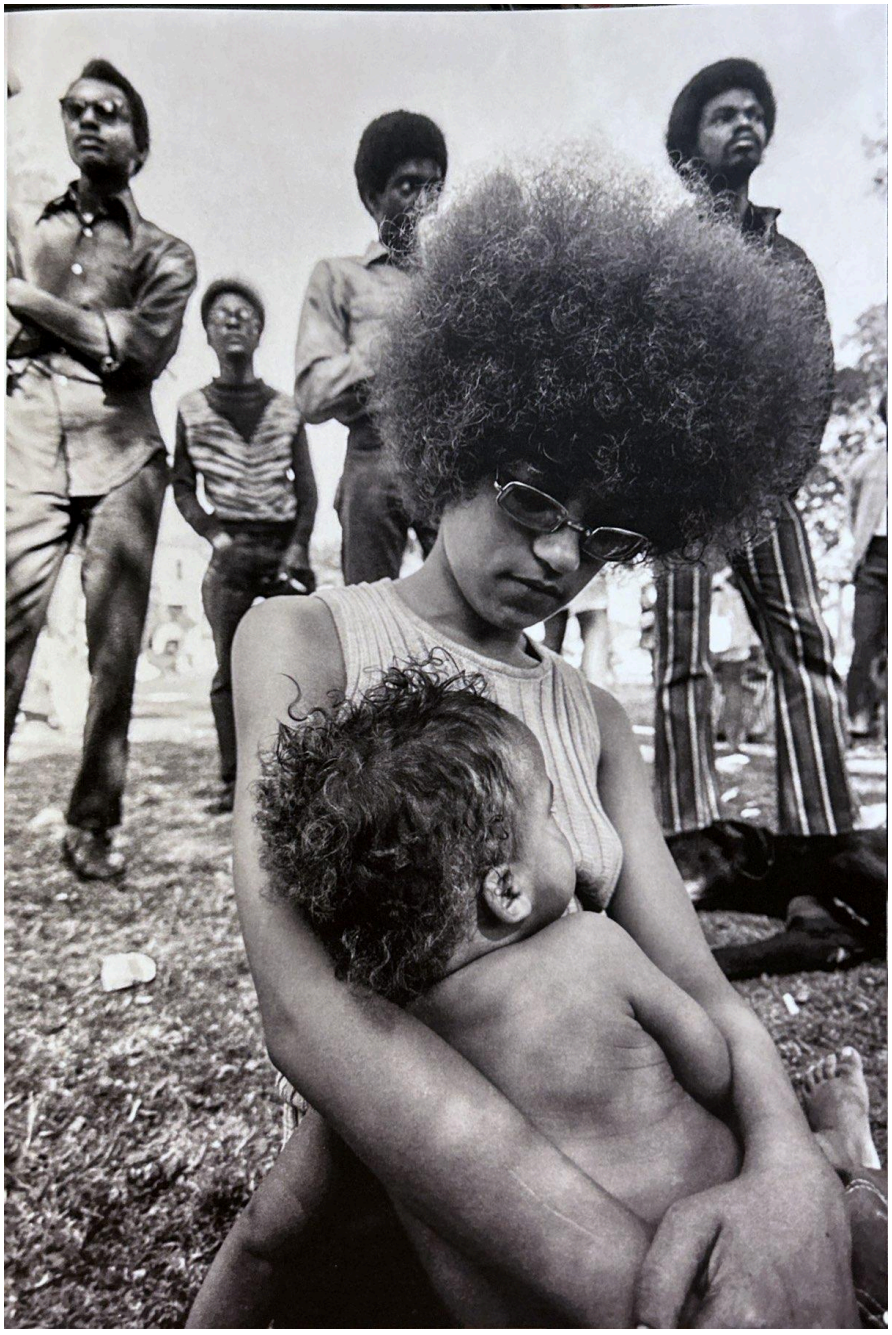
[67] Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 411.
[68] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 257-258.
[69] "Interview with Akua Njeri," 12m.

Appendix I



“Summer, 1970 Oakland, California: Mother and child listen to speakers at a pre-rally in DeFremery Park for the Constitutional Convention, which was to be held that September in Philadelphia.” [70]

[70] Shames and Huggins, *Comrade Sisters*, 33.

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