



**“To Give Medicine Back to The People”:
Community Health Activism of The Black Panther Party**

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“The condition of truth is to allow the suffering to speak. It doesn’t mean that those who suffer have a monopoly on truth but it means that the condition of truth to emerge must be in tune with those who are undergoing social misery—socially induced forms of suffering.”

Cornel West, as quoted by Paul Farmer in *Pathologies of Power*

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INTRODUCTION

At a small café in downtown Berkeley, California, David Levinson sat across from me to share his story, wearing a hat which read “Physicians for Social Responsibility” and a necklace symbolizing “living” in Hebrew. Levinson, now an emergency room physician, was quite modest about his impressive track record of health care activism. As a “red diaper baby,” he grew up on the picket lines and developed a social consciousness at a young age. After receiving his medical degree, he worked in Nicaragua to organize medical conferences for their burgeoning health care system. In El Salvador, Levinson documented war crimes in violation of international human rights law. He provided medical care during the Zapatista rebellion in Mexico and went to Iraq during the Gulf War to treat Iraqi patients after the United States’ bombing campaign on hospitals.¹

David Levinson attributes his current career and perspective on doctoring to his involvement in the Black Panther Party. His beliefs about medicine are exactly those voiced by the Party itself. He explains, “Much disease is a political and social issue not developed from their reality but from their political situation and social position.” He says that “unless we tie our clinical work to a bigger way of changing society then it doesn’t matter how many band-aids you put on or how many antibiotics you dispense.” Levinson believes that practicing medicine can serve an immediate need, but equally as important it must be used as a “practical skill as part of a bigger vision for social change.”²

Levinson, a white man, was a member of the Black Panther Party through its multi-racial satellite chapter, the International Committee to Combat Fascism. In 1970, the ICCF,

¹ David Levinson interview with author, Berkeley, CA, January 8, 2011. Levinson discusses that he was a “red diaper baby” because his parents, Cece and Saul Levinson, were involved in the Communist Party before allying with the Black Panther Party.

² Ibid.

following the lead of many Black Panther Party chapters, founded a health clinic and Levinson joined the medical cadre, rank-and-file Party members trained in medical skills to treat the community. He learned how to treat wounds from a Navy corpsman in the cadre and did basic first aid. He even took a local job as an ambulance driver to get supplies for the clinic. Levinson dropped out of college to join the Panthers, but his experiences encouraged him to go back to college and then to medical school. When David Levinson asked chairman Bobby Seale for permission to go to medical school, Seale granted it because he believed that their struggle for justice in health would be long-term.³

Levinson's story exemplifies the ways in which activists from diverse backgrounds worked together at the Black Panther Party's health care programs. The sixties was an era of numerous and diverse grassroots movements ranging the political spectrum, providing the Panthers with partners in leftist movements and also unexpected allies from conservative and religious organizations which believed in the Party's pragmatic social agenda. Dr. Tolbert Small, a black physician who volunteered at a Panther health clinic remembers with approval their willingness to "work with any progressive community, regardless of color."⁴

In the words of the Party's Minister of Defense, Huey P. Newton: "When unified and consistent, theory and action constitute a solid foundation for resolving our problems."⁵ The Black Panthers provided an analysis of health that was theoretical and political alongside its on-the-ground service programs. During the heyday of the Black Panther Party, along with its free breakfast programs and other grassroots organizing efforts, it addressed the health care needs of medically underserved and uninsured by establishing free medical clinics "to

³ Ibid

⁴ Tolbert Small interview with author, phone interview, February 8, 2011.

⁵ Curtis Austin, *Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party*, (Fayetteville, AK: University of Arkansas Press, 2006), 59.

give medicine back to the people...[so] that medicine will serve the people instead of the greedy medical institutions.”⁶ The health clinics were not among the most common community programs because they were difficult and costly to start up and maintain. Despite these difficulties, the clinics were far-reaching, and in many cases were so successful that some of them still exist in different forms. Yet they remain understudied in literature about the Party.

This thesis will examine the theory and action that Newton argued were necessary to ensure social change. Chapter 1 will describe the beginnings of the Black Panther Party and its political and social milieu. The second and third correspond with the Panthers’ own set of goals and interventions. Chapter 2 will explore how the Black Panther Party conceptualized health and publicized health care inequalities in its newspaper, *The Black Panther*, while Chapter 2 will outline the extent and impact of the Party’s health care initiatives.

Chapter 1: Tactics For Survival

Drawing largely upon secondary scholarship, I will briefly contextualize the Black Panther Party’s response to a history of medical neglect and the situation of poor and black people. The Panthers’ survival programs worked so well because the Party addressed pressing inequalities and everyday survival concerns. Specifically, major factors contributing to the success of the Black Panther Party’s health care programs included its ability to structure a relevant and much-needed critique of the system and the “free clinic movement,” which provided the Panthers with willing health care professional volunteers.

⁶ John Thomas, “Fascist Medical Clinic in Jamaica,” *The Black Panther*, (April 18, 1970): 9. Thomas argues that “fascist” doctors have a monopoly on the hospitals, tools and pharmacies and that their sole interest is to make a profit. He concludes that the Black Panther Party medical clinics will restore dignity by educating people and meeting their needs.

Chapter 2: “Dramatizing the Neglect”

In the first chapter I will describe the Black Panther Party’s dramatic rhetorical approach to publicizing health inequities and its sweeping critique of the U.S. health care system. Sources include *The Black Panther* weekly newspaper, primary source publications, oral histories and secondary scholarship. The medical activism of the civil rights and Black Power movements were consistent with their larger ideologies. While civil rights health activism focused on integrating hospitals and legislation, Black Power and Panther medical activism largely rejected the medical establishment, challenged its authority, and sought to create alternate health care services which were free and community-controlled. The Party’s concerns were not only a response to contemporary health inequalities, but represented a deep-seated and historically rooted distrust among African Americans toward the health care system.

Chapter 3: Voices Of The Medical Cadre

Chapter two recounts the stories of the Black Panthers’ many free health care programs, including medical team prison visits, free clinics and ambulance services. It will draw from primary source newspapers and oral histories with the Black Panther Party and its physicians who were involved in the programs. The health care programs varied by chapter and availability of resources. This part will focus on themes relating to the practical pursuit of an empowering and community-controlled approach to health care. Many of the Panthers who participated in these programs remember their experiences fondly and went on to participate in other types of activism.

The historiography of the Black Panther Party is relatively new. In the 1960s, the media publicized a monolithic image of the Black Panthers as violent and separatist, despite their community service programs and willingness to work with people of any color. This popular image of black men with guns still remains part of our collective memory of the 1960's & 70's.⁷ Soon after the Party's demise in 1980, former Panthers began to write their own history—this collective effort to preserve a more accurate approach to their varied activities resulted in people's archives all over the country, containing invaluable primary sources. During the 1990s, numerous Black Panthers wrote memoirs about their experiences in the Party, including leader Elaine Brown and founding member David Hilliard.⁸ Published around the same time, edited compilations included essays and collaborations by both former Panthers and historians.⁹

Some Panthers are still engaged in preserving the history and memory of the Party. The Huey P. Newton Foundation, founded by former Panther David Hilliard and Fredrika Newton, oversees book publications and has deposited some of the national chapter's most important documents at Stanford University. Former Panther Billy "X" Jennings probably owns the most extensive collection of Panther manuscripts, photography and memorabilia in

⁷ Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon*, (New York, NY: New Press, 2007).

⁸ Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's story*, (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1992); David Hilliard, *This Side of Glory: the Autobiography of David Hilliard and the Story of the Black Panther Party*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993). These are just two examples of commonly cited memoirs written by former Panthers.

⁹ For an edited compilation from Panthers and historians, see Charles E. Jones, *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1998).

his at-home archive. He has assisted many authors with their publications and has worked alongside the production of movies and documentaries about the Party.¹⁰

Recent work in the history of the black freedom struggle aims to challenge the accepted history of the Black Panther Party, as well as the traditional narrative of the civil rights movement, which has concentrated primarily on the South, beginning with the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* through the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The construction of civil rights as nonviolent frames the shift in activity to the north and Black Power as a “wrong turn” toward violence. Recently, historians Robert Self, Matthew Countryman, and others argue that the differences between civil rights and Black Power should not be understood as a nonviolent-violent dichotomy, but as a new form of activism that was also a significant part of the African American freedom struggle.¹¹ In addition, other scholars have suggested that the violent Black Panther image distorts the history of self-defense tactics that were used by activists when necessary, even in the South. Timothy Tyson’s account of Robert F. Williams, a leader of the National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the 1950s, shows that the decision to take up arms for self-defense, to “meet violence with violence,” was not uncommon. Southern civil rights movement participants occasionally viewed the latter as a necessary tactic when all else failed, just as nonviolence was a tactic to

¹⁰ For information about the Huey P. Newton Foundation, see “Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation, Inc.,” www.Blackpanther.org, accessed on March 29, 2011.; Billy “X” correspondence with author. Billy “X” has provided many historians with archival sources, including Curtis Austin, author of *Up Against the Wall*.

¹¹ Robert Self, “The Black Panther Party and the Long Civil Rights Era” in Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams, ed. *In search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Matthew Countryman *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Jeanne F. Theoharis, Komozi Woodard, and Matthew Countryman, *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

underscore white violence.¹² Martin Luther King feared the term Black Power would repel white allies, but believed in the need for what it articulated. Tyson emphasizes how important King's nonviolence was as a tactic to mobilize the church. Yet even King himself, an advisor close to him noted, at one point early in the movement had "an arsenal" in his home.¹³

The Black Panther Party's approach targeted specific issues and needs in their respective suburban and urban communities. The Panthers have often been pegged as an urban-centric organization emerging from urban traditions.¹⁴ The urban chapters were inevitably influenced by their history and surroundings but the national chapter's framework for the Party drew largely upon southern culture. In one of the most recent studies, historian Donna Jean Murch argues that the founding of the Black Panther Party in Oakland grew from the experiences of black migrants from the South who moved to California during a post-World War II economic boom. Because of their shared oppression and regional proximity, they developed a strong sense of neighborhood and student culture which gradually emerged out of what she terms the "entropy of young migrants." The decision to take up arms and the adoption of the pig as a symbol for the police was rooted in the southern experience.¹⁵

Additionally, the Black Panther Party attracted members because it addressed the overarching, everyday concerns of black people in America. Historian Curtis Austin suggests that the "genius of the Black Panther Party" was in the way it "observed, analyzed, and articulated the extreme conditions under which most blacks lived" and then "formulated

¹² Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*.

¹³ Tyson, "Martin Luther King and the Southern Dream of Freedom."

¹⁴ Self, "The Black Panther Party and the Long Civil Rights Era."

¹⁵ Donna Jean Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press 2010).

extreme solutions to these problems.”¹⁶ Historians also point out how the Black Panthers’ theory of uniting with oppressed people around the world was a critique of colonization on the global, federal, and local levels, citing independence movements around the world.¹⁷

Although I will engage the history of the Black Panther Party critically, this is not a story of violence either by or against the Party, as that approach to their history has already been studied at length.¹⁸ Surprisingly, most current literature on the Black Panther Party does not discuss the lasting impact of its community service programs. Indeed many assume the programs ended along with the demise of the Party. On the contrary, some of its programs were able to survive into the 1980s or took on new forms. These assumption help explain why, in the midst of the maturing of historiography of the Black Panther Party itself, we know very little about the Panthers’ approaches to health care. Many of the volunteers at the clinics, including health care professionals, medical students and rank-and-file Panthers, remained active in health care politics and grassroots medicine even after the clinics had closed. So far, only sociologist Alondra Nelson has addressed the Black Panther Party’s theory of health care delivery at-length. While her dissertation focuses mainly on the various Black Power conceptions of health care, her forthcoming book will be the first to historicize the Black Panther Party’s on-the-ground health care activities.¹⁹

¹⁶ Curtis Austin, *Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party* (Fayetteville, AK: University of Arkansas Press, 2006), 59.

¹⁷ Self, “The Black Panther Party and the Long Civil Rights Era.”

¹⁸ See Austin, *Up Against the Wall*. This is a thoughtful history of violence in and against the Party. Former Panther Billy “X” Jennings believes that this is the most accurate account of the Party.

¹⁹ Alondra Nelson, “Black Power, Biomedicine and the Politics of Knowledge.” (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2003); “Department of Sociology” Columbia University Online. <http://www.sociology.columbia.edu/fac-bios/nelson/faculty.html>, accessed on March 28, 2011.

The Black Panther Party health clinics were partnerships between the Panthers and its communities. Panthers engaged volunteers, participants and a donor base from the people they served. The stories of the health care programs in this thesis, told by the Panthers themselves, demonstrate the sincerity of their efforts to provide community care. Because of the paucity of information about these efforts, I conducted oral histories with those involved in these programs and from them I will also chart the new directions taken by people and programs after the Party disbanded in 1980.

Oral history has helped scholars retrieve knowledge of the activities of Black Panther Party, but very little information on tape has been made available for public consumption.²⁰ Some critics of oral history methodology argue that these interviews are only partially credible because subjective memories cannot rival empirical evidence. Others suggest that these narratives can tell a story of the past which would otherwise go untold.²¹ I have used oral histories to provide qualitative and quantitative facts about the Black Panther Party health clinics because there is little archival information or secondary research about them available. These oral histories have not only provided evidence, but also gave me insight into how experiences are remembered and incorporated into one's own life story. Although I was granted inside access to some of the Panthers' personal archives and collections, many of their documents remain in their personal possession because some Panthers feel that

²⁰ Austin, *Up Against the Wall*; Nelson, *Black Power, Biomedicine and the Politics of Knowledge*; Murch, *Living for the City*. The Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project has provided their oral histories of Panthers through an easily accessible website compilation.

²¹ "Oral History" in Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, ed. *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century History and Theory*, (New York: New York University Press, 1999). This article raises critiques of using oral history as evidence.

universities can be inconvenient to potential users or render their materials inaccessible to the ordinary public.²²

²² Personal correspondence with Billy “X” Jennings. I was limited by time and funds in the number of former Panthers I was able to interview. Additionally, my trip to meet former Panthers was concentrated in California and Washington.

