

---

## A Study On Black Panther Party: One Of The Black Power Movements

On May 2, 1967, a fleet of cars stopped outside the State Capitol building in Sacramento, California. 24 men and 6 women, all dressed in the uniform of black leather jackets and berets, openly carrying shotguns and rifles, piled out of the cars. They loaded their weapons both visibly and audibly before marching towards the front steps of the Capitol, guns pointed to the sky. They had a large audience of shocked onlookers, among them the governor of California, Ronald Reagan, in the process of holding a speech on the Capitol lawn. He was scared enough to run for cover. Once they had gained entry to the building, the group made its way to the State Assembly session, initiating something of a panic. Ushered back out by security, the group reassembled on the steps of the Capitol, where its spokesperson read a message to the gathered crowd of media reporters and cameramen. Pictures of this tough-looking cadre of black revolutionaries were beamed out across the world. The Black Panther Party (BPP) had taken to the public stage with a bang. This was no coincidence. Sacramento was the culmination point of a series of strategically staged actions performed by the Panthers, with the aim of projecting a radically different image of blacks into the American imagination - the captive black warrior in Babylon.

When looking through photographs from that day, and from archival photographs and footage of other Black Panther events, the turtleneck jumps out at you. Interspersed between the official uniform of powder blue shirt, black beret, black trousers and black leather jacket, the turtleneck seems all-pervasive. Either worn under the shirt or instead of it, in all colours of the rainbow from black to white to orange to florescent yellow, long-sleeved or short-sleeved, the turtleneck was in front of the State Capitol in Sacramento, it was at Free Huey rallies, it was in the offices as the Panthers undertook administrative work, it was on the children taking part in the community work the Panthers undertook. An item of clothing that has notes of Existentialist cigarette smoke and strong coffee, of experimental jazz, of navy seamen, of fascism and of Paris's Left Bank, the American side of the Atlantic is not where one's mind immediately jumps to when thinking of this famous garment, a garment that has almost taken on a personality of its own. This undiscovered part of the turtleneck's history shall be put under the microscope in this study. Why did the Black Panthers wear the turtleneck so often, despite the fact that it was not part of the official uniform? What qualities did the turtleneck have over other items of clothing, such as the powder blue shirt, the Dashiki of Cultural Nationalists, or the countercultural t-shirt of the New Left? What did they wish to express with the garment? What role did it play in their resistance to the racism and racist structure of the USA? How did it fit in with what they wanted to achieve, with challenging White America?

My approach to these questions shall be two-fold, weaving together dress as object and dress as performance in order to reconstruct the role of this previously silent member of the Black Panther Party. Structure and an additional dimension will be added through a variation of Petr Bogatyrev's theory of the function of dress in Western society —through studying practicality, group identity, and self-concept. Such an approach necessitates drawing on a wide variety of sources. The main sources for this study shall include the African American magazine *Ebony*, the Party's own publication *The Black Panther*, and photographs from the archives of Ruth-Marion Baruch and Pirkle Jones, white photographers from the California area. These shall be

---

supplemented by the memoirs of ex-Panthers and sources from the FBI. Unfortunately, due to the constraints of this thesis a research trip to the United States was unable to be made, and archives that may have given the opportunity to extend a more object-based study with extant garments were therefore also unable to be visited. Nevertheless, important insights may still be gained through examining the sources available in Germany through digitised archives and published memoirs.

Although materiality has a long history in dress studies, the approach is a relatively new trend in history writing. In this study it shall be used to show that any examination of dress must take into account how the item of clothing touches the senses. Any examination of dress needs to consider the sensuality of touch, colour and flow, the feeling of the garment on the skin. A study of clothing should not be cold; it has to invoke the tactile, emotional, intimate world of feelings and sensations. The impact of new synthetic fabrics and the adaptable nature of the turtleneck as a garment, its ubiquity and low cost were characteristics that made it the ideal item to pull over their heads. Further, the materiality of the turtleneck also provided a springboard for the Panthers to form a group identity, reifying their conflict with a competing Black Power movement — Cultural Nationalism.

