

Chapter Eleven

Why I Joined the Party: An Africana Womanist Reflection

Regina Jennings

In *Africana Womanism*, Professor Clenora Hudson-Weems provides a useful theoretical framework for explaining why I joined the Black Panther Party in 1968.¹ As creator of the concept “Africana womanism,” she cites racism as the dominant challenge to Black people. She contends that Black women have historically subordinated their own needs in the interest of the family and community. When I became interested in the Black Panther Party at the age of sixteen, I knew racism and police brutality intimately, but I had no knowledge or understanding of sexism. I was raised, as most Black women of the 1950s and 1960s were, to accept male dominance and to consider myself a helpmate to men. I joined the Black Panther Party because I wanted to help smash racism in America. I joined the Black Panthers because it was the only organization that faced White America forthrightly without begging or carrying signs for equality and justice. I respected and admired their bold image. However, after being in the Party, I experienced and recognized the existence of a double standard for women. Some brothers in leadership positions were sexist. This was a problem that was left unchecked and weakened the foundation of the Black Panther Party.

In 1968, still in my teens, I took a late plane from Philadelphia to Oakland, California, to join the Black Panther Party. As a runaway since the age of fifteen, a witness to vulgar police brutality, and a victim of racism on my first job, I was ready to become a Panther. Their mystique—the black pants, leather jackets, berets, guns, and their talk—aggressive and direct—attracted me and thousands more across America.

I grew up in Philadelphia in the 1960s where I regularly saw the police do a “Rodney King” on Black people. Attending a school where I learned only about White accomplishments and living in an environment where the elders rarely discussed Black advancement, I grew into an unstable young woman without race pride or self-respect. When I worked in a secretarial pool of about twenty White women who deliberately refused to even speak to me, I experienced the trauma of White racism. I had never been around so many Whites before, and their inhumanity literally drove me toward insanity.

I would walk into this company and speak to each person the way Black people had always spoken to one another in my neighborhood. However, when I spoke to them, they pretended not to see or hear me. I became emotionally distraught and started to sink in a terrible way.

One particularly cruel woman collected money for refreshments. Each day that I foolishly placed my money on my desk for collection marked a day that she held her head contemptuously high and walked by my desk. This insult hurt me in ways I find difficult to express. I decided to personally place my money in her hand. As she made her rounds laughing and talking with all the other secretaries, I arose from my chair and stood in front of my desk. With my money hot in my hand, I waited for her to come my way. As she approached my space, I reached for her hand and she skipped around me. As I watched her walk away, I stood humiliatingly frozen with my hand still extended.

I already knew how to handle weapons; I had lived among people who disregarded the law. I decided to equalize this situation. I decided that murder was a fair and equitable recourse. During this period when I pistol-packed for work, I watched the news about Martin Luther King, Jr. on television. I saw his people police-whipped like dogs. As I planned how I would take this offensive woman off the planet, I fumed at how White Americans generally treated my people. Then one day I saw an eloquent Huey P. Newton being interviewed on film. He was charged with killing one policeman and wounding another. He was discussing race, society, self-defense, and other subjects I failed to comprehend. I saw a marvelous Bobby Seale marching with male and female Panthers with guns at the state capitol in California. I thought I had finally found my calling.

Summer 1968

I spat on Philadelphia
boarded a late plane to Oakland
Oakland land of Huey Newton and Bobby Seale

I looked on the earth
sky down
the geography a map
like the one in Miss Somebody's class

Hating school, counselors, teachers,
and basement books
Hating Black to mean
ugly, evil, dirty sub, shiftless, and slavery

I flew high wolfing at streams
of fat clouds
knowing I would land in San Francisco
and light up on the Golden Gate Bridge

And just like this airplane bursting through clouds
like snow
I would burst
the bloodless murderers
of Blacks

Panther Power

I joined the Black Panther Party with a serious drug habit and with a personal directive to kill White people. When I first showed up at Panther headquarters in Oakland, California, and was asked why I wanted to be a Panther, I said, "I wanna kill all the White people; that's why." I was dressed in my best suede and leather outfit and was sporting a most pronounced cabaret hair-piece. The officer-of-the-day must have been accustomed to all types of people with outrageous reasons for wanting to join the Panthers. After my outburst, he calmly took my name and number and said someone would get in touch with me soon. I immediately became self-conscious—aware of myself, my clothing, and my hair—as I watched the stony Black faces in the office continue their work while ignoring my comment.