CHAPTER 1: TACTICS FOR SURVIVAL

Near Dalton, Georgia, a woman was injured in a car crash. The closest hospital advertised “no Negroes,” so an ambulance was summoned from 66 miles away to take her to the closest hospital that treated black persons.²³

A 70-year-old man with white skin and blue-gray eyes was hit by an automobile. The motorist who hit the man rushed him to [Georgia’s] Grady Municipal Hospital. The physician worked to save the patient’s life while the family was notified of the accident. The first family member to arrive was the patient’s [black] son-in-law. “What! Have we put a nigger in the white ward?” Still unconscious, the patient was wheeled across the street through the rain to the black ward in the old building.²⁴

Both patients died in the black hospital ward. The first woman was a Young Women’s Christian Association executive and a college dean while the second patient was the father-in-law of Walter White, the black son-in-law and executive director of the NAACP. Clearly, both were prominent African Americans and were still subjected to inferior medical care. Open race-based discrimination in the hospital system existed well into the 1960s. Worsening matters, in 1965, the two hundred remaining black hospitals were closed in the name of integration; black people would not fare well in white segregated facilities.²⁵ Health care mirrored other major racial inequalities at the time. Residential segregation, created by unfair hiring practices, white flight and restrictive housing covenants, was a major factor contributing to health disparities.²⁶ From 1947 to 1971, segregation in hospitals was a

²³ Preston P. Reynolds, “Hospitals and Civil Rights, 1945 – 1963: The Case of *Simkins v. Moses H. Cone Memorial Hospital*” *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 126;11 (June 1, 1997): 898-899.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Vanessa Northington Gamble, *Making a Place for Ourselves: The Black Hospital Movement 1920-1945*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Gamble tells the history of black activists who advocated for black hospitals because they believed it would be the most promising way to achieve decent medical care.

²⁶ Ibid; For a history about how racism caused residential segregation using Detroit as a case study, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

result of separate-but-equal legislation exacerbated by uneven allocation of funds through the Hill Burton Act, which provided \$3.7 billion to public hospitals across the United States while permitting separate-but-equal facilities until 1954. One observer refers to the problems of the postwar “Negro medical ghetto” and opportunistic white physicians who looked to set up private practices as “medicaid mills.”²⁷ The advent of large urban teaching hospitals in the 1950s worsened the situation for poor inner-city black residents.²⁸ An observer at an academic hospital noticed that young doctors only treated poor patients for what they can “learn about medicine by treating them.” Another observer noted that, at the outpatient clinic, the physician reinforces racist stereotypes that “these [poor and black] people are unwanted as private clientele” and influence further decisions “about where to practice and what kind of practice to establish.”²⁹

In the Black Panther Party’s perspective, injustices in health care paralleled those in every other sector of society. It was in this milieu that the Black Panther Party would structure its radical opposition against the establishment of the U.S. government and the inequalities produced by capitalism and racism.

The Rise Of The Black Panther Party

I should have known that in an atmosphere where false promises are daily realities, where deferred dreams are nightly facts, where acts of unpunished violence toward Negroes are a way of life, nonviolence would eventually be seriously questioned.³⁰

²⁷ Michael Byrd and Linda Clayton, *An American Health Dilemma: Race, Medicine, and Health Care in the United States, 1900-2000*, (New York: Routledge, 2002): 351.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 329

²⁹ *Ibid*, 206-207

³⁰ Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010).

Even Martin Luther King understood the ways in which the civil rights integration efforts in the South had failed. Although the civil rights movement in the South successfully underscored white violence and brought about landmark legislation, it did little to challenge the white power structure. In 1966, Stokely Carmichael, a former leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), articulated the need for a break from civil rights integrationism and an attempt to “close ranks” within the larger African American freedom struggle; he urged black Americans to unite and build institutions, organizations and an alternative value system to that of white America. Stokely Carmichael outlined a unified approach for black self-determination and self-respect, which he coined as “Black Power.” Carmichael, opposed to what he saw as the racist and greedy hegemonic white value system, called upon black people to establish new and alternate institutions which would serve their direct needs and interests.³¹ The Black Power framework provided enough leeway for a wide variety of black activists with diverse perspectives and tactics to participate.³²

Due to government ineffectiveness to enforce the Civil Rights Act of 1964, black activists in the South were drawn to Black Power in large numbers and developed new tactics to gain political power and community control. Civil rights activists in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, famous for their bus boycotts and sit-ins, joined the Lowndes County Freedom Organization in Alabama to raise black political participation

³¹ Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) and Charles V. Hamilton, “Black Power: Its Need and Substance,” in Ture & Hamilton, ed. *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Random House, 1967), 44.

³² Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, “The Art of Black Power,” an introduction to “New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement,” (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006). Collins and Crawford describe how two main movements emerged in the Black Power movement, revolutionary nationalism and cultural nationalism. The Black Panthers belonged to the former, while the latter worked to describe and embrace a black culture, encompassing a black aesthetic, black arts, and African history and culture.

through voter registration. In Louisiana, the Deacons for Defense organized around policing the Klu Klux Klan.³³ The Black Panther Party incorporated tactics from these two organizations into their own approach. In 1966, two student activists at Merritt College, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, drew upon these changing civil rights tactics in the South to organize the most long-lasting and prominent Black Power organization, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in Oakland, California. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was one of the most prominent Black Power organizations because it was the largest (with an estimated sixty six chapters) and engaged with a radical critique of racism and capitalism.³⁴ Core membership in each chapter ranged from less than ten to over thirty, although many more members showed interest initially.³⁵ The Party's name and symbol of a crouching black panther was derived from the Lowndes Organization; it symbolized the fact that black people, like a panther, would not be violent until seriously threatened. The Party conceptualized a program of self-defense through community control of police and openly displayed guns to exhibit their willingness to defend themselves and their communities "by any means necessary."³⁶

Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale first articulated the conceptual framework of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Newton and Seale described the plight of black people within America as a "colonized inner Third World" who "suffer from the colonial plight

³³ Murch, *Living for the City*, 121

³⁴ Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 143, 359

³⁵ Sandra Ford interview with author, Portland, OR, March 2, 2011. Ford remembers that there were less than ten dedicated members in Portland; Aaron Dixon interview with author, Seattle, WA, January 10, 2011. Aaron Dixon recalls that over three hundred people showed up the first few Panther meetings in Seattle, but only thirty dedicated members remained after a few months.

³⁶ Murch, *Living for the City*, 120, 132

more than any ethnic group in the country.”³⁷ Accordingly, the Panthers drew largely from Marxist/Leninist theory and sought to educate and organize poor and working-class people of any color, including the unemployed or unemployable poor, for whom they used Marx’s trope the “lumpen proletariat” or “the People,” a trope from Mao Zedong’s communist China.³⁸ Although the Panthers drew many ideas from Marxist/Leninist theory, they differed from each other here in that Marxism intended to organize the workers and deemed the lumpen as useless.³⁹ Although white people were allowed to join the Black Panther Party only through its satellite chapter, the International Committee to Combat Fascism, the Panthers had members from diverse backgrounds, including Japanese, Native American and Chicano members.⁴⁰ The Black Panther Party taught its members theory in weekly political education classes where Panthers were required to read revolutionary works from the likes of Vladimir Lenin, Malcolm X, Franz Fanon and Mao Zedong. Many Panthers developed a social consciousness and some even learned to read in these classes.⁴¹

Considering their revolutionary pioneers and rampant police brutality in black communities, the Black Panthers conceptualized a program of self-defense through community control of police. After the violent suppression of the Watts and Attica rebellions in 1965 and 1961, it became clear that law enforcement agencies would seek to suppress rather than protect or serve black communities. Huey P. Newton, co-founder, studied California laws and found a little-known loophole which allowed public display of firearms.

³⁷ Huey P. Newton, ed. Toni Morrison, *To Die For the People*, (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2009), 96.

³⁸ Curtin Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 53.

³⁹ *Ibid*, xx.

⁴⁰ “Seattle Black Panther Party History and Memory Project,” Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project, <http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/BPP.html>, accessed on March 28, 2011

⁴¹ Jon Rice, “The World of the Illinois Panthers,” in *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South 1940-1980* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2003), 49.

This open display of guns and militant defense approach made the Party appealing to black urban youth.⁴²

“Survival Pending Revolution”

In 1968, the Black Panther Party removed Self-Defense from its name and initiated its most far-reaching survival program to provide free breakfasts for schoolchildren. The Party used the breakfast program as a platform to talk about the links between economic status and education, and how black children cannot learn without adequate food.⁴³ During breakfast, the Panthers would teach children about murdered Panther heroes such as, George Jackson, about drug abuse and that “socialism can work.”⁴⁴ The Seattle chapter breakfast program operated out of five locations which, combined, fed three hundred children per day.⁴⁵ After much success with the free breakfast program, in 1971, chairman Bobby Seale called for the Black Panther Party to shift its entire focus toward organizing around survival programs which he believed were “more important than the gun.” Seale rejected the idea that the Party was undergoing a major ideological shift, and maintained that people would “unify around these [survival] programs; if police try to stop them, they’ll have the whole community on their hands.”⁴⁶ Grounded in beliefs of egalitarianism and efforts to unite those who they

⁴² Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 143.

⁴³ Murch, *Living for the City*, 185; JoNina M. Abron, “Serving the People”: The Survival Programs of the Black Panther Party *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, 179-182.

⁴⁴ “Breakfast, clinic programs belie militant Panther image” *The Oregonian*, Friday, November 12, 1971.

⁴⁵ Taressa Stone, “The Sidney Miller Clinic—Breakfast and More” April 27, *University of Washington Daily*.

⁴⁶ Gerald West, “Bobby Seale Vows Panthers to Work Peacefully in System” *Chicago Tribune*, February 8, 1972, 5.

believed to be the proletariat, the Panthers initiated programs for “survival pending revolution,” in order to “help people survive until their consciousness is raised.”⁴⁷

Survival programs varied by chapter, but were likely to include free food giveaways, free clothing programs, liberation schools, free health clinics and free sickle cell anemia testing. Each chapter’s programs were flexible and responded directly to the needs of its community. In Sacramento, Billy “X” remembers Panthers directing traffic at a dangerous intersection without adequate streetlights; they did this to draw attention to the problem until the police responded.⁴⁸ Liberation schools included comprehensive education programs which, according to the Panthers, taught “true history and our role in the present-day society.” The Oakland Community School was one of the most successful educational initiatives, running from 1971 to 1982.⁴⁹ Under the leadership of Elaine Brown and other female leaders in the early 1970s, the Black Panther Party got involved in electoral politics. They succeeded in registering 35,000 black voters and were responsible for the election of Oakland, California’s first black mayor.⁵⁰

There exists much debate among scholars about the reasons for the Black Panthers’ shift from violence toward electoral politics and community survival programs. Some have suggested that shift represents a move away from revolution and toward reform.⁵¹ However, the Black Panthers argued that electoral politics and working within the system were a way

⁴⁷ Abron, “Serving the People,” 179.

⁴⁸ Billy “X” Jennings interview with author, Sacramento, CA, January 5, 2011. On Billy’s website, “It’s About Time,” he lists over sixty survival programs started by the Black Panther Party.

⁴⁹ Abron, “Serving the People,” 50.

⁵⁰ Murch, *Living for the City*, 221.

⁵¹ Austin, *Up Against the Wall*.

to maintain community control.⁵² Throughout all of its initiatives, the Black Panther Party engaged with a radical critique of the establishment and insisted that its survival programs were revolutionary. Bobby Seale said the programs were established “not because we’re reformists...But (it is) because these programs meet basic human needs and are tools and institutions which people can organize around.”⁵³ Historian Donna Murch attributes the shift in organizing tactics to police and FBI backlash.⁵⁴ When asked about reasons for this change, former Panther Billy X remembers that the Panthers were young, so they were always trying new organizing tactics to see what worked.⁵⁵ Throughout all the Black Panther Party initiatives, it never abandoned militant tactics and radical rhetoric. The Party was even accused of intimidating companies to donate to survival programs. Once, the Seattle chapter was charged with bombing a stingy Safeway because it only donated of a carton of eggs.⁵⁶ Another Panther chapter boycotted McDonalds until it donated meat.⁵⁷ When business owners saw the Panthers coming, they would “hand over the food,” says Ms. Ford, who believed the militant Panther image worked in their favor.⁵⁸

The Black Panther Party’s free health care services exemplify how the Party maintained a revolutionary approach to organizing while providing a much-needed service for its communities. In 1972 the Black Panther Party added health care to its Ten Point Platform.

⁵² Murch, *Living for the City*, 221.

⁵³ Mark Gladstone, “Panthers Provide Food, Distribute Sickle Cell Tests,” *Washington Post* 1972.

⁵⁴ Murch, *Living for the City*, 169.

⁵⁵ Billy “X” Jennings interviewed by author.

⁵⁶ “Black Panther Says He Made Bomb,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, (June 25, 1970).

⁵⁷ “Safeway Boycott” *Afroamerican Journal*, (August 7, 1969), accessed through Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project.

⁵⁸ Sandra Ford interview with author.

Point Six asserted: “We want completely free health care for all black and oppressed persons”:

We believe that the government must provide, free of charge, for the people, health facilities which will not only treat our illnesses, most of which have come about as a result of our oppression, but which will also develop preventive medical programs to guarantee our future survival. We believe that mass health education and research programs must be developed to give all Black and oppressed people access to advanced scientific and medical information, so we may provide ourselves with proper medical attention and care.⁵⁹

The Panthers started free health programs because they wanted to create an example of how the health care system should function. They drafted a Second constitution which called for “socialized medicine through revolution” and accused the government of genocide and purposefully allowing black people to die from preventable causes.⁶⁰ Black Panther Party health care initiatives varied by chapter, but notable programs included sickle-cell anemia testing, ambulance response programs, medical team prison visits, immunizations, well-child programs and maternal education.⁶¹

Violence and Decline

President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed The Kerner Commission to investigate the cause of numerous urban rebellions in the 1960s. The Kerner Commission identified “police misconduct” as the root cause of rebellions and that it “contributes directly to the risk of civil disorder.” Local law enforcement agencies and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) made it their full-time job to suppress and eliminate supposed black militancy and black

⁵⁹ Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation, *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs*, (Albuquerque, NM, 2008), 75.

⁶⁰ “Black Panther Party 2nd Constitution,” Vertical Files, Civil Liberties - Blacks - Black Nationalism - Black Panthers, Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan, (1978).

