

FRANZISKA MEISTER

**RACISM**

AND

**RESISTANCE**

HOW THE BLACK PANTHERS  
CHALLENGED WHITE SUPREMACY

**[transcript]** Political Science

**From:**

*Franziska Meister*

## **Racism and Resistance**

### **How the Black Panthers Challenged White Supremacy**

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Even a cursory look at U.S. society today reveals that protests against racial discrimination are by no means a thing of the past. What can we learn from past movements in order to understand the workings of racism and resistance? In this book, Franziska Meister revisits the Black Panther Party and offers a new perspective on the Party as a whole and its struggle for racial social justice. She shows how the Panthers were engaged in exposing structural racism in the U.S. and depicts them as uniquely resourceful, imaginative and subversive in the ways they challenged White Supremacy while at the same time revolutionizing both the self-conception and the public image of black people.

Meister thus highlights an often marginalized aspect of the Panthers: how they sought to reach a world beyond race – by going through race. A message well worth considering in an age of "color blindness".

**Franziska Meister** (PhD) is a science and culture editor at Swiss weekly »WOZ – Die Wochenzeitung«. She is a doctor of history and worked at the ZHAW Winterthur.

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## Preface

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“Can you believe it?”, the professor from the History Department at UC Berkeley shouted across the hallway to his approaching colleague, pointing his thumb towards me, “she wants to write about the Black Panthers!” That was at the end of the 1990s, and I wasn’t sure whether they were amused about me, a female white Ph.D. student from Switzerland, or about the subject of my historical venture. I chose to take both issues seriously – namely, to capitalize on the outsider’s perspective. For what has perplexed me ever since I spent my senior high school year as an exchange student in a practically all-white New England small town was a conception of race so universally shared that I caused profound irritation whenever I addressed it: a professed antiracism that went hand in hand with beliefs reflecting white supremacy. Race, I have since come to understand, is a category that permeates US history and society up to the present. At the same time, it is curiously absent from public discourse and conscience. Or at least it was until Donald Trump won the presidential election in November 2016. His patented slogan “Make America Great Again” and the buzzword “America First”, decoded, signify one thing above all: whites (or rather: white males) first.

One could read this as a rollback of women’s political aspirations, which were incorporated by Trump’s Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton, just as well as one could perceive it as a backlash against Barack Obama, the first black man who had ever become President of the United States. But that would be too simple of an explanation, and a mistaken one at that. Arguably, Obama was not elected because he is black, but rather in spite of it: what made him eligible for a majority of white citizens in 2008 is the fact that his age and African origin severed any possible ties to what is remembered as the “racial crisis” of the late 1960s. Obama himself deliberately excluded race relations from his campaign and continued to tiptoe around the issue during his tenure. Yet he would never have been able to take the oval office without those who shouted “Black Power” almost 50 years ago.

After the election of Donald Trump, the danger of history repeating itself is closer than ever. No longer only because race has been marginalized from

contemporary discourse with the rise of the ideology of colorblindness, but because it could emerge once more in the factual guise of white supremacy. In view of a newly ascending Ku Klux Klan and overt racism manifesting itself in public again, discussing race from a black perspective becomes ever more urgent. This is what this book sets out to do. In fact, the era of Black Power still has to be captured in its historic significance, as the black historian Peniel E. Joseph points out, and this assessment holds true particularly for the period's most influential and radical black activists, the Black Panthers.