On leaving the Panther office, I moved around the Bay area, discovering the ambience of California and the new lingo slightly peppered with southern accents. Black people would say, "Right on sister," when someone agreed with female rhetoric. During the 1960s, Oakland reflected the Black power movement that was electrifying the country. Large bushy Afros, Muslims selling Black ice cream, and hairdressers and barbers stocking new products for natural hair were commonplace.² It never occurred to me while I was glorifying in the language, music, and the aesthetics of my people that I was being followed. As the Panthers checked out my Philadelphia and Oakland addresses, they also followed me for well over a week. Some believed I may have been sent by the FBI, but the captain assured them with Panther good humor, "She's too stupid to be from the FBI." He believed my cover and my comments too honest, too loud, and too ridiculous to be serious.

My struggle from drug addict to soldier was a hard-fought personal war. The Panthers, like many people in the Black community, understood my dependency on drugs; and under the leadership of the captain, they helped me gradually to abandon the addiction. The captain assigned me so many activities, as he did other Panthers, and our teachers taught us so vigorously about our importance to our community that I started to care about learning and understanding our situation with an undrugged mind. Never having particularly enjoyed history as taught in school, my attitude completely changed in the Party. The way Panther teachers taught us new recruits, I wanted to devour history books. They taught us from an Afrocentric perspective, whereby the needs and interests of African people determined our perception of the world. I had never considered Black people as a subject of

knowledge. I had been taught only to revere White people as the source of world progress. We studied about revolutions in China, Cuba, and Africa. The void I used to fill with drugs was now filled instead with a pure and noble love for my people.

In Oakland, California, the Panthers and the Black community had a mutual love affair. We brought them Black men and women willing to transform the Black community with social programs, to defend where we lived and breathed with our lives. The people brought us food, joy, assurances, hope, and companionship. I remember one week when our office was rather low on food, a gentleman came into the headquarters with a huge deer slung across his shoulders. Fascinated, I crept up close to see the deer, and as I stared into his dead eyes, I felt a connection. I thought of *Bambi*, the Walt Disney film of my childhood. I thought, "how could anyone kill and eat a deer." Many of the Panther brothers were hunters so they cut up the deer meat in the back of the office. I almost fainted. The Panther men in particular laughed at my reaction, but after it was cooked, I refused to eat the meat. Knowing that I was very hungry, some of them chased me around the office and playfully urged me to sample the spicy scented deer. Ironically, as we fed hungry children breakfast, and later gave out bags of groceries to the poor, often times Panthers themselves had little food and certainly very little money. We lived mostly off paper sales. We sold each Panther paper for twenty-five cents. We turned fifteen cents into the office and kept ten cents for ourselves.

Most people know about the breakfast for school children program founded by Huey and Bobby and implemented by the rank-and-file. Panther leadership demanded that businessmen in the Black community donate food to the program. We were taught that businesses that profited from the Black community ought to assist in community development. Panthers arose at dawn to cook and serve hungry children before they attended school. Panthers also stayed afterwards and cleaned the area where the programs were housed. Our first breakfast program was in the basement of Saint Augustine Church pastored by Father Earl Neil.

The free breakfast for school children seems to be common knowledge, but people may not know about the dances we staged for the Oakland youth. We decorated the community centers, halls, or church basements with our colors—blue and black. We hung blue and black streamers and lights and Panther paraphernalia on walls. On vending tables, there were the usual posters and buttons of our national leaders, Kathleen Cleaver, Eldridge Cleaver (The Rage), Bobby Seale, and Huey P. Newton. We sisters attempted to bake cakes and cookies, but we were not very good cooks, and the community people knew it. They usually supplied the food for our dances.

Some of the youth imitated our dress—black pants, blue sweat shirts fronted with prowling panthers. Although this imitation made us feel rather

proud, one had difficulty discerning Oakland youth from Panthers. When not on guard duty, we jammed on the dance floor with one another or with community brothers and sisters. Sometimes young males would rap to us sisters while we were dancing under blue/black lights, and we would laugh and urge them to join the Party if they wanted to talk to us. Local Panther male leaders made speeches after playing records—the Isley Brothers, Sly Stone, James Brown—and the youth pretty much listened attentively. Whether or not they joined our organization, we usually won community sympathizers after our events.