⁶¹ Judson Jeffries, *Comrades: A Local History of the Black Panther Party*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007): 120-125.

nationalist groups.⁶² Accordingly, law enforcement agencies focused on destroying the Black Panther Party. In 1968, J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI, told the Senate that the Black Panther Party represented the “greatest threat to the internal security of the country.” FBI mobilization against the Panthers took extralegal and personal forms, because cops were likely to oppose the Party’s radical politics.⁶³

Curtis Austin argues that government policies and organizations, such as the FBI and the COINTELPRO (Counter Intelligence Program), were the most determining factor in the decline of the Black Panther Party.⁶⁴ In an interview, even the former mayor of Seattle, Wes Uhlman, pointed out the brutal lawlessness of police actions against the Black Panther Party. Uhlman recalls that people were “naturally a little frightened” because the Panthers made some “pretty outrageous statements.” Despite the fact that the Seattle Panthers were “fairly benign,” Uhlman was pressured by the police to conduct a raid. The mayor declined the request but, counter to his request, an FBI informant was already living in the Panther headquarters and only noticed a minor infringement. The fact that the police disregarded the mayor’s advice to not raid the Panther clinic shows the extent to which the police worked extralegally.⁶⁵

In 1972, the lawyer of the Black Panther Party, Charles Garry, predicted that its participation in community service programs would bolster community support so strongly that the Panthers “will be much more of a threat than they ever were when they were carrying

⁶² Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 192.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 191.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 32.

⁶⁵ Wes Uhlman interview with the Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project.

guns.”⁶⁶ Historian Curtis Austin argues that the government was most scared of the Panther survival program approach because of its ability to indoctrinate and organize the community; he says that the “government knew full well that on any day and at any time it could defeat the Panthers’ rag-tag army.” The FBI tried to stymie Panther efforts by resorting to pouring chemicals on stacks of *The Black Panther* newspaper and sending letters to churches requesting that they not host free breakfast programs.⁶⁷

A “Free Clinic Movement”

In 1965, as part of Great Society anti-poverty programs, President Lyndon B. Johnson mobilized with provision for a neighborhood health center program; this would be first major government initiative after the New Deal to extend health care to the poor and underserved.⁶⁸ Soon after Johnson’s program, government-funded neighborhood health centers sprung up nationwide alongside those started by the nonprofit sector. Free medical clinics were conceptualized as a facility which offers a structured approach to care offering health care services for free or based upon a sliding scale.⁶⁹ Newly established government-funded and nonprofit neighborhood health centers (most commonly called free medical clinics) took a firm public stance that health care is a human right and engaged with a criticism about the contemporary state of health care policy.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Paul Delaney, “Panthers Exchanging Guns for Ballots,” *The New York Times*, (August 20, 1972): 1.

⁶⁷ Billy “X” interview with author; Abron, “Serving the People,” 183.

⁶⁸ Byrd and Clayton, *An American Health Dilemma*, 334.

⁶⁹ Jerome L. Schwartz, “Free Health Clinics: What Are They?” *Health Right News*, (January 1971).

⁷⁰ *An American Health Dilemma*, 217-219.

Although free medical clinics had existed prior to the sixties, this surge in facilities was a direct outgrowth of sixties New Left and radical politics. A white physician who volunteered at a Black Panther Party in Seattle remembers the political milieu:

A lot of people got pretty radicalized during this time because of the Vietnam War...At demonstrations, there was a group of [volunteer] physicians and nurses with white coats who would go around helping people. These things tended to radicalize you...but I think the most altruistic output from all that was the free clinic movement. It was based upon the idea that things are going to hell in southeast Asia but maybe we can do something to improve the health of people in Seattle.⁷¹

A flurry of literature identified recently established health clinics in the late-sixties as part of a new phenomenon: the “free clinic movement.” According to a volunteer, the purpose of labeling free health clinics as part of a movement was to “legitimize what a lot of people were already doing freelance.”⁷² Although many other public health clinics existed prior to the 1960s, this movement sought to identify itself as a concerted effort to survey and unite clinics with an unabashed stance that health care is human right. The movement developed a discourse along with its name, proclaiming that it would provide health care free-of-charge regardless of a patient’s ability to pay. According to the National Free Clinic Council (NFCC), a clinic would be considered part of the movement under a few conditions: it acknowledged health care as a right, provided free care, was controlled by the community, treated patients with dignity and recognized the failures of the contemporary health care system.⁷³

⁷¹ John Holcenberg interview with Trevor Griffey, given to author in personal correspondence with Griffey on November 1, 2010.

⁷² Jessie Schaefer interview with author, Seattle, WA, (January 10, 2010).

⁷³ “National Free Clinic Council Newsletter,” *Huey P. Newton Foundation Inc. Collection, Stanford University*, box 17; folder 9, “info on our medical clinics 1 of 2.” The date of publication is not listed on the newsletter.

Surveying the clinics and gathering quantitative data was elusive. In 1967, a study which claimed to be the first national survey of free medical clinics found that “[t]he free clinic movement is dynamic and spreading, as evidenced by the 60 new free clinics in 1970.” In that same year, a total of 917 physicians served in 35 clinics.⁷⁴ Numerous regional organizations responded to new health clinics in an effort to acknowledge and legitimize grassroots clinics through funding and organization efforts. The National Free Clinic Council (NFCC) was established in order to reiterate common goals among diverse clinics and regions. The goals of the NFCC were to provide funding, disseminate information, and assist with quality improvement and starting-up new clinics. The NFCC held conferences and published a weekly journal. Further, it provided substantial grants to clinics; among thirty six health clinics, two Black Panther clinics received \$15,000.⁷⁵

Among the first and most publicized of these 1960s health clinics was the Haight Ashbury Free Clinic in San Francisco, a city where many young people in the sixties counterculture migrated. The clinic was established in 1967 to address health concerns prevalent among the counterculture, such as sexually transmitted diseases and drug-related illnesses, in a non-judgemental way. The model of Haight Ashbury set the precedent for the free clinic movement: its approach to care was modeled on the population it sought to serve.⁷⁶ A clinic very similar to Haight Ashbury, the Open Door clinic in Seattle, would provide assistance to the Black Panther Party clinic in its start-up operations and sent two of its physicians to work with the Party. The Open Door clinic in Seattle “provided a place for

⁷⁴ Schwartz, “Free Health Clinics: What Are They?”

⁷⁵ “National Free Clinic Council Newsletter,” Huey P. Newton Foundation Inc. Collection, Stanford University, box 17; folder 9, “info on our medical clinics 1 of 2.”

⁷⁶ Gregory Weiss, *Grassroots Medicine: the Story of America’s Free Health Clinics* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

people to crash, some counseling and screening for venereal disease or pelvic inflammatory disease.” Jesse Schaefer worked as a liaison from the Open Door clinic to the Black Panther Party clinic and talks about the model of care they both followed; he remembers that people would call him when they overdosed and he would just sit alongside them if they needed medical care, without judging or asking questions.⁷⁷ A physician who spent time volunteering for the Black Panther remembers the difficulties of treating people rejected by the mainstream facilities:

In order to get support they said ‘we’ll take care of anybody’. I got this call to come to this house and there was this guy who had been shot. I had surmised that he had been in some operation...not related to the Panthers or anything. They [Panthers] would end up with some fringes coming to the clinic; I saw ulcers caused by skin poppers and people who had injected peanut butter, but most of the time, the medical stuff was standard.⁷⁸

Literature about the “free clinic movement” written during the sixties identifies a separate category for clinics started by political activists, dubbed by authors as “neighborhood-type clinics.” These clinics were established by social activists, including the Young Lord Organization, Black Panther Party, the Patriot Party and the Latin American Defense Organization.⁷⁹ The Young Lords, a Puerto Rican nationalist organization, regarded health care as one of its foremost initiatives. Notably, the Young Lords and the Black Panther Party in Harlem had a longstanding relationship and partnered to raise awareness about lead poisoning from paint used in public and low-income housing; their persistent petitioning resulted in a government ban on lead paint use by landlords. Further, their activism directly resulted in the Bureau of Lead Poisoning Control established by the New York City Health

⁷⁷ Jessie Schaefer interview with author.

⁷⁸ John Holcenberg interview with Trevor Griffey.

⁷⁹ “Jerome L. Schwartz “Free health clinics: what are they?”

Department.⁸⁰ In Chicago, Panther Bobby Rush remembers that the Panthers' coalition with the Young Lords and Young Patriots (an organization for young Appalachian whites) was the “first time the Rainbow Coalition was used.”⁸¹

The free medical clinic efforts were ideological, pragmatic and provide insight into how the Panthers worked with people outside of the Party. The beginnings of the Black Panther clinics were similar in structure and function to many other clinics at the time. As a result of the survival programs, the Black Panthers increased their support base immensely and gained formerly unsuspecting allies—black and white. They appealed to more conservative groups within the black community, including the NAACP and Episcopal churches, which provided large donations to the Party and allowed the Panthers to use their church space for breakfast programs.⁸²

The efficacy of a free medical approach to health care for the poor is contested. The Black Panthers underscored the importance of community-control of all its services, especially the free health clinics. Some black professionals who observed the government-funded free clinic trend criticized it as “medical colonialism” and argued that the government was trying to “make money off the ghettos.” Critics accused white physicians who directed the programs to be ignorant “Suburban Oriented Physicians.”⁸³ Further, government-funded free medical clinics hurt black professionals working in the vicinity and contributed to the

⁸⁰ Theresa Horvath, “The Health Initiatives of the Young Lords Party: How a group of 1960s radicals made health a revolutionary concern,” Hofstra University, David Rogers Health Care Colloquium, Weill Cornell Medical School, New York.; Denise Oliver interviewed by Jaisal Noor for wagingnonviolence.org; For an article in which the Black Panthers discuss the problems of lead poisoning, see “Lead Poisoning,” *The Black Panther*, (November 30, 1972).

⁸¹ Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, “Birth of the Black Panthers, 1966-1967” *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History Of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990): 528.

⁸² Murch, *Living in the City*. 23, 172.

⁸³ *An American Health Dilemma*. 413.

closure of black hospitals, as mentioned earlier. Thus, black people would have to receive care from hospitals or free medical clinics with nearly all-white staff and administration.⁸⁴ As argued, this form of hierarchy would perpetuate African American economic dependence on white institutions.⁸⁵ This criticism of white-led free medical clinics underscores the importance of the Black Panther Party approach to health care because it advocated self-determination and community control of health institutions.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 141.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 416.

CHAPTER 2: “DRAMATIZING THE NEGLECT”

Since health is an integral part of lived experience, it became a crucial battleground during the southern civil rights movement. Postwar dreams of a better life were crushed for African Americans as scientific and medical advancements were not accessible to all. Popular 1970s black musician, Gil Scott Heron, sums up this blatant government failure, worsened by the Cold War as government funding was diverted away from social services toward technology and scientific progress: “I can’t pay no doctor bills but Whitey’s on the moon.”¹ Civil rights health care activism, like the movement in general, focused on legal, legislative and conciliatory initiatives. For example, the NAACP spearheaded letter writing campaigns responding to individual acts of discrimination and black health professionals fought, somewhat unsuccessfully, for integration into the highly segregated American Medical Association.²

During the civil rights movement in the South, the Medical Committee for Human Rights (MCHR) was founded in 1964 as a physician activist group composed of some black and mostly white health care professionals. The MCHR protested segregation and separate-but-equal clauses in hospital administration. During the summer of 1965, the MCHR assisted with student activists in the Southern Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). MCHR members marched alongside demonstrators to provide first aid and emergency care when activists were subject to police and white violence.³ After the civil rights movement in the South moved northward, the organization

¹ Gil Scott Heron, “Whitey on the Moon,” <http://www.gilscottheron.com/lywhitey.html>, accessed on March 20, 2011.

² *An American Health Dilemma*, 186-191.

³ John Dittmer, *The Good Doctors: The Medical Committee for Human Rights and the Struggle for Social Justice in Health Care*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), 18-20.

would continue its tradition of activism and provide outspoken support for the Black Panther Party.

As a result of concerted civil rights medical activism, there was a short period of improvement in access to health care for black Americans. Civil rights successes in education and employment led to an increase of black socioeconomic status which indirectly affected health care; but health care civil rights activism ultimately took a back seat to education. Despite the persistent efforts of civil rights health care activists, huge race-based health disparities remained.⁴ The health initiatives of the Black Panthers can be correlated with the shift from the non-violent, morally exhortatory language of the civil rights movement to the more insistently radical rhetoric of Black Power activists. Indeed, though civil rights activists critiqued the capitalistic nature of health care they focused primarily on reformist, conciliatory efforts. The Black Panthers were responding to a different historical moment, when integration had been achieved on the legal front, but was consistently stymied by the racialized economic structures and the capitalist system. For the purpose of alarming the public and drawing attention to serious inequities, the Black Panther Party's weekly newspaper, *The Black Panther*, referred to the medical establishment as "fascist" and "genocidal."⁵ Dr. Tolbert Small, a black physician volunteer for the Panthers, asserts that the use of the term genocide was a tactic for "dramatizing the neglect," because "the statistics show that it [the neglect] was genocidal."⁶

⁴ David R. Williams and Chiquita Collins, "U.S. Socioeconomic and Racial Differences in Health: Patterns and Explanations" *Annual Review of Sociology*. 21:349-86 (1995) 361; *An American Health Dilemma*, 290.

⁵ For an example of this hyperbolic rhetoric, see "Vacaville 'Medical' Facility," *The Black Panther*, (October 28, 1972), 13.

⁶ Tolbert Small, interview with author. Dr. Small said that the phrase "black genocide" was first coined by Elaine Brown.

“Serve the People, Body and Soul”

During the 1972 three-day-long Black Community Survival Conference, the Black Panthers gave out two thousand bags of food, one thousand pairs of shoes and tested hundreds for sickle cell anemia. At the conference, the Panthers advertised for free services and pledged to “serve the people, body and soul.”⁷ All Black Panther services were called “survival programs,” alluding to their inclusive approach to health, which encompassed adequate food, employment, housing and a physical state of wellbeing. Emory Douglas, the renowned Black Panther Minister of Culture, used cartoons to convey this message to a broad readership, ranging from the illiterate to the intelligentsia (See Figure 1).⁸

The Black Panthers embraced the holistic and rejected internalized bioscience as practiced by the medical establishment. Frantz Fanon, one of the Black Panthers’ favorite theorists, was a black Martinican psychiatrist and philosopher living in France during the Algerian independence struggle. He argued that Western medicine in a colonial society was essentially exploitive, in which the doctor-patient dynamic becomes the colonizer-colonized, as the doctor is usually white and the patient not.⁹ This colonizing bioscience, practiced by the medical establishment, turned sick people into their diseased body parts. In his autobiography, Black Panther Ship Shockley tells about his struggles with sickle cell anemia and the white physicians who saw him only as a fascinating and strange case study:

⁷ “Chairman Bobby Seale for Mayor!” *The Black Panther*, (May 20, 1972).

⁸ Sam Durant ed., *Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas*, (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), 130.

⁹ Hussein Abdilahi Bulhan, *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression*, (New York: Plenum Press, 1985).