While contemporary interest in the Black Panther Party (BPP) was huge and prompted a variety of accounts and compilations mostly journalistic in style, these accounts catered almost exclusively to the hegemonial narrative of describing the Panthers as a bunch of violence-prone ghetto hoodlums. It was not until the 1990s that a series of rivaling biographies of former West Coast Panthers sought to reanimate interest in the BPP and its history (Anthony 1990; Brown 1992; Hilliard / Cole 1993; Brent 1996; Andrews 1996; Olsen 2000). Two groundbreaking collections of essays from both scholars and former Panthers or New Left activists (Jones 1998c; Cleaver / Katsiaficas 2001) set the stage for serious academic scholarship on the Party. These publications provide insight into different aspects of the BPP and its development. Over the past ten years, a new generation of scholars has added depth and detail to an increasingly multifaceted history of the Black Panther Party. Rhodes (2007), for instance, provides a nuanced account of the BPP's history in the Bay Area as reflected in the intricate interplay between the Panthers and mass media, the black press, and underground newspapers. The role of women within the Party is comparably well researched, both in terms of their practical everyday contributions and from a gender perspective that explores their difficult search for the position of revolutionary black women caught between struggling against prevailing expressions of machoism within the Party and white-dominated perceptions within the women's liberation movement (Alkebulan 2007; Witt 2007a; Cleaver 2001; LeBlanc-Ernest 1998; Matthews 1998). A shift of focus from national Party leaders to the rank and file in the various cities across the states – combined with oral history approaches – has opened access to the BPP in its local versions and brought to light the tremendous heterogeneity between individual Party chapters and branches (Arend 2009; Williams / Lazerow 2009; Jeffries 2007a; 2007b; Alkebulan 2007; Witt 2007a; 2007b; Austin 2006). Through these studies, the Panthers' community service programs and the great efforts that went into establishing them and keeping them running came to the foreground. And while Party ideology has also been scrutinized both in relation to other Black Power concepts and its orientation on class (Alkebulan 2007; Jeffries 2002; Hayes / Kiene 1998; Spichal 1974), a thoroughly class-based analysis of the BPP, particularly with respect to its daily activities, has

not yet been attempted. Much rather, it seems that Panther historiography has come to a halt with Bloom and Martin's in-depth monography (2013).

The roots of this book go back to my Ph.D., a monography on the Black Panther Party finished before the bulk of the above literature on the BPP was published. It is based on source material collected mainly in the archives of the Bancroft library at UC Berkeley, with additional material coming from the Special Collections and University Archives from Stanford and various private archives from former Panthers and New Left activists. When claiming that an outsider's perspective guided my research, what I refer to is this: my groping to understand the importance of race in shaping America's self-conception led me towards embracing the perspective of those growing up in the midst of US society without being recognized as full members of this society – black people. For their marginalized position provides them with what one of the preeminent black intellectuals of the 20th century, W.E.B. Du Bois, labeled Double Consciousness – and thus, for me as a historian, with what I perceive as a privileged approach to understanding race and race relations in the tumultuous 1960s. While contemporary black writers and intellectuals such as Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, or James Baldwin – not to forget Martin Luther King and Malcolm X – have been enlightening my conception regarding the problem of race, it is from the black voices of the ghetto streets that I learned most: from the various testimonials coming from a broad cross section of the black community of Watts in the aftermath of the Los Angeles ghetto revolt in 1965, and, particularly, from *The Black Panther*, the Party's weekly newspaper which I systematically dissected from its first issue up to 1972. With respect to the various writings of Party members, which I also included in my analysis, one has to take into account that many of them were written in hindsight and offer a perspective molded accordingly by later events, which is why I have always sought to compare them with sources dating close to the events analyzed, especially *The Black Panther*.

Many other sources I have used – among them government investigations and commission reports as well as articles from various mass media – have been included in studies on the Black Panther Party published since I finished my Ph.D. None of these studies, however, have rested so profoundly on an in-depth scrutiny of *The Black Panther*, and none of them, to my knowledge, have systematically gathered and analyzed contemporary agitprop and documentary films about the Panthers. What hopefully most distinguishes this book – apart from the inclusion of film sources – from other historical accounts is the approach taken: the attempt to capture the Black Panthers as engaged in a struggle for *Black Visibility* and to thus convey in what respects this struggle remains of importance until today. Critical Race Theory and particularly the work of the black philosopher Charles W. Mills has been of eminent importance

to this effect. Particularly his *Blackness Visible* (1998) was instrumental in putting my findings into a larger perspective.