I have never known any people like members of the Black Panther Party. Their bravery and courage both humbled and awed me. Some have said that Panthers were crazy, that they wanted to die. Not so. We considered ourselves the vanguard army of Black people, an army not unlike the military vision of Marcus Garvey. We understood that one had to pay a price for freedom in the tradition of Harriet Tubman, Frantz Fanon, and Malcolm X.

In addition to studying revolutions in Africa and Cuba, we studied the *Red Book* of Chairman Mao. The film *The Battle of Algiers* was our orientation theme; yet at core we were Black Americans struggling with issues that pertained directly to our people. Our local leaders organized political education classes regularly for Panthers and community folk where we all learned about the nature of America. In the early morning before dawn, we attended exercise classes before we were vanned to various churches to cook and serve breakfast to our school children. At night we blew the poetry of Al-prentice "Bunchy" Carter, who along with John Huggins, was brutally murdered by members of Us, the organization led by Maulana Karenga. We also blew other Panther poetry, plus the precious words of Sonia Sanchez and Haki Madhubuti. Our main purpose from 1968–70, however, was to free Huey P. Newton. Our leaders planned and organized broad-based rallies with diverse Black activist groups: the Brown Berets, a Chicano organization; the Red Guard, an Asian organization; and the Peace and Freedom Party, an organization of White leftist radicals.

Initially, I refused to work with Whites in the Peace and Freedom Party, but my captain threatened me with Panther Party punishment for my initial refusal. Party discipline entailed a marathon of push-ups or pumping X number of laps around the corner. I had not forgotten either the racism of White cops or the racism of my former coworkers. Firmly believing that they hated all Blacks, I saw no value or sense in working with Whites. This belief remained solid until I witnessed how hard some Whites worked on the Free Huey campaigns. However, I always wondered and openly asked why they were not working as aggressively to solve the racism that existed within their own communities.

The captain of the East Oakland branch of the Black Panther Party was well respected by the national Party leadership. All of us in East Oakland thought of him as a friend and sometimes as a father. The rank and file

readily understood that for our Party to be effective we had to follow orders. Additionally, between the years of 1968–70, we all felt the pig infiltration of our organization. The pigs were playing dirty tricks on us through letters that pitted one leader against another and through wire taps.³ Still a young organization, we were unable to discern what was real or fake. We were constantly fortifying our office on the strength of leaks from agents who had turned into supposed sympathizers.

Such infiltration changed whatever sense of normalcy the Panther environment ever had. Our situation was always on the periphery of alarm. The very nature of existing in Oakland, or any place in America for that matter, as a Black group organized to defy the racist oppression of the state entailed constant tension. Add to this the infiltration of pigs who were Blacks like us, and one can only imagine how the Panther environment was continually charged with suspicion and tension. We rank and file lived every day as if it were our last. At times, in a frenzied, scary way, all of us sometimes questioned whether to trust one another; and we all lived together, worked together, studied together, played together, ate together, and drank together. Since we expected either to be killed or to be jailed, we loved one another fully, purely, and platonically unless we decided otherwise.

All I wanted was to be a soldier. I did not wish to be romantically linked with any of my comrades, and even though I gave my entire life to the Party—my time, my energy, my will, my clothes, my money, and my skills; yet my captain wanted more. My captain wanted me.

This man, who had helped me overcome my addiction, who had taught me and others so much about the world, who had stood toe to toe with racist businessmen who initially refused to donate food to our breakfast for school children program, who had organized our office so efficiently that we were considered a model for other branches—the man whom I thought was my friend over time turned into my nemesis. When I repeatedly refused his advances, he made my life miserable. He gave me ridiculous orders. He shunned me. He found fault in my performance. During the early years of the Black Panther Party, there was no democratic procedure for challenging an officer. This was one of the greatest flaws in my beloved organization. There was no external governing board to regulate how the individual offices operated.