Figure 2. Emory Douglas, "Serving The People Body and Soul," *The Black Panther*, (March 27, 1971)

The Doctor beckoned to a groups of young whites dressed in gray uniforms to stand near me as he lectured over me while I laid still in pain. “This is a classic case of Hemoglobin S disease in crisis” . . . He uncovered my midsection and encouraged a tall freckled face Intern to peer at my abdomen. “Hard isn't it?” The Intern stepped back allowing the others to do the same. “And that's not the only area that get hard,” as he smiled and glanced at the female Interns in the group, further raising the sheet for the group to observe my genitals.¹⁰

This dehumanizing experience led Shockley to think about his sickle cell anemia in more favorable terms. In his autobiography, he writes poems about sickle cell anemia as a “pain inherited by Kings” from Africa and bringing up the interesting ways that the disease provides immunity against malaria.¹¹ The Panthers criticized the government for failing to provide black and poor people without adequate care, but also perpetuating the core issues which produced poor health. In turn, the Black Panthers worked to reframe health and illness on their own terms in an empowering and politicized way.

A Structural Violence Critique

Their sickness is a result of structural violence: neither culture nor pure individual will is at fault; rather, historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces conspire to constrain individual agency. Structural violence is visited upon all those whose social status denies them access to the fruits of scientific and social progress.¹²

Poverty is well established as one of the greatest risk factors for poor health outcomes.¹³ In order to flesh out the relationship between poverty and poor health, medical anthropologists contextualize empirical findings about health disparities within theoretical

¹⁰ Ship Shockley, *Mother's Son*. (Bloomington, Indiana: Xlibris, 2009), 134; For excerpts from Shockley's autobiography, see Ship Shockley, “The Reality of Sickle Cell Anemia,” http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/Announcements/pdf/Sickle_Cell_Anemia.pdf, accessed March 20, 2011.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Paul Farmer, *Infections and Inequalities* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 79.

¹³ World Health Organization, “Chapter 1: The State of World Health” in “Bridging the Gaps.” 1995. Accessed on <http://www.who.int/whr/1995/en/index.html>.

frameworks. One of the most prominent frameworks is the structural violence critique which explains how large-scale social forces, such as poverty, racism and sexism, are embodied as individualized sickness and disease. Poor health outcomes become a symptom of belonging to the bottommost echelon in a social hierarchy.¹⁴

Prominent contemporary medical anthropologist and physician, Paul Farmer, is helpful in thinking about structural violence. Farmer emphasizes the inextricable linkage of health and political activism, which he sees as the only way to eradicate the root cause of oppression. He vigorously rejects charity, which he dismisses as “managing inequality.”¹⁵ Although Farmer addresses relative suffering among the oppressed, such as comparing the experiences of those who are poor in Haiti with those of the poor in the United States, he enjoins people to “think globally *and* locally and act in response to both levels of analysis.” Structural inequalities, Farmer insists, transcend cultural differences and national borders.¹⁶

In many ways, the Panthers critique of health care and their call for a new world order shares a great deal with Paul Farmer’s structural violence framework. The Black Panthers’ struggle was both local and international in scope. Although the Black Panthers did not use the term “structural violence,” Farmer’s framework helps to explain why they felt perfectly comfortable blaming the establishment for actively participating in the deaths of Black and poor people. The structural violence framework posits that the powerful actively participate in maintaining a system which directly or indirectly, unwittingly or not, oppresses the

¹⁴ Paul Farmer, *Pathologies and Power: Health, Human Rights and the New War on the Poor* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005) Although Farmer’s approach is a modern one, it is a call to activism and provides an additional framework for understanding the Black Panther Party’s efforts.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 226.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 159.

vulnerable.¹⁷ This type of critique was consistently used by activists throughout the African American freedom struggle. In the beginning half of the 20th century, welfare rights activists attributed their poverty to the cruel inconsistencies of a system with racist employment policies that deprived them of jobs while accusing them of being shiftless. They resisted the notion that poverty was a result of personal failures.¹⁸ Although these critiques of structural violence are similar, the solutions provided by Farmer, a prominent white physician, and those suggested by many black activists differed in interesting ways. While Farmer calls upon people with power to stand in solidarity with the oppressed, black activists exhort the oppressed to unite and push back against the establishment.

The Black Panther Party articulated its position on health and structural violence most commonly in *The Black Panther* weekly newspaper. Beginning in the 1970s, health topics increasingly surfaced on the front page and inside the paper. At only 25 cents per copy, its readership was extensive with over 125,000 issues per week sold.¹⁹ Health topics within the paper included, but were not limited to, discussions of Black Panther Party clinics, exposés on hospitals and updates on health care politics. In 1974, *The Black Panther* included an “Our Health” column; it featured educational blurbs about women’s health, immunizations, and lead poisoning. The first column articulated an agenda for mass health education in order to “give all Black and oppressed people access to advanced scientific and medical information.”²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid, 157.

¹⁸ Linda Gordon, “Black and White Visions of Welfare: Women's Welfare Activism, 1890-1945” *The Journal of American History*. vol. 78, no. 2, (September 1991): 559-59.

¹⁹ Abron, “Serving the People,” 182.

²⁰ “Our Health,” *The Black Panther*, August, 31, 1974. This was the first column of “Our Health.” Considering the Party’s shift to a service-oriented approach by 1970, the addition of this section of the paper in 1974 lagged behind other health education incentives.

Framing the causation of illness was a way in which Panthers engaged with a structural violence critique. Instead of attributing hypertension (high blood pressure) deaths to personal habits, such as a poor diet or smoking, a drawing featured in *The Black Panther* shows a visibly distressed black man under the words “HYPERTENSION KILLS...I’M HUNGRY. I’M UNEMPLOYED. I’M BLACK.” Thus, blacks suffer disproportionately from hypertension because being poor results in excessive stress exacerbated by poor nutrition—two risk factors for hypertension.²¹ The Panthers considered health care problems within a wide perspective, arguing that “one of the ways to cure hypertension is to get the community involved in curing some of its own social ills.” They concluded that the hypertension problem could only be fixed “by starting at the roots of its problem, which nine out of ten times is this corrupt system.”²²

Consistent with Black Power aims, the Panthers called for a new type of medical establishment. Articles in *The Black Panther* follow consistent narratives; the author would accuse a hospital of racism and planned genocide. Then blame is shifted to the entire “racist genocidal establishment.” Many of the hospitals critiqued in *The Black Panther* were large academic teaching hospitals or public hospitals meant to serve the poor, which the Panthers refer to as “testing places” for black and poor patients who are used as “guinea pigs.”²³ In 1973, one journalist wrote about how Oakland’s Highland Hospital values “private wealth over public health.” The author notes “the longer poor patients remain at Highland Hospital the longer the doctors can experiment on them with repeated tests and examinations.” Then,

²¹ Emory Douglass, “Hypertension Kills,” Date unknown. Billy “X” gave this clipping from the newspaper to the author in a personal correspondence.

²² “Clinic Survives Through Close Ties With Community,” *The Black Panther*, (May 18, 1974).

²³ “...In The Interests of Science,” *The Black Panther*, (December 20, 1972): 5.

the author suggests that the entire public health system in Oakland is at fault for the inability of its county hospitals to provide adequate services for the poor. The article is juxtaposed with a photo of three domineering white physicians with their arms crossed—a type of depiction which surfaced in numerous other exposés. In order to fix problems at specific hospitals, the Panthers called for a reworking of the entire system of health care which currently was only based upon “making a buck” at the cost of human lives.²⁴

Alongside this critique of health care in the United States, the Black Panthers looked toward what they saw as a more successful health care system in China. Both the Black Panther Party and the Medical Committee for Human Rights (MCHR) coordinated trips to China and publicized ways that its health care had surpassed that in the U.S. Twenty-two Panthers went to China for seven weeks as official guests of the government. Dr. Tolbert Small remembers how people in China were “very enthused about building socialism.” He recalls the Black Panther Party trip to China fondly:

They were combining western medicine with Chinese traditional medicine. They had over a million barefoot doctors who were going out into the community. They had brought an end to prostitution and an end to opium. I think we were all very impressed with their model of providing health care for the people. At that time their model was to serve the people.²⁵

Barefoot doctors were peasants and farm workers trained in basic medical care, including environmental sanitation, health education, immunization, first aid and some primary care to meet the community’s needs. This model for rural medical services was

²⁴ “City Medical Care: Private Wealth Over Public Health.” *The Black Panther*, (May 8, 1973): 1.

²⁵ Tolbert Small interview with author. He makes a point to say that China is “a completely different country now.”

included as part of Mao Zedong's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of 1965.²⁶ *The Black Panther* frequently praised the progress of Mao Zedong's People's Republic of China in training "thousands of medical personnel" and establishing clinics and hospitals in remote areas.²⁷ In addition to rural care, Mao's program structured a model for urban care to train assistants to physicians and health workers in factories.²⁸ Following the MCHR trip to China, members wrote an article in the *Health Right News* about China's "Quest for a 'New Medicine,'" discussing its medical prowess in surgery while incorporating traditional medicine, such as the use of acupuncture for anesthesia.²⁹ Dr. Tolbert Small learned how to practice acupuncture in China, which he used at the Panther clinic upon return.³⁰

It is well known that Mao's politics influenced the Panthers' stance on revolution and taking up arms for self-defense, but in fact revolutionary heroes like Mao also laid the framework for its comprehensive survival programs. Sociologist Alondra Nelson shows that the Panthers were influenced by lesser-known health care theories of Mao Zedong, Franz Fanon and Ernesto "Che" Guevara. A chapter in Mao's *Little Red Book* called "Serving the People" became the inspiration for the title of "People's programs" and many of the Panthers' free health clinics. Guevara and Fanon were both physicians who had stressed the important role of health care in social change. In addition to Fanon's aforementioned discussion of medical colonialism, he believed in the humanizing potential of the case study to construct narratives of the oppressed. Likewise, Guevara was an Argentinian revolutionary

²⁶ Victor W. Sidel, "The Barefoot Doctors of the People's Republic of China," *New England Journal of Medicine* (June 15, 1972). This description is provided in the abstract.

²⁷ "Four Films Capture China's Great Strides" *The Black Panther* December 8, 1973

²⁸ Sidel, "The Barefoot Doctors of the People's Republic of China."

²⁹ "China: A Quest for a New Medicine," *Health Right News*, (May 1972).

³⁰ "The RW Interview: Dr. Tolbert Small: Journey of a People's Doctor" *The Revolutionary Worker*. (February 17, 2002); Tolbert Small interview with author.

physician (with the self-titled role of “fighter-doctor”) who believed in the centrality of health workers in revolutions and the importance of medical institutions in an egalitarian society.³¹

The manual for physicians in the Medical Committee for Human Rights was dedicated to “The Physicians of the People”: Che Guevara, Norman Bethune and Franz Fanon and sought to outline medical care as “medical spiritual leaders had paved the way.” Norman Bethune was a Canadian physician during the early 20th century who was committed to free medical care for the poor and was a lone advocate for socialized medicine.³² The MCHR guidebook outlined how medical care should be approached in political situations and emergencies, like at demonstrations.³³

Exposing “Black Genocide”

Genocide is not just the wiping out of one’s race by forcible means. We are subject to genocide in the roach ridden, rat infested apartments we are forced to live in by landlords charging us high rent for housing which is one of the bare necessities of life.³⁴

In 1965 sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan reignited fears of black genocide and forced sterilization with his report for the United States Department of Labor, titled “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” Referred to as the Moynihan Report, this study drew upon social science reasoning to argue that “at the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family.” Moynihan deemed

³¹ Nelson, “Black Power, Biomedicine and the Politics of Knowledge.”

³² Larry Hannant ed. *The Politics of Passion: Norman Bethune’s Writing and Art*. (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1998): 100-102.

³³ John Holcenberg interview with Trevor Griffey, an MCHR physician at the Sidney Miller Free Medical Clinic. Holcenberg told Griffey that this packet had circulated widely around free clinics in the 1960s.

³⁴ “Genocide,” *The Black Panther* (March 15, 1970): 9.

institutionalized inequalities as a secondary factor to cultural difference, such as the “matriarchal structure of Negro family” in perpetuating black-white disparities. The report pathologized the black family and discussed potential benefits of family planning.³⁵

During the sixties, the radical Black Power critique and the second wave feminist movement brought the discussion of sterilization and family planning into political discourse. In 1960, the Food and Drug Administration announced approval of a provisional act to legalize the birth control pill.³⁶ The popularization of birth control along with the Moynihan Report heightened suspicions among some blacks about the motives behind the dissemination of family planning techniques, including sterilization and birth control.³⁷ The Black Panthers formulated a genocide argument which they embedded in their wide-ranging contemporary critiques of social inequalities. These included political discussions about poor hospital care, psychosurgery and sickle cell anemia testing.

Although the language used was purposely dramatic, the types of genocide raised in *The Black Panther* were justified by accounts of the inequalities and mistreatment the paper addressed, especially when the deceptive Tuskegee Syphilis Study was exposed to the public in the early 1970's. Beginning in 1932, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study was initiated by the

³⁵ Office of Policy Planning and Research United States Department of Labor, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” (March 1965), <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm>, accessed on March 20, 2011; Lawrence D. Bobo Camille Z. Charles, “Race in the American Mind: From the Moynihan Report to the Obama Candidacy” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 621;1, (Jan 2009); Cowan, *Heredity and Hope*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

³⁶ Elaine Tyler May, *America and the Pill: A History of Promise, Peril, and Liberation*, (New York: Basic Books, 2010): 3, Cowan, *Heredity and Hope*. Cowan suggests that the Moynihan Report directly resulted in distrust, but there were numerous current events which contributed to heightened fears, including the popularity of the birth control pill and family planning. See Elaine Tyler May, *America and the Pill*.

³⁷ Cowan, *Heredity and Hope*, 173-176.

U.S. Public Health Service (USPS) to examine the symptoms and lifecourse of six hundred poor black sharecroppers in North Carolina with syphilis. The USPS lied to the men and told them that they were being treated for the disease, when actually penicillin treatments were withheld, despite scientific knowledge generated in the 1940s that it was an effective cure.³⁸

In 1972, this story was featured in *The Black Panther* with the title “GERM WARFARE

DECLARED AGAINST BLACKS!” only days after the information was released to the public.

The cover of *The Black Panther* featured a photo of a man with a face mutilated by late-stage syphilis. Inside, the article interviews one of the defensive physicians involved in the study.