However, it is important to bear in mind that dress functions beyond garment-as-object. As we shall see, often this extra dimension is addressed through the use of a theory of semiotics, seeing dress as a symbol, a language to be read. As I shall show in the discussion on theory, the use of semiotic theories often neglect the agency of the body, the wearer, and the garment itself, and is based on false ontologies that mislead us in our attempt to reconstruct the history of a garment. An interpretation of dress necessitates the consideration of all three aspects in order to reconstruct the effect of a garment, a feature that performance analysis can help us with. The polysemic characteristic of the turtleneck allowed for the imprinting of many identities onto the same piece of fabric. In the case of the Panthers' Minister of Information, Eldridge Cleaver, the turtleneck allowed the coalescence of both an intellectual and paramilitary meaning that was integral in turning his body into the stage of the Second American Revolution that the Black Panther Party hoped to bring about.

This study builds upon an additional strand of historiography — that of the Black Panther Party. Although contemporary interest in the Party was huge and prompted a variety of accounts, mostly journalistic in style, such accounts catered almost exclusively to the hegemonic narrative of describing the Party as a group of violence-prone ghetto hoodlums. This view was rivalled in the 1990s, when the published biographies of former West Coast Panthers set forward a new narrative, breaking down the previous othering that had occurred and bringing aspects such as the community work of the Panthers into focus, and helping to reanimate interest in the BPP and its history. Further serious academic scholarship was helped by groundbreaking collections of essays from both scholars and former Panthers or New Left activists. These publications provided an extra dimension through their insights into neglected aspects of the Party and its development. In recent scholarship, a new generation of researchers has added depth and detail into an increasingly multifaceted history of the Black Panther Party. Rhodes' nuanced account of the BPP's history in the Bay Area as reflected in the intricate dance between the Panthers and the mass media, the black press, and underground newspapers, is a good example of this. The role of women has been researched, although it still lags behind the dominant masculine image of the Panthers. Insights from their practical everyday contributions to the struggle both against the prevailing expressions of masochism within the party and white-dominated perceptions within the Women's Liberation Movement, have led to a sharper, more

---

colourful picture of the position of revolutionary black women at this time. Also contributing to this picture is a shift of focus from the national Party leaders to the rank and file in the myriad of Panther chapters across the United States, and indeed internationally. Combined with oral history approaches, these studies have opened access to the BPP in its local specificities and has brought to light the tremendous heterogeneity between different chapters and branches. This is an aspect that shall also come to the fore in this study.

Unfortunately the interaction between dress and race is a field that has been somewhat neglected in academic scholarship. Many studies, such as that of Joanne Entwistle, use Bourdieu's theory of Habitus to explain dress through lenses of class and gender, making it even more astonishing that the impact of race is left by the wayside. This study is indebted to the seminal works such as Monica Miller's investigation of the black dandy and Philipp Dorestal's study on African American dress in the twentieth century, that have helped to close the gap in the scholarship considerably. Critical Race Theory, and particularly the work of philosopher Charles W. Mills, has also been of eminent importance to this study. His *Blackness Visible* was especially instrumental in putting the findings here into a larger perspective, both in terms of situating the turtleneck within the Black Panther Party and into the African American experience.

This study shall therefore commence with discussing the framework that shall provide the foundations to our findings. After demonstrating the importance of visibility and the creation of a new visual vocabulary to the Black Panther Party, the focus shall turn to materiality, and its subsets of practicality and group identity. Our view shall turn from the macro to the micro through the case study of Eldridge Cleaver to show how the visuality of the turtleneck fitted in with one Panther's self-concept. In conclusion, it shall be shown how the turtleneck was integral to the Black Panther Party's understanding of itself and its role in society. They saw their own bodies as a stage on which the revolution was to be enacted. They wished to empower the men in their community to defend themselves against white oppression and therefore created a black masculinity based on the captive black warrior in Babylon. This was an image that was situated within the assemblages of gender, race, sexuality and the urban produced from the surveillance and restriction of the rebellious black body.

This study is intended as an interim report rather than a signing off, an exploratory stab at explaining the meaning of the turtleneck for the Black Panther Party, and aims to be a contribution to two disparate fields: the discussion in dress history focusing on the importance of the body wearing the clothes, the human body at the centre of what clothing means; and a cultural turn in the scholarship of the black power movement that aims to go beyond measuring success or failure or passing judgement on the effectiveness of tactics. PUT THE CONCLUSIONS I COME TO IN HERE As Elizabeth Wilson concisely states: "Clothes are a poster for one's act." To get closer to a reconstruction of the act, we need to get closer to the clothing.