Moreover, by this time Kathleen Cleaver was abroad with Eldridge, after he pulled a brilliant masquerade that eluded the authorities and allowed him to escape arrest. The Rage was wanted for parole violation and for his part in the April 6, 1968 shoot-out when Little Bobby Hutton was the first to fall. Indeed, we did have national headquarters in Berkeley where the Central Committee presided, but usually one strong personality held sway of that committee, either Bobby Seale or during his incarceration, David Hilliard. I sought redress from the Central Committee. However, the Central Committee sided with my captain. The all-male panel agreed that I should not

behave as a bourgeois woman and bring such values to the Party. They believed that my attitude of sexual abstinence was both foolish and counter-revolutionary.

I lacked maturity and the skill necessary to challenge authoritarian men, so I searched for ways to circumvent the sexism of my captain. I was determined not to leave the Party because I felt there was no other place in America where I could fully be my Black revolutionary self. Besides, I had become a part of the Oakland community. I had store owners and other Oakland people who only purchased papers from me. I assisted senior citizens with their grocery shopping, participated in political organizing, and personally instructed a group of young children in reading. There were homes in the community where I could always get a good meal, and neighborhood residents consistently watched my back.

After a year of transforming myself into a young woman who cared deeply for my people and becoming a fixture within Oakland and enjoying all of its rights and privileges, I found that my captain searched for greater ways to push me out of the Party. He felt that I was not a good influence on the other soldiers; so with the help of local Panther officials, he transferred me out of Oakland and away from a year of diligent and joyous work. He transferred me to National Headquarters where I experienced the same kind of vicious sexism all over again. There were women who came through the Party and would immediately leave because of the vulgar male behavior. There were women in the Party like me who tried to hold on because we understood the power, the significance, and the need for our organization. Black men, who had been too long without some form of power, lacked the background to understand and rework their double standard toward the female cadre. Perhaps, if the Party had external observers—community elders who respected our platform—such unfair practices against women may not have occurred.

All men in the Party were not sexist. In fact, many fought with me against the foolishness of our captain. These men were also ostracized by the leadership. Besides, we were facing so many threatening issues that were larger than the plight of selected female cadre. I am talking about the years when Huey P. Newton faced the gas chamber. I am talking about the years when our offices were being attacked by the police. I am talking about the years of massive Panther arrests. I am talking about the years when our national leadership rotated in and out of prison or transported themselves to countries outside of America. Sexism was a significant factor in weakening the structure of the Black Panther Party. It is important to understand and recognize the proclivities among men, especially as we move toward the 21st century, and especially as Black men make public pronouncements to regain the reigns of leadership for Black America. If women are disrespected, so goes the nation.

Members of the rank and file of the Black Panther Party were a unique group of dedicated warriors who worked years without any recognition,

rewards, awards, or monetary inducements to eliminate injustice in America. Nothing impressed me more than the discipline exhibited by my dear, dear brothers and sisters in the Black Panther Party. There is no other experience like being with people who wake up before dawn and retire at night thinking about and working aggressively for our people. Some sisters and brothers with whom I lived, ate, talked long into the night, exchanged clothes, fed children, sold Panther papers, shot targets, drank bitter dogs, and ran midnight missions are dead now. I want you to know how much they perfectly loved you. I want you to know that they were willing to die for you.

Routine

In a Blackberry morning
a bullet rests in each chamber
In a morning of chilled expectation
I shower and jump into Levi's and combat boots
In a mirror providing memory
I fork my big, Black bush
Panthers in the bedroom,
living room, bathroom, growl, laugh, scowl
count weapons and cleanse bodies

In the seedling of a Blackberry morning
we prepare for the knock
of Panthers
standing
around the swimming pool
standing like pieces in a game of chess

I move to secure my place
We walk
unsmiling, sisters and brothers
bursting through doors of damaged glass

In a Panther van we ride
smoking, talking, teasing, listening
Our Captain
mapping the day in a pattern of plans

And outside
the stars pinch inward
and outside
a midnight morning
muses on the daylight

NOTES

1. Clenora Hudson-Weems, *African Womanist: Reclaiming Ourselves* (Troy, Michigan: Bedford Publishers, 1994).

2. "Black" was the actual name of this new ice cream, sold in Muslim restaurants, which was created to honor the power and thrust of the Black power movement. Because we "Negroes" had just made the enormous leap to "Black" as a preferable racial identifier, we consumed and created many things with the title Black.

3. Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret War Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1988). Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1987).