Mills and the sociologist Bob Blauner, whose advice has guided me through the various stages of my tackling with the Panthers and black protest in the 1960s, have been inspiring also in an altogether different way: their works exemplify that even exceedingly complex and abstract matters can be captured in a language that manages to reach out beyond an exclusive circle of experts and make them relevant to people outside academia. I gave my very best to reach this goal. This book would not have been possible without the support of many people – chief among them the late Bruno Fritzsche, professor of modern history at the University of Zurich, who has continuously supported my research on both an academic and personal level, but unfortunately cannot witness its present materialization. My warmest thanks also go to Jakob Horstmann from the editing house *transcript* for the enthusiasm with which he accepted my manuscript for publication and Annika Linnemann, also from *transcript*, for her efficient and entirely unbureaucratic guidance throughout the publication process. I am deeply indebted also to Renata Leimer, who proofread the manuscript thoughtfully and thoroughly. Last but not least, I embrace my main men, Christoph Ringli and our sons Nicolas and Valentin, who never questioned that I spent so many evenings and weekends sitting behind the screen of my laptop and transforming the kitchen table into a writing habitat with piles of books and notes.





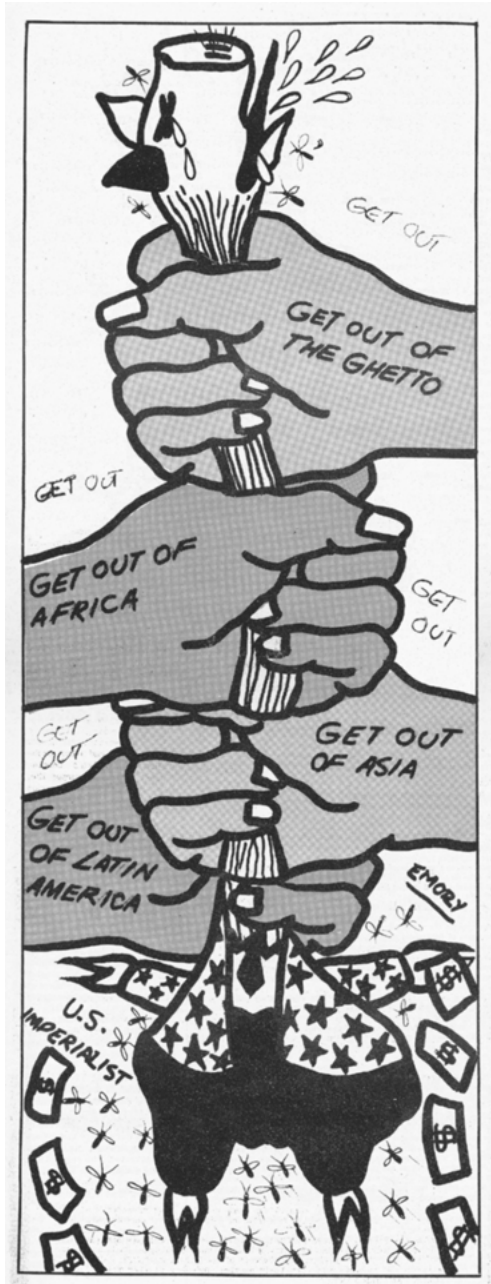


Fig. 1: Get Out (Emory Douglas, 1968,  
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## Introduction: Playing the Race Card

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Bobby Hutton was unarmed and had his arms raised above his head when he emerged from the basement where he had been hiding from the police. The Oakland police officers riddled the 17-year-old black youth with bullets. Philando Castile, who had been pulled over by the police in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, was killed at close range through the open car window by an officer. Alton Sterling was wrestled to the ground of a parking lot in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, by two policemen who then proceeded to execute him with several gunshots. In 2015 alone, US police killed at least 346 black people. Roughly every third of the victims was unarmed. In all but ten cases, the police officers were not charged with a crime.<sup>1</sup>