The author concludes with a call to action:

It is up to us, now, also survivors of Tuskegee, to use preventive justice and guarantee our futures, our very survival with people’s health care, people’s control of technology, control of Black and poor people of all the institutions in our communities.³⁹

When the study was first exposed, journalists cited it as the source for distrust among black people toward the medical system; reporters had little knowledge that these forms of brutal racism in medicine had been ongoing for generations.⁴⁰ In response to white journalistic ignorance, *The Black Panther* asserted that events like Tuskegee are “frequent...not isolated occurrences.”⁴¹

The Tuskegee study was just one of many types of genocide discussed in *The Black Panther*. In the 1960s and 1970s, physicians looked to experimental brain surgery to replace supposedly ineffective tranquilizers. Black boys (but rarely girls) above the age of five were considered eligible patients due to their supposed aggressiveness and hyperactivity. Two

³⁸ Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*, (New York: Doubleday, 2006).

³⁹ “Germ Warfare Declared Against Blacks,” (*The Black Panther*, August 5, 1972): 7.

⁴⁰ Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, 180

⁴¹ “...In the Interests of Science,” 5.

notable neurological surgeons at Harvard Medical School drew largely upon racist theorizing to assert that participants in the 1965 Watts uprising might have “abnormal pathological brains” and diagnosed them with “the kind of brain damage that could necessitate such radical surgery,” defined as the removal of large chunks of brain tissue. They addressed social factors, but argued that brain dysfunction was the “more subtle, yet more probable, reason for urban rioting.” In a 1967 publication of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, the researchers argued that clinical studies were essential in order to “pinpoint, diagnose and treat those people with low violence thresholds before they contribute to further tragedies.” These surgeons received a \$600,000 grant for their research from The National Institutes of Mental Health and the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration.⁴² In response, *The Black Panther’s* article, “Tearing Out Our Thoughts: Psychosurgery in the Black Community” noted that “psychosurgery is the government’s newest tool to maintain oppression in the Black community.” The writer named The Neuro-Research Foundation, the leading organization for psychosurgery, arguing that it had been located at Boston City Hospital because it was used by “Black, Puerto Rican and other poor communities of Boston”⁴³

Birth control and sterilization were other popular examples of genocide exposed in *The Black Panther*. An article published in 1971 calls for readers to protest a proposed bill in Tennessee that would essentially force women with one or more children out-of-wedlock to lose welfare benefits if they refused sterilization. Most reproductive topics in *The Black Panther* surrounded birth control. The Panthers’ early opposition to birth control is

⁴² Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, 284-287. The facts in this book are very similar to those referenced in *The Black Panther*.

⁴³ “Tearing Out Our Thoughts: Psychosurgery and the Black Community” *The Black Panther* (Jan 6, 1973): 6, 13.

commonly discussed as evidence of sexism within the Party. Those researchers who have claimed sexism in the Party have cited only a few articles in *The Black Panther*. One article from 1972 claims that “sickle cell anemia + the pill = instant genocide.” Despite a few articles voicing opposition to family planning, by the early 1970’s the paper begins to include more articles supporting birth control.⁴⁴ Black Power activists were divided on the issue of birth control, but the Panthers’ initial opposition was most because of their belief that race and class struggles had to precede the feminist struggle. Eventually, emerging black feminist voices began to critique that point of view. Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman elected to Congress, argued that to “label family planning and legal abortion programs ‘genocide’ is male rhetoric, for male ears. It falls flat to female listeners and thoughtful male ones.”⁴⁵

In the instances when the Black Panther Party leadership condemned birth control, it was not necessarily adopted by individual chapters. Sandra Ford recalls that “sexism was not as much of an issue for Portland,” because of “very strong-minded women in the group and men who were receptive to listening.” Further, as a firm believer in birth control herself, she suggested it to many women who came to the clinic. She notes that instructions on birth control from the national chapter were not necessarily adopted by individual chapters.⁴⁶ Some volunteers at the Panthers’ health clinics received formal training in “planned parenthood counseling services.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Cowan, *Heredity and Hope*, 178.

⁴⁵ Shirley Chisholm, *Unbought and Unbossed*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), 130.

⁴⁶ Sandra Ford interview with author.

⁴⁷ “Medical Cadre Weekly Report,” Huey P. Newton Foundation, Inc. Collection, Stanford University Archives, box 17; folder 9, “info on our medical clinics 2 of 2.”

Reframing Sickle Cell Anemia

Sickle cell anemia is a genetic disease characterized by abnormally shaped blood cells which can clog blood flow, resulting in painful crises; it occurs in about one of five hundred African Americans in the U.S. The disease was a prime target of Panther's efforts to address race-based medical neglect. A study conducted in 1969 found that only about thirty percent of African Americans in a middle-class region of Richmond, Virginia had heard of sickle cell disease. On a national level, knowledge of sickle cell was arguably lower.⁴⁸ According to Dr. Tolbert Small, chairman Bobby Seale had found out about this study and "felt that this was another type of racism and decided to draw attention to it."⁴⁹ Soon after, *The Black Panther* published the study's findings that "the majority of black people have remained unaware of the existence of sickle cell anemia and its deadly effects."

Sickle cell anemia soon emerged as one of the Panthers' most talked-about health topics. The bestselling edition of *The Black Panther* proclaimed in 1971 that "The People's Fight Against Sickle Cell Anemia Begins." The corresponding article titled, "AMERICA'S RACIST NEGLIGENCE IN SICKLE CELL RESEARCH EXPOSED BY ITS VICTIMS." Panthers discussed the science behind sickle cell anemia, but also publicized the voices of individual patients. One page shows two enlarged photos of sickled cells compared to normal, explaining the molecular differences in hemoglobin structure. The corresponding article tells

⁴⁸ John C. Lane and Robert B. Scott, "Awareness of Sickle Cell Anemia Among Negroes of Richmond, Va.," *Public Health Reports*, vol 84, no. 11, (November 1969): 949-953. This study was conducted in an area with residents at an above-average education level.

⁴⁹ Tolbert Small interview with author.

the story of two women who had lived most of their lives not knowing they had sickle cell while suffering its symptoms.⁵⁰

The decision to focus on sickle cell anemia as a form of neglect occurred not because it was the biggest killer of black people, but because of the disease's complex social history with important implications. During the early to mid-twentieth century, physicians used sickle cell anemia as evidence for the defense of segregation and miscegenation.⁵¹ By the 1960s, sickle cell anemia had become a "celebrity disease" in Washington and in the media, largely attributed to the rise of Black Power.⁵² The Panthers responded to this popularization and framed sickle cell anemia as a metaphor for black identity and shared experience. In many ways, sickle cell anemia became a social commodity and tool for consciousness-raising to discuss inheritance, identity and medical activism.⁵³ Historian Alondra Nelson argues that the Panthers' focus on a genetic disease, and biomedicine at large, was a way of subverting narratives of race science and reframing theories of racial difference.⁵⁴

The disease became so publicized that, in a 1971 address to Congress, President Nixon declared: "It is a sad and shameful fact that the causes of this disease have been largely neglected throughout our history. We cannot rewrite this record of neglect but we can reverse it." Nixon strategically placed sickle cell anemia along with cancer as a "second

⁵⁰ "The People's Fight Against Sickle Cell Anemia Begins." *The Black Panther*, (May 27, 1972): cover, 10-13; Dr. Tolbert Small said that this was the best-selling issue.

⁵¹ Keith Wailoo, "Genetic Marker of Segregation: Sickle Cell Anemia, Thalassemia, and Racial Ideology in American Medical Writing 1920-1950," *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* vol. 18, (1996): 305-320.

⁵² Keith Wailoo, *Dying in the City of Blues: Sickle Cell Anemia and the Politics of Race and Health*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Michael G. Michaelson, "Sickle Cell Anaemia" in ed. Dawn Gill and Les Levidow, *Anti-racist Science Teaching*, (London, England: Free Association Books, 1987): 165

⁵³ Wailoo, *Dying in the City of Blues*, 22-23. These three topics, inheritance, identity, and medical activism, are raised by Wailoo.

⁵⁴ Nelson, "Black Power, Biomedicine and the Politics of Knowledge."

targeted disease for concentrated research.”⁵⁵ Although Nixon had diverted funding for medical research overall, he effectively used sickle cell anemia as a political tool to gain public support and save face at a time when the Democratic Party was pushing for health care reform. Typically, Nixon was becoming a strong fiscal conservative, who selectively chose domestic liberal subjects with appeal to the mainstream.⁵⁶ His strategic funding of sickle cell anemia was an invitation to garner support from liberal and black voters, despite his waning interest in advancing the cause of civil rights.⁵⁷

Sickle Cell Anemia Testing

The Black Panther Party adopted sickle cell anemia testing because it feared that, in the wrong hands, genetic testing would be disastrous and genocidal. Additionally, looming threats like the Tuskegee Syphilis study in 1972 and the Moynihan Report in 1965 (which pathologized the black family), had heightened African Americans’ fears about genocide. Thus, Panther Party instituted sickle cell anemia testing programs while critiquing other programs as “for-profit” rather than “for the people.”⁵⁸ The Party established a nonprofit foundation, the People’s Sickle Cell Anemia Fund and provided sickle cell anemia testing at schools, health clinics and fairs. Dr. Tolbert Small estimates that, overall, the Black Panther Party tested “hundreds of thousands” for sickle cell anemia. The Panthers gathered up-to-date

⁵⁵ Wailoo, *Dying in the City of Blues*, 166.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 22-23.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 166.

⁵⁸ Tolbert Small, “Sickle Cell Anemia Foundations,” Huey P. Newton Foundation, Inc. Collection, Stanford University Archives, box 18, folder 7, “Miscellaneous.”

sickle cell anemia testing equipment and convinced local physicians to train rank-and-file members.⁵⁹

Throughout these efforts, The Medical Committee for Human Rights remained loyal to the Black Panther Party and voiced support for its sickle cell anemia testing. The MCHR worried that mass sickle cell testing could lead to the “quasi-legal limiting of reproduction or counseling that pressures black women not to have children” which, they believed, “would be genocidal.” They determined that “[p]roper education must be done by black people” and teaching must discuss “sickle cell as a genetic change, not a defect.” The MCHR determined that black professionals should do all the counseling and that their role should focus on educating white professionals to “assist in the training of Panther teams for screening and educational work in the black community.”⁶⁰

Black activists were divided about sickle cell anemia testing. On a black radio station, Dr. Tolbert Small cautioned his listeners against some sickle cell anemia foundations: “Other foundations have sprung up simply because people were interested in making a buck, and they saw sickle cell anemia and they could rip off the profits for themselves” and were “mushrooming most of their funds into salaries.”⁶¹ For similar reasons in 1974, the Panthers in Los Angeles picketed outside of a benefit dinner held by the black-led Los Angeles Sickle Cell Anemia Foundation and tried to prevent the guests from entering.⁶²

⁵⁹ Claudia “Sister Sheba” Grayson interview with author, Sacramento, CA, January 6, 2011; Silvia Perez interview with author, Sacramento, CA, January 6, 2011; Leon Hobbs interview with the Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project; Tolbert Small interview with author. Tolbert Small said that Bobby Seale’s approximation that the Panthers tested “millions” is probably an overestimate.

⁶⁰ “MCHR Newsletter,” Huey P. Newton Foundation, Inc. Collection, Stanford University Archives. (December 2, 1971).

⁶¹ Small, “Sickle Cell Anemia Foundations.”

⁶² Cowan, *Heredity and Hope*, 178

Although the Panthers claimed to do follow-up genetic counseling, this also remained an area of debate and criticism. Sandra Ford from the Portland chapter led the sickle cell anemia testing program. She explains that, although they always notified people with their results, “one-on-one counseling was out of our sphere. We didn’t do personal stuff like how this affects you if you get married.”⁶³ Another participant in the Panthers’ screening programs discusses his admiration for the program, yet acknowledges its pitfalls:

[T]here have been painful moments when I have wondered if, in telling someone in otherwise perfect health that he or she had ‘sickle cell trait’, we were not forcing that person to pay a price in anxiety and confusion disproportionate to what she had gained. Would she get sick? Probably not. Could we help her? No. What should she do? Nothing.⁶⁴

Further, he expressed concern at the possible outcomes of Black Panther Party efforts: that sickle cell anemia attention will fade or the programs will continue and be exploited by the medical community.⁶⁵ In the same vein, a Professor from Howard University is quoted in *The Wall Street Journal* as saying that testing “should be kept out of the hands of community groups that don’t have adequate medical consultation.”⁶⁶

Historian Ruth Cowan argues that the Panthers’ public accusations against government sickle cell disease programs solidified distrust among African Americans in government-funded medical institutions.⁶⁷ Cowan argues that by criticizing well-intentioned nonprofits, the Panthers ruined a good chance for unity among black nonprofit sickle cell anemia programs. Leon Hobbs, former Panther and director of the Sidney Miller Free Clinic,

⁶³ Sandra Ford interview with author.

⁶⁴ Michaelson, “Sickle Cell Anaemia,” 69.; Also see Nelson, “Black Power, Biomedicine, and the Politics of Knowledge,” 178.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 70.

⁶⁶ Jonathan Spivak, “Boon or Bane for Blacks? The Battle Against Sickle Cell Progresses, But It Brings Some Problems Along With Results,” *The Wall Street Journal*, (January 4, 1973): 22.

⁶⁷ Cowan, *Heredity and Hope*, 179.

expresses concern that sickle cell anemia testing is now seen as less important than diabetes and heart disease because “sickle cell anemia is a genetic disease and the only way you eradicate a genetic disease is through education.” Hobbs suggests that sickle cell anemia testing is important because people can be advised to “not have children because if you do your child will have a twenty five percent chance that they will live in pain and suffering and probably not live past thirty years old.”⁶⁸

A Complicated Legacy

The history of the Black Panthers’ sickle cell anemia campaign shows how members engaged in a discourse on their own terms in the context of what they believed would be best for black people. Their advocacy of massive testing was that of committed activists who were trying to implement an empowering approach to local control of medical care. Likewise, their discussion of genocide was a tactic to draw attention and mobilize communities and the government to respond. The main critique of the Black Panther Party’s rhetoric is that it solidified distrust toward the medical establishment. However, their goals and initiatives were geared toward raising awareness, toward education, and toward helping people think critically about health disparities.

⁶⁸ Leon Hobbs interview with the Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project.

CHAPTER 3: VOICES OF THE MEDICAL CADRE

Experience has proved that if a clinic is to really work for the people it must from the beginning be initiated, organized and run by the community people. This is easy to say but hard to realize.⁶⁹

The Black Panther Party founded its Sidney Miller Free Medical Clinic in 1969. Located in Seattle's Central District at the corner of Spruce and 20th Street, one visitor recalled: "Power to the People was uttered at the door like a password. Sandbags lined the walls. Boards covered the windows and a couple of rifles leaned against the doorway." The clinic boasted one examination room, a laboratory and a reception office.⁷⁰ Party members chose its name to commemorate Sidney Miller, a comrade killed in a police shootout. After it was closed in 1971, clinic supporters erected a "People's Wall" in its place to commemorate in colorfully painted words dedications to fallen Panthers, punctuated by depictions of Black Power activists from Angela Davis to Malcolm X. Eight years later, the clinic was renamed and reopened as government-funded community health center: The Carolyn Downs Family Medical Center. Today this clinic stands just a block down the street from the Panther's original experiment; it provides an array of primary and preventive care services regardless of a client's ability to pay.



Fig 2. Carolyn Downs Family Medical Center in Seattle, Washington.

⁶⁹ Deborah Green, "Seattle Thrives," *Health Right News*, September 1971; Deborah Green is an activist and wife of Dr. John Green, a volunteer physician at the Sidney Miller free clinic in Seattle.

⁷⁰ Taressa Stone, "Activist Elmer Dixon is still cracking eggs" *University of Washington Daily*, April 27, 1978. Sidney Miller was killed by a grocery store owner in 1969 after being accused of stealing something.

A plaque displayed in the waiting room of the clinic recognizes the activism of the Black Panther Party for its “broad spectrum of community support services” and for its “commitment to the ideal that health care is a right for all people.”⁷¹

The Politics of Health Care

In the 1974, the national office in Oakland held a meeting to reflect upon and reiterate the reasons for its health clinics and other community-oriented goals:

We’re going to set a revolutionary example here. . . . Each time, each place, the people will take their lead from us, the revolutionary vanguard. Just as the people have demanded and institutionalized our Free Breakfast for Children and sickle-cell-anemia programs, they will demand socialized medicine and decent housing. Soon they will begin to take control of their political machinery.⁷²

During the heyday of the Party, free medical clinics like the one in Seattle were established in numerous cities. Although the number of clinics nationwide is difficult to determine, sources suggest that at least twelve clinics existed at some point during the time period from 1969 to 1975 (See Table 1).⁷³ The goal of the survival programs was to directly serve the needs of the community while raising the political consciousness among poor and working class people. Also, Minister of Defense, Huey P. Newton intended the clinics to boost organizing efforts; according to Huey, the main goal was “to get the people to understand the true reasons why they were in need in such an incredibly rich land.”⁷⁴ Most important, the health clinics were a means to an end rather than an end in and of itself,

⁷¹ “Country Doctor Community Health Centers,” www.countrydoctor.org., accessed on March 23, 2011; Today, the waiting room displays a plaque with its mission statement. Information recorded upon author’s visit to the clinic on January 10, 2011.

⁷² Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 6.

⁷³ These numbers are based upon compiled data presented in Table 1 in Appendix.

⁷⁴ Huey P. Newton, David Hilliard, Donald Weise, *The Huey P. Newton Reader*, (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2003): 230; See also Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 263.

because Panthers believed that band-aid fixes were not a viable solution health care inequalities.⁷⁵

Despite these political goals, the Panthers did not proselytize at their free health clinics. They believed that their services spoke loudly enough as an example of what the government was not providing for poor and black people, and they hoped their example would hone the community's understanding of how politics worked. Aaron Dixon, founder of the Seattle chapter, remembers how the Panthers would “talk about their ten point program, the right to childcare and civil rights rather than ideologically supporting the black Panthers.” Dixon says that “everything was political so whatever it was we were talking about we brought in the politics of it. A small organization had to come forth and provide these services because the government was not willing to do it at that time. We always had posters of individuals involved in the party and the movement. Just coming into the Panther organization was a realization in itself.”⁷⁶ *The Black Panther* newspaper could be found lying around at the health clinics. In the waiting room, political literature mingled with information on clinic services and educational pamphlets.⁷⁷ A photograph of the



Figure 2. Spurgeon “Jake” Winters Free Medical Care Center in Chicago, Illinois.

⁷⁵ David Levinson interview with author.

⁷⁶ Aaron Dixon interview with author.

⁷⁷ Sister Sheba interview with author. Sister Sheba also mentions that because the clinics were named after Panther heroes, they were openly political. At the Portland clinic, director Sandra Ford said that the Panthers only promoted politics through posters on the walls and literature in the waiting room.; For an explanation about political information that could be found at Panther health clinics, see “Clinic Survives Through Close Ties With Community,” *The Black Panther*, (May 18, 1974).

Panthers Chicago clinic, for example, shows three girls sitting in under a picture of Huey P. Newton flanked by two pages from *The Black Panther* which read: “FIGHT SICKLE CELL ANEMIA” and “BLACK GENOCIDE.”⁷⁸

Health Care Programs

The Panthers extended their health programs to include sickle cell anemia testing, prison visits and free ambulance services. The free ambulance services were established in response to the slowness of ambulances when called to poor black communities. In Winston-Salem, residents complained about the local ambulance fee, ranging from twenty dollars to forty-five dollars for a round-trip.⁷⁹ The Winston-Salem, North Carolina Panthers spent four years trying to get the local government of Forsyth County to approve their right to operate a franchise. At the County Commissioners meeting over four hundred people showed up, many of which were middle-class or conservative black allies voicing support, including black civic organizations, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Welfare Rights Organization, and senior citizens. Even some white community members showed up to support the proposed ambulance. The Black Panthers eventually convinced the county to grant them the freedom to provide emergency care.⁸⁰

Once established, the Joseph Waddell People’s Free Ambulance Service in Winston-Salem was markedly successful. It received \$35,000 in grants from an Episcopal church and

⁷⁸ “The Free Clinics: Ghetto Care Centers Struggle to Survive,” *American Medical News*, (February 21, 1972): 12-14

⁷⁹ FBI Headquarters File, BU: 105-165706, <http://www.fbi.gov/foia/electronic-reading-room/black-panther-party>, accessed online on March 10, 2011; “Winston-Salem Free Ambulance Service Opens” *The Black Panther*, (February 16, 1974).

⁸⁰ “Winston-Salem Free Ambulance Service Opens” *The Black Panther*, (February 16, 1974): 3.

small donations from citizens and local college students. The Panthers started with one donated hearse, but was eventually able to buy an ambulance, a van and two other vehicles.⁸¹ The ambulance service lasted for two years with twenty volunteers trained as Emergency Medical Technicians, first-aid respondents, or certified ambulance attendants. It operated on a 24 hour emergency basis and from 8am to 5pm for non-emergencies.⁸² An NBC Nightly news segment shows two Black Panthers in uniforms carrying in a sick woman on a stretcher into the back of an ambulance. “Some patients have died after being denied care by attendants who deem their cases as not urgent,” said the reporter. A Panther was shown, voicing in their routine style, that “everyone has a right to an ambulance” and that the program was part of a larger effort to “organize and convince the community” of the need for free health services.⁸³ The Panthers claimed twofold benefits: saving taxpayers money and lowering barriers to health care because of one’s financial status. “Anyone not moved by human suffering can contemplate the higher cost of public health care that inevitably results from neglect,” a local editorial about the program suggested.⁸⁴

Moreover, the Panthers brought care directly to prison inmates. According to *The Black Panther*, the black inmates of Walla Walla State Penitentiary wrote to a Panther medical clinic “inquiring about the sickle cell tests that were being administered in the

⁸¹ “Medical Cadre Report,” Huey P. Newton Foundation Inc. Stanford University Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Box 17; Series 2. “Info on our medical clinics 1 of 2.” According to “Winston-Salem Free Ambulance Service Opens,” Joseph Waddell was “slain by officials” in prison although they disguised it as a heart attack; See NBC news; FBI Headquarters File, BU: 105-165706.

⁸² “Winston-Salem Free Ambulance Service Opens.”

⁸³ NBC Nightly News. From Vanderbilt Television News Archives. 2/25/1974. Reporter: John Chancellor. “(Studio) Report on Black Panthers' more peaceful activities.”

⁸⁴ “Ambulance Aid” in Black Panther documents on microform at the University of Michigan. Box 1 Reel 2. (Sunnyvale, CA: BMI Imaging Systems, 1994), (June 9, 1976).

oppressed communities of Seattle.”⁸⁵ A group of Seattle Panthers teamed up with health care workers on a visit to the prison. The Black Panther medical team proceeded past the warden who thought they were on an authorized medical visit. In an interview, one of the Panthers laughed as he recalled how they managed to sneak in cameras and two hundred *Black Panther* newspapers. Inside, the Panthers tested 286 black prisoners for sickle cell anemia and took photos of prisoners’ bedsores. *The Black Panther* later featured an article about the poor medical care in Walla Walla State Penitentiary juxtaposed with a photo of a naked man lying on his back exposing a large infected bed sore.⁸⁶

Health Workers and Volunteers

Usually, the Panthers who founded clinics were laypeople with little or no medical knowledge. The exhausting lifestyle of Party membership would not allow for enough time to hold down a professional job. Thus, many of the Panthers involved in day-to-day programs were teenagers with only one or two members per chapter in their late twenties or early thirties.⁸⁷ Rank-and-file Panthers received training in various specialized tasks and became instrumental as maintenance people, gathering supplies for the clinics, record clerks, drivers, and liaisons with medical professionals.⁸⁸ Panthers also became involved in assisting with medical care and disseminating health education. “If people were willing to learn, we were

⁸⁵ “Seattle N.C.C.F. Medical Corps Treats Walla Walla Prison Inmate,” *The Black Panther*, (March 6, 1971): 2.

⁸⁶ Leon Hobbs interview with the Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project. Leon Hobbs remembers that this number was 286 but *The Black Panther* article cited above lists the number of prisoners tested as “over one hundred eighty inmates.” This was likely an error in memory; “Seattle N.C.C.F. Medical Corps Treats Walla Prison Inmate.”

⁸⁷ David Levinson interview with author; Sandra Ford interview with author.

⁸⁸ Silvia Perez interview with author. Silvia referred to this as the “difficult, unglamorous work”; Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 331.

willing to teach them,” noted Dr. Tolbert Small, a black physician who volunteered at the Panther clinic in Berkeley. For the provision of general and specialized medical services, the Panthers relied heavily on the expertise of health care professionals, including practitioners and medical students. Volunteer health professionals opted to assist with clients at the clinic or offer to see referrals at their practice.⁸⁹

Dr. Tolbert Small was one of the leading physicians at the George Jackson clinic in Berkeley, where he trained rank-and-file Panthers to test blood samples for sickle cell anemia and record basic vital signs. Silvia Perez, a Chicano Panther at the George Jackson clinic remembers the importance of all volunteers including the rank-and-file members: “I was a coordinator. Everybody was a sort of coordinator. Everybody did everything and everybody was expected to do everything. We did solicitation of donations and we literally had to clean that place too.” Sister Sheba was another rank-and-file Panther at the George Jackson clinic who remembers her time there as an opportunity to gain valuable experience. Growing up, Sheba was good at science, but her parents discouraged her because they didn’t think it was a “ladylike profession.” However, the Panthers encouraged Sheba in her interests and trained her to sort donated medications. When the Berkeley clinic closed, Sheba became a certified medical assistant and worked in the private practice of Dr. Tolbert Small, The Harriet Tubman Medical Office in Oakland.⁹⁰

While Panthers performed all types of volunteer jobs, a Party member almost always occupied the role of clinic director.⁹¹ For example, when the leaders of the Seattle chapter

⁸⁹ David Levinson interview with author.

⁹⁰ Sister Sheba interview with author.

⁹¹ There are probably a few exceptions. Terry Kupers says that he took orders from Panther leadership but he, along with a Black nurse practitioner, Marie Branch, was considered a clinic director.

ordered Leon Hobbs to organize a medical clinic but Hobbs was hesitant: “What do I know about medicine? What do I know about organizing? All I wanted to do was to fight the police. I wanted to be a rabble rouser.” Retrospectively, Hobbs notes that his role as coordinator was that of a catalyst; clinic functions were ultimately sustained by rank-and-file Panthers, community volunteers and professionals.⁹² Hobbs remembers how “people like lawyers, doctors, nurses, schoolteachers—everybody came together. The Black Student Union and even our Caucasian brothers and sisters came across with money and the [building] structures.”⁹³ The proportionality of male and female volunteers in the health clinics has been debated. Sandra Ford, a volunteer at the Portland clinic, voiced frustration that the few male volunteers at clinics were the physicians and professionals, while the women took care of unskilled and housekeeping tasks. Contrarily, Sister Sheba and Silvia Perez noticed no such gender difference at the George Jackson clinic in Berkeley.⁹⁴

Consistent with the Black Power tenets, the Black Panther Party believed that institutions in black communities should be controlled by blacks, who could best represent its needs. The health clinics were no exception, but unlike some other Black Power organizations, the Black Panthers welcomed and invited collaboration with whites in its community programs. White people participated in the medical programs as volunteers, physicians, as well as the multiracial branch of the Party, known as the International/National Committee to Combat Fascism (ICCF/NCCF).⁹⁵ Volunteers at one clinic did not seem to

⁹² Leon Hobbs interview with the Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Sandra Ford interview with author; Sister Sheba interview with author; Silvia Perez interview with author. Some historians say that women made up most of the volunteers for the survival programs. For example, see Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 262.

⁹⁵ Andrew Witt, *The Black Panthers in the Midwest: The community programs and services of the Black Panther Party in Milwaukee, 1966-1977*, (New York: Routledge, 2007).

mind that it was mostly operated by middle-class white people because the situation was only transient; the Panthers expected the community to eventually take over. The Los Angeles clinic had only one black nurse practitioner; and at the Chicago clinic nine out of ten volunteer physicians were white.⁹⁶

Although non-Panthers served as volunteers and sometimes held leadership positions, the Panthers always maintained control of clinic operations. Clinics sent leader Huey P. Newton updates weekly via a “Medical Cadre Report,” which outlined clinic successes and failures along with providing statistics about patients treated.⁹⁷ To illustrate the hierarchy, white physician Terry Kupers says that he always took orders from Panther leadership even while serving as a co-director (along with a black nurse practitioner, Marie Branch) at the Bunchy Carter clinic in Los Angeles. Kupers remembers that “at times there was a feeling in the movement that there needed to be black leadership of black organizations so I was limited to say much. I was not very involved in the radical rhetoric because I was a white guy.”⁹⁸ There might have been some distance between the Panthers and whites who participated in the Party’s programs; a black nurse at a Panther clinic in Philadelphia remembers how Panther officials ordered a nurse to leave because she was not black.⁹⁹ Yet, there is no substantial evidence that recurring acts of hostility existed between the Panthers and white allies.

Although relationships between Panthers and their white allies were friendly, the prevalence of white medical professionals and students could have been a barrier to the initial

⁹⁶ “Clinic Survives Through Close Ties With Community,” *The Black Panther*, May 18, 1974; Brown, *A Taste of Power*; “The free clinics: Ghetto care centers struggle to survive” *American Medical News*, (February 21, 1972).

⁹⁷ “Weekly Medical Cadre Report,” (March 27-April 5, 1974).

⁹⁸ Terry Kupers interviewed by author.

⁹⁹ John Dittmer, *The Good Doctors*, 226.

goal of black leadership. In Chicago, the Franklin Lynch People's Free Health Clinic drew white volunteers from elite hospitals and medical schools, such as the University of Chicago. When the Panthers first proposed the clinic, the response from the community was immediate; over two hundred people showed up to the first meeting and following weeks would have anywhere from sixty to eighty people, including Panthers, community members, health professionals and medical students. According to a writer in the Medical Committee for Human Rights' *Health Rights News*, the meetings turned into "struggles over racism, male supremacy, and professional elitism." The author reports that because of an unequal distribution of skills, and racism inherent in medical education, "the result for us was clearly a top-heavy involvement of white students and professionals who had the responsibility to make many technical decisions." In conclusion, the author found that "[t]op-heavy white involvement was a material reality, but a political albatross."¹⁰⁰

In 1968, a group of four hundred members of the Bay Area Medical Committee for Human Rights, including social workers, attorneys, and health care workers, pledged to act as a "service and watchdog" organization for the Panthers; the MCHR promised to provide personnel to serve as emergency responders, attorneys, and community patrols. Dr. Donald Goldmacher, chairman of the New York City MCHR chapter, voiced support for the Panthers because "medical treatment is a right and not a privilege." "Now there's a chance for professionals to do something other than paying lip service or sending in financial contributions. Now they can volunteer a portion of their time," said Goldmacher.¹⁰¹ A statement drafted by The Council for Health Organizations, including the Medical

¹⁰⁰The Franklin Lynch People's Free Health Center, "Panthers in Boston," *Health Rights News*, IV, (January 1971): 1.

¹⁰¹ Charles Howe, "Bay Doctors Will Help Black Panthers," *San Francisco Chronicle*, (April 17, 1968).

Committee for Human Rights, Physicians Forum, and the Physicians for Social

Responsibility, proclaimed:

The establishment of free health clinics cannot alone solve the massive health problems of the ghettos...But the BPP clinics can serve as one model of health facilities initiated by the people and dedicated directly to meeting the needs of the people and so earn our support.¹⁰²

Physicians in the MCHR would live up to their promises as dedicated allies of the Panther clinics. Terry Kupers was an MCHR member, medical resident in psychiatry and the director of the Panthers' Bunchy Carter Free Clinic in Los Angeles. Before Kupers became involved with the Panthers, he went to Alabama and Texas to participate in the civil rights movement during a summer in medical school. He was commissioned by the government Health, Education and Welfare Department to inspect compliance with hospital civil rights legislation. Kupers recalls witnessing racism inherent in the medical establishment through "sloppy" black hospitals. In Texas, Kupers says that he was "arrested and shot at in East Texas. Someone was sitting on their porch and shot at me because I was in the car with a black man." Kupers worked closely with black student activists and the MCHR while in the South; soon, his "social world became populated by radicals."¹⁰³

After his experiences in the South, Dr. Kupers teamed up with the Black Panthers because they "symbolized something important and everybody had to do all they could to keep them from being destroyed."¹⁰⁴ In 1969, the MCHR called a press conference in which members condemned the government for looking to kill black Panthers. The conference ended with a statement that an attack on the black Panthers was "a loss of civil liberties for

¹⁰² Paul B. Cornely, "Panthers work for health through free care clinics," *Afro-American*, (May 9, 1970), 22

¹⁰³ Terry Kupers interview with author.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

all.”¹⁰⁵ Soon after this, many members of the MCHR would mobilize with the Panthers in the start-up of its health clinics. After this meeting, Dr. Kupers suggested that the Panthers in Los Angeles initiate a free health clinic; the Panthers responded with enthusiasm.¹⁰⁶

In addition to the MCHR, white activists mobilized for the Panther cause via its multiracial service-oriented chapter, the International Committee to Combat Fascism (ICCF). In 1969, the Black Panther Party founded this type of satellite chapter after the United Front Against Fascism Conference in Oakland.¹⁰⁷ The Conference was designed to mobilize diverse people around the country in order to establish a network of organizations and committees that would fight against the perceived threat of fascism. Attendee David Levinson made it clear that “they were not referring to the Italian or German-style fascism, but a form of fascism created by a powerful military industrial complex and intended to bring this perspective to the national population.” The ICCF emerged from this conference as a virtual branch of the Black Panther Party; it functioned like any other branch and took orders from the national office. In Berkeley, the ICCF was conceptualized as a branch of the Party for white people, although in other areas it served as a precursor to official chapter formation. In the racially diverse community of West Berkeley, the ICCF established a free medical first aid station (including first aid classes, child care and an on-call ambulance service), a poison control program, free housing maintenance and free auto repair.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Dittmer, *The Good Doctors*, 226.

¹⁰⁶ Terry Kupers interviewed by author.

¹⁰⁷ “It’s About Time: Black Panther Party Legacy and Alumni Website”
www.itsabouttimebpp.com.

¹⁰⁸ David Levinson interview with author.

Scope and Extent of Medical Care

Since Panther health clinics were not intended to be long-term solutions to health inequities, they were often located in makeshift and transient structures. The Panthers preferred to provide immediate care and service rather than hoarding supplies and funds. After one of the Party's community survival conferences, the FBI noted that the Panthers were financially broke because they had exhausted their funds on food and goods, which they gave away for free during the conference.¹⁰⁹ The Franklin Lynch clinic in Boston operated in a trailer and the clinic in Washington D.C. set-up in a run-down basement.¹¹⁰ The George Jackson clinic was a storefront in Berkeley, while most other clinics took space in a section of the building used as Party headquarters.¹¹¹

Though budgets were always meager, collaborating with professionals and outside organizations enabled the Panthers to provide a wide variety of services, which almost always included baby and maternal care, sickle cell anemia testing, access to a physician referral network, first aid care, immunizations and a pharmacy. Less common programs included tuberculosis and laboratory testing, optometry, dental and x-ray services.¹¹² The People's Free Health Center in Portland maintained an impressive health education program, educating people on sickle cell anemia, drug abuse, children's health and birth control.¹¹³

Clinics sometimes specialized in a certain area based upon the specialties of volunteers; for example, Portland was one of the few chapters with a dental clinic, the

¹⁰⁹ FBI Headquarters File, BU: 105-165706.

¹¹⁰ "Racist Bandits Attack People's Free Health Care Center," *The Black Panther*, (May 1970); "D.C. People's Free Clinic Opens: Black Panther Party Inaugurates Door-to-Door Health Services," *The Black Panther*, (June 9, 1973).

¹¹¹ Sister Sheba interview with author.

¹¹² "Weekly Medical Cadre Report," (August 19, 1973).

¹¹³ Witt, *The Black Panthers in the Midwest*, 63.

Malcolm X Peoples' Free Dental Clinic, because it was within the vicinity of the Oregon State University Dental College. The dental clinic was open from Mondays to Wednesdays and served six to nine patients each day. The director of the dental clinic said that the clinic started with twenty four dentists, but it was down to six and a few dental students and technicians when "[s]ome moved, some were scared off by the political aspects of the Black Panthers and some were just all talk and no action."¹¹⁴ The Bunchy Carter clinic was the only clinic to provide mental health services because its founder was a psychiatry resident.¹¹⁵ Sandra Ford, clinic director in Portland, says that sometimes really ill people would come to the clinic and the Panthers would take them to the hospital and stay with them in the emergency room. Or, the Panthers could take the people to a welfare office if they were really poor and help them receive the necessary finances for medical care. In this way, the Panthers served as advocates for their patients.¹¹⁶

Considering their modest funds and limited volunteer base, the health clinics maintained impressive schedules. Compared to other free clinics in the area, the Panther clinic in Chicago was "unique because of its hours of operation. General medicine is provided for at least three hours on four nights each week and on Saturday afternoon. On the remaining week night, a pediatrician staffs the facility."¹¹⁷ A survey of Chicago clinics found that the Spurgeon Jake Winters People's Medical Care Center was able to treat 1,400 patients over a period of fourteen months with an average of seventy-five patients treated weekly.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ <http://itsabouttimebpp.com>; Sandra Ford interview with author.; "Breakfast, Clinic Programs Belie Militant Panther Image," *The Oregonian*, (November 12, 1971).

¹¹⁵ Terry Kupers interview with author.

¹¹⁶ Sandra Ford interview with author.

¹¹⁷ "The Free Clinics: Ghetto Care Centers Struggle to Survive."

¹¹⁸ Irene Turner, "Free Health Centers, A New Concept?" (October 1972 62;10)

Dr. Tolbert Small from the George Jackson clinic in Berkeley remembers that on a busy night he would have likely stayed until two in the morning and see over twenty patients.¹¹⁹

The Panther clinics relied heavily on donations from a diverse support base. In Philadelphia, a group of Quakers donated the building for the Panthers' medical clinic.¹²⁰ Panthers also received near-to-expiration and sample pharmaceuticals from corporations.¹²¹ Non-Panther free medical clinics sometimes provided equipment or experience. Jessie Schaefer, of the Open Door Clinic in Seattle, remembers getting a call from the Panthers' Sidney Miller Free clinic asking for supplies. Volunteers at the Open Door clinic gathered X-ray machines and exam tables for the Panthers. In addition, two physicians from the Open Door clinic would serve as volunteers at Sidney Miller.¹²²

The Black Panther Party claimed that it would not accept government funds as a rule, but it did accept grant monies indirectly from governmental organizations, local institutions and hospitals. According to a weekly medical cadre report, seven clinics in California were slated to receive money from the forty million dollars that President Richard Nixon had allocated for the "Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children grant." From this, the Black Panther Party's George Jackson clinic expected \$104,000 per month.¹²³ The Berkeley clinic was funded by a program through the Health Education and Welfare office and also through a Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA)

¹¹⁹ Tolbert Small interview with author.

¹²⁰ "The Mark Clark Free Medical Clinic," *The Black Panther*, date unknown. Newspaper clipping given to author by Billy "X" in personal correspondence.

¹²¹ Sister Sheba interview with author.

¹²² Elmer Dixon, "History of Carolyn Downs Family Medical Center," (April 21, 1989). Deborah Green, wife of one of the volunteer physicians gave this oral history transcript to the author in a personal correspondence.

¹²³ "Weekly Medical Cadre Report," (June 7, 1974).

grant which paid workers at volunteer health clinics.¹²⁴ Additionally, local public health and hospital workers were occasionally supportive of Panther clinics; in the city of Berkeley, a Children's Hospital processed blood samples and the public health office ran gonorrhea cultures and syphilis tests.¹²⁵ In California's Alameda County, the public health system provided rubella vaccines.¹²⁶

Community Response

The health clinics of the Black Panther Party were established to meet people's most pressing health needs, so the community demographics were commonly medically underserved or uninsured black, poor or working-class. The Panthers had a strong support base in the communities where its survival programs operated. Their initial free food giveaways and free breakfast programs increased the Party's visibility and approval within communities, thus gaining Panthers sufficient backing and finances to expand services to the more expensive and time-intensive busing and health care initiatives. The Black Panthers recognized the need to appeal to students and the black middle class for support; Bobby Seale said that it was tactical to "utilize the skills of doctors, lawyers and the so-called black bourgeoisie."¹²⁷ Middle-class and conservative black people, who formerly did not support the Party, made substantial financial contributions.¹²⁸ Sandra Ford, a leader of the Panther

¹²⁴ "Associated In-Group Donors," Huey P. Newton Foundation, Inc. Collection. Stanford University Archives, Box 17; Folder 9.

¹²⁵ Tolbert Small interview with author. Worked from 1970-1974; Sheba mentioned this, too.

¹²⁶ Sister Sheba interview with author; "NFCC Newsletter," Stanford University Archives. Box 17; Folder 10.

¹²⁷ "We Must Organize and Unify the People: Bobby Seale Speaks at Columbia University," *The Black Panther*, (December 16, 1973).

¹²⁸ Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 276.

clinic in Portland, remembers how random people in the community would stop her in public, give her donations and tell her that they appreciated the health clinic.¹²⁹

Ironically, an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, displaying its usual bias against the Panthers described the Party as a “frightening phenomenon—a symbol of social disruption and of potential for racial violence in the U.S.” However, the *Journal* author includes an interview he conducted with Mrs. Reynolds, a 30-year-old black woman. Ms. Reynolds praises the Panthers community programs, even though she was unsure about supporting its politics. “When Mrs. Reynolds or one of her seven children needs medical attention, the Panthers send a doctor to the family’s dilapidated apartment on Staten Island at no charge.” Further, the writer mentions that its clinic supporters are “in the thousands. And the numerical growth doesn’t fully reflect its burgeoning impact.”¹³⁰ A white visitor to the Portland clinic confessed, “I’m not even too sure what the Panthers’ politics are...But at the county hospital they told me it would be 30 days before I could get somebody to look at my back. Here, I don’t have to wait.”¹³¹

The extent of ideological support for the Panthers is largely undetermined—even among those who benefited from its programs. A 1970 public opinion survey found that sixty percent of whites and twenty percent of black people felt threatened by the Black Panther Party.¹³² The media and popular portrayal of the Black Panthers vilified them even in many black communities, so that their survival programs might have seemed like an unexpected turn to some. For example, Paul B. Cornely, a prominent black physician and public health

¹²⁹ Sandra Ford interview with author.

¹³⁰ David McClintick, “Negro Militants Use Free Food, Medical Aid to Promote Revolution,” *The Wall Street Journal*, (August 29, 1969).

¹³¹ “Breakfast, clinic programs belie militant Panther image.”

¹³² Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers*, 138.

researcher committed to closing health disparities, noted, “while I disagree with their basic philosophy and political ideology, many of their efforts show great love rather than hatred.” It is important to note that the Black Panther Party never preached “hatred” and had always justified its militant position to be a form of self-defense to protect black communities from police brutality. Disconnects between the Panthers’ ideology and its community membership might be attributed to a lack of understanding of the Panthers embeddedness in theoretical Marxism/Leninism and radical rhetoric.