Almost half a century lies between the latter two police killings of July 2016 and Bobby Hutton's death in April 1968. Hutton had been among the first recruits of the Black Panther Party, who had started to mobilize the black ghetto community around the issues of police violence and the necessity for black self-defense in October 1966. Hutton's death – only days after Martin Luther King, Jr. had been murdered – propelled the Panthers to the vanguard position not only of the Black Movement but the larger New Left and Antiwar Movements. “Revolution has come – Time to pick up the gun!” the protest resonated in the streets and reverberated on campus rallies, as the term *pig* for policeman became commonplace and the US government was routinely referred to as a racist, imperialist power structure. The more the government went into overdrive to suppress the Black Panther Party, which by the end of 1968 was active in practically every major US city with a sizable black community, the broader the Panthers' support base became, reaching both conservative black leaders and intellectuals within the liberal white establishment. It was only when President Richard Nixon started to make concessions to appease both antiwar and black voices by scaling back the military draft and opening up avenues of political, social, and economic ascent for blacks through federal affirmative action programs that the Black Panthers' support base began to dwindle and fall apart, as did the Party itself in early 1971 (although it continued to be active on a local basis in Oakland until 1982).

Thus Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin conclude their comprehensive historical account *Black Against Empire* (2013), which is widely appraised as the ultimate study on the Black Panther Party. “Most blacks in the United States today, especially the black middle class, believe their grievances can be redressed through traditional political and economic channels. Most view insurgency as no longer necessary and do not feel threatened by state repression of insurgent challengers.” (Bloom / Martin 2013: 398)

An assessment that must ring odd in the ears of all those who have taken to the streets under the banner of *Black Lives Matter* in recent years to protest police killings of black people. The loosely knit network first started to organize after the murderer of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Florida was acquitted in 2013. *Black Lives Matter* has reverberated in social media channels and from the streets ever since, from the 2014 police killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson and Eric Garner in New York City to the latest victims of police violence in 2016, among them Philando Castile and Alton Sterling. The slogan itself is worth a pause: to maintain that *Black Lives Matter* is chilling evidence for the fact that for many blacks, history has not evolved as a series of progress but rather in cycles, if not in an outright downward spiral. Take only the existential fear emanating from every page of Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me* (2015), a deeply personal reflection addressing his son but aiming at the larger white public at the same time, echoing James Baldwin’s letter to his nephew in *The Fire This Time* (1963) – minus the seething anger contained in Baldwin’s eloquent prose. And what are black people to make of the slogan “All Lives Matter” that aims at nullifying their claim that *Black Lives Matter*?

The ever so dominant ideology of colorblindness that permeates American society today leaves Americans literally blind to black sufferings because this ideology masks how racism is structurally engrained and continues to reproduce itself even in the absence of overt racist sentiments. The demand for colorblindness quite simply “equates ending racism with eliminating racial reference within juridical discourse and public policy.” (Singh 2004: 10) Thus race has become a taboo. In the late 1960s, in contrast, Americans from across all walks of life and ethnicities had found the courage to debate issues of race and racism “with the kind of urgency that the nation had not witnessed since the debates over slavery and Reconstruction a hundred years earlier,” as the sociologist Bob Blauner (2001: 12) points out. The Black Panthers played a key role in fueling and shaping these debates, as this book aims to show. Moreover, their conception of race and the strategies they chose to fight racism hopefully demonstrate that ending racism is possible only by putting race center stage – by going through race, instead of trying to go around race.

The great black writer and intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois prophesied over 100 years ago that one of the central problems of the twentieth century would be

that of the *color line*. Race, he maintained throughout his many books and essays, is a category that cannot be subordinated to any other categories of social, economic or political analysis – not even class –, for “the problem of race always cuts across and hinders the settlement of other problems” (Singh 2004: 75). Today, no one would contest that race is a social construction. Only few, however, are ready to acknowledge that race, as the black philosopher Charles W. Mills phrases it, is “an assigned category that influences the socialization one receives, the life-world in which one moves, the experiences one has, the worldview one develops – in short [...] one’s *being and consciousness*” (Mills 1998: xv, original emphasis).

Historically, race emerged from two parallel, but linked processes: the dissemination of enlightenment ideals on the one hand and European expansionism, with its concomitants of expropriation, colonialism, and settlement, on the other.<sup>2</sup> This brought forth the dichotomy between the ‘civilized’ – the settler, colonizer, expropriator, and slaveholder – and the ‘savage other’ – the dislocated, colonized, expropriated, and enslaved, with the development of racial stereotypes accompanying this dichotomy. The repertoire of