Clinic Decline and Backlash

The Panther health clinics declined, along with or years after the decimation of the Party. A variety of causes have been offered, including lack of funds and police brutality. According to Sister Sheba at the George Jackson clinic, the Panthers’ job was only to start up the clinics because “political activists have a habit of getting locked up or mysteriously dying.”¹³³ The Panthers never intended to maintain the clinics forever; instead, they wanted the community to step up and follow its example. Sheba mentions that police intimidation did not have an impact on the George Jackson clinic in Berkeley, because the police knew the community would rally behind the Panthers. “The community was so supportive of the clinic,” Sheba remembers, that “it [police intimidation] was almost a running joke.” Panthers at the Portland clinic concluded that “any community institution that truly meets the needs of the people it serves never has to worry about survival. The community will support and protect its own.”¹³⁴

¹³³ Sister Sheba interview with author.

¹³⁴ “Clinic Survives Through Close Ties With Community,” *The Black Panther*, (May 18, 1974).

The most common causes of Panther health clinic closure were police brutality combined with external pressure from local governments. The police and Panthers had numerous confrontations at the Bunchy Carter Free Clinic in Los Angeles. Dr. Terry Kupers, clinic director, remembers that COINTELPRO shot into Party headquarters and the free clinic (both part of the same building) where about a dozen Panthers were hiding between the floorboards and ceiling of the second floor. This event occurred the same day that Chicago police brutally murdered Black Panther leader Fred Hampton while he slept with his wife and infant son in his apartment. Though none were killed in the Los Angeles incident, the Panthers were taken to a nearby jail and roughly treated. After this raid, the community support was so overwhelming that an estimated three thousand people gathered outside to protest.¹³⁵ Volunteers tried to reopen the clinic after the raid, but because tear gas lingered in the air, it operated out of two vans in front of the clinic site. A new mobile clinic was proposed to commute to different areas in the community.¹³⁶ Similarly, in 1976, the Boston chapter's Franklin Lynch Peoples Free Health Center publicized thirteen bullet holes fired into its clinic trailer. The article was publicized in *The Black Panther* and called for a "counter-attack."¹³⁷

FBI files were extensive on the Black Panther Party health care programs. While nearly all Panther members were on record, the Medical Committee for Human Rights was

¹³⁵Terry Kupers interview with author; Jeff Cohen and Jeff Gottlieb, "Was Fred Hampton Executed?" *The Nation*, (November 20, 2009), accessed online March 25, 2011; *Brown, A Taste of Power*, 204-210. The story told by Elaine Brown and Terry Kupers differs. Terry Kupers said that the community protest was immediate, while Elaine Brown remembers it as days later.

¹³⁶Cornerly, *Health in Action*; "Panthers Use VW Bus for Free Clinic" *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Thursday, January 22, 1970 Los Angeles, California.

¹³⁷ "Racist Bandits Attack Peoples Free Health Center," *The Black Panther*, (1976). Billy "X" gave the newspaper clipping to author in personal correspondence. Exact date is unknown.

targeted by the FBI as enabling the Panthers. The FBI maintained a file on the chairman of the committee, Dr. Phillip Shapiro, for his financial and personal support of the Panthers. On numerous occasions he provided the Panthers with free medical care and even gave funds for three Panthers to go to Cuba.¹³⁸ Portland Panther Kent Ford remembers that “[w]e got a lot of harassment. One day the cops came by and said, ‘Kent, the next Panther clinic will be named after you.’” He recalled, “they would call on the phone and say, ‘We’re gonna get you.’”¹³⁹ Ford later won five thousand dollars in a lawsuit for the “indignity that he suffered at the hands of the police.”¹⁴⁰

Finally, the Chicago Spurgeon Jake Winters clinic faced controversy only a week after it opened in 1970. The Chicago Board of Public Health issued a summons accusing the clinic of operating without a license. Panther attorneys argued that the clinic was an extension of each physician’s private practice and that the Panthers were specifically being targeted for their political beliefs. The legal battles surrounding this clinic cost the Panthers exorbitant amounts of money and were a major factor contributing to its closure.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ “United States Department of Justice file of Dr. Philip Shapiro,” San Francisco, CA, Stanford University Archives, (September 3, 1968).

¹³⁹ Sandra Ford interview with author.

¹⁴⁰ “City of Portland, Oregon.” Department of Public Safety. Bureau of Police Officer’s Report, “September 11, 1970,” from “It’s About Time,” http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/Chapter_History/chapter_history_index.html, accessed on March 20, 2011. Ford is the only Panther identified to have ever received compensation as a result of police brutality.

¹⁴¹ Ronald Kozoil, “Move Against Panther Clinic” *Chicago Tribune*, January 21, 1970

Lasting Impact

The Black Panther Party's free medical clinics exemplify the strengths and weaknesses of the organization. On the one hand, the Panthers garnered support from seemingly diverse people and organizations. They worked full-time jobs in the medical cadre, learning skills and maintaining the clinics. Even with minimal funding they were able to provide a wide array of services. However, like their discussion of health in *The Black Panther*, the Party's image was still rejected as too radical to some, or it was not adequately understood by the communities it sought to serve. Counter to what the Party intended, some black people in the community embraced the programs but rejected the politics. Clearly, the Party believed in the centrality of its radical rhetoric to transform health clinics into tools for consciousness raising. Judging by the successes of their revolutionary heroes, Mao Zedong and Che Guevara, in winning over the masses, they were probably on the right track to gaining a solid support base for a revolution.

EPILOGUE

In January of 2011, I met Billy “X” Jennings in Sacramento where he introduced me to enthusiastic Panthers and allies who were instrumental in their free health clinics. Billy X, the mastermind of the “It’s About Time: Black Panther Party Legacy and Alumni” website, still maintains an extensive network of former Panthers as contacts and friends. The home of Billy X Jennings and his partner, white former ICCF member Gail Shaw, is a living archive of Panther history. Billy X works full-time maintaining Panther documents and educating interested scholars and students about Panther history. Billy X’s collection could easily compile over twenty boxes of a university archive. He still receives emails from people all over the world inquiring about the Black Panther Party or asking about how to start up a chapter. One of these recent inquiries, for example, was from a man who belonged to the “untouchable” social caste in India who wanted to start a Black Panther Party.¹⁴²

All of the Panthers I interviewed believed that the Party had positively impacted their life and spurred their social consciousness; many even continued to stay active in community-oriented projects after the Party’s demise. Leon Hobbs says that his time in the Black Panther Party was “the happiest days of my life because I knew I was doing something positive...we didn’t have time to vacillate and talk about change because we saw change.”¹⁴³ When the Black Panther Party began to disband in 1982, Dickson didn’t want to accept that the Party had ended because he believed that there was still such a strong need for it. In 1987, he remained involved in activism by participating in the South African anti-apartheid movement. Now, Dickson is the executive director of a tri-yearly publication, *The Commemorator*, which discusses historical and contemporary issues relating to black and

¹⁴² Billy X Jennings personal correspondence with author.

¹⁴³ Leon Hobbs interview with the Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project.

oppressed people in the U.S. and abroad. Dixon runs an adult literacy campaign and still keeps in contact with students from the Panthers' Oakland Community School, for whom he held a reunion in 2008.¹⁴⁴

Aaron Dixon, the co-founder of the Seattle chapter, ran for the Green Party ticket in the 2006 Senate race. He ran on a platform advocating fair trade, corporate control and opposition to the Iraq War.¹⁴⁵ Today, he is well known in Seattle for his work with local nonprofit organizations and is in the process of writing an autobiography. He remembers the successes of the Black Panther Party and how it “showed the government, the system, how to deliver social service programs”:

The free food program that we started by giving out bags of groceries was the impetus for the Northwest Harvest Program which has food banks all across Seattle...In 1974 the government allocated money for community breakfast programs, free medical clinics, and legal aid services.¹⁴⁶

As a rule, the Black Panthers would not accept government funds during the 1970s, but now many of them are proud that the government is providing some of the programs first started by the Party. Dr. Tolbert Small says, because the Black Panthers “lit a fire under the government and embarrassed them,” the government gave money to local hospitals for sickle cell anemia research. He asserts that even the doctors at the Children's Hospital in Oakland who do sickle cell anemia research know this part of the Panthers' legacy.¹⁴⁷

The three physicians whom I interviewed, David Levinson, Tolbert Small and Terry Kupers, all remember their experiences with the Panther clinics as solidifying their

¹⁴⁴ Melvin Dickson interview with author, Oakland, CA, January 8, 2011.

¹⁴⁵ Neil Modie, “Former Black Panther Aaron Dixon runs for Senate,” *Seattle Public Investigator*, (Tuesday, March 7, 2006), accessed on April 3, 2011. <http://www.seattlepi.com/default/article/Former-Black-Panther-Aaron-Dixon-to-run-for-Senate-1197802.php>

¹⁴⁶ Aaron Dixon interview with author.

¹⁴⁷ “Doctor Tolbert Small: Journey of a People's Doctor.”

commitment to justice in health. Terry Kupers, the white psychiatrist and director of the Bunchy Carter clinic, had visited the Panthers in prison to provide medical care, and now works as a psychiatric witness in lawsuits to expose brutal conditions in prisons. His experiences watching the Panthers unfairly arrested and treated poorly in jail developed his understanding of the prison-industrial complex, which he believes is a form of slavery. Kupers remains an advocate for the Angola 3, former members of the Black Panther Party who were unjustly incarcerated at the Angola Louisiana State Prison.¹⁴⁸

A Living History

My interest in this topic stems from my extensive research on free medical clinics. As a family medicine research assistant, I conducted review of literature on free medical clinics. My research revealed that free medical clinics today consistently struggle to maintain local control and culturally-relevant approaches to care. The current economic downturn has further strained the safety net, leading more of the medically uninsured and underserved to seek care at emergency rooms and free medical clinics. In 2009, it was estimated that four million Americans would visit 1,200 free clinics.¹⁴⁹ Considering the prevalence of free medical clinics today, the model provided by the Black Panther Party is still relevant because many of the complications in the 1970s still ring true. Many free medical clinics are

¹⁴⁸ Robert Hillary King, *From the Bottom of the Heap: The Autobiography of Black Panther Robert Hillary King*, (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2009). Terry Kupers wrote the introduction to King's autobiography because he knew him personally and is very involved with the Angola 3. For information about Kupers' present-day work, see his book, *Prison Madness: The Mental Health Crisis Behind Bars and What We Must Do About It*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1999).

¹⁴⁹ Emily Schiller et al. "Free Clinics Stand as a Pillar of the Health Care Safety Net: Findings from a Literature Review," forthcoming in edited compilation from the *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 1-15.

established by local medical schools and staffed with student volunteers. This trend raises concerns that students are practicing on patients without adequate supervision. Further, some literature shows that, without adequate preparation or education, volunteerism at free clinics can solidify students' feelings of frustration with the medically underserved and uninsured.¹⁵⁰

Most free clinics today embrace the belief that 'health care is a human right' but do not openly engage with the Black Power aims of community-control and self-determination. Perhaps this is because most leadership at free health clinics is composed of middle-class professionals. The Black Panthers did not have complete solutions to fixing problems in the health care system, but their efforts to publicize health disparities, educate, and train community people in basic medical skills can inform medical activism today. History should not be a celebration of the past, but should be assessed for its relevance to the living. The Black Panther Party was not flawless and should be engaged with critically, but the story of its community health activism is in tune with an activist history with important implications for the present. Further, this story can show how optimism is both a moral and a political choice to fight the system and work toward justice despite seemingly insurmountable odds.

¹⁵⁰ Schiller et al. "Free Clinics Stand as a Pillar of the Health Care Safety Net."

APPENDIX

Table 1. Partial Listing of Black Panther Party Health Clinics and Ambulance Services*

Name	Location	Opened
Sidney Miller Free Medical Clinic/Carolyn Downs	Seattle, Washington	1969
Spurgeon “Jake” Winters Free Medical Center	Chicago, Illinois	1970
“Alprentice” Bunchy Carter Free Medical Clinic	Los Angeles, California	1970 (estimate)
Fred Hampton Memorial People’s Free Health Clinic	Portland, Oregon	1969
George Jackson People’s Free Medical Research Health Clinic (formerly the Bobby Seale Free Medical Clinic)	Berkeley, California	1971
Franklin Lynch People’s Free Health Center	Boston, Massachusetts	1970
Peoples Free Health Clinic	Washington, DC	1973
Mark Clark Medical Center	North Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	N/A
People’s Free Health Clinic	Milwaukee, Wisconsin	1970
Cleveland Health Clinic	Cleveland, Ohio	1971
Bobby Hutton Community Clinic	Kansas City, Missouri	1969
Joseph Waddell’s People’s Free Ambulance Service	Winston-Salem	1974
Berkeley NCCF	Berkeley, California	1970

*Deborah Green, “Seattle Thrives”; “The free clinics: Ghetto care centers struggle to survive”; “The Fred Hampton Memorial People’s Free Health Clinic is Open,” *The Black Panther* January 31, 1970, 7; Terry Kupers interview with author. Terry Kupers did not remember the exact date that the police raided the Bunchy Carter clinic; “George Jackson People’s Free Medical Research Health Clinic” Stanford University Archives; Tolbert Small interviewed by author; “Racist Bandits Attack Peoples Free Health Center,” *The Black Panther* July 1970; “D.C. People’s Free Health Clinic Opens” *The Black Panther* June 9, 1973, 5; “The Mark Clark Free Medical Clinic” *The Black Panther*, 1970 (exact date unknown, given to author in personal correspondence); Andrew Witt, *The Black Panthers in the Midwest*; 63; “Cleveland Racists Dynamite People’s Free Health Center” *The Black Panther*, September 11, 1971, 9; JoNina M. Abron “Serving the People” and ; “Winston-Salem Free Ambulance Service Opens,” *The Black Panther*, Sat Feb 16 1974; David Levinson interview. I was unable to locate information about an ambulance program in Memphis as discussed by Austin in *Up Against the Wall*. In addition, I could not find information about the clinics in Palo Alto or Staten Island as mentioned in Witt, *The Black Panthers in the Midwest*.

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Figures

Cover. “Black Power Fist” <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/>

Figure 1. Emory Douglas, “Serving The People Body and Soul,” *The Black Panther*, (March 27, 1971).

Figure 2. “Carolyn Downs Family Medical Center in Seattle, Washington” Taken by author.

Figure 3. “Spurgeon Jake Winters Free Medical Clinic in Chicago, Illinois” from “The Free Clinics: Ghetto Care Centers Struggle to Survive” *American Medical News*. February 21, 1972, 12-14. Reproduced by Stanford University Special Collections Library. Palo Alto, CA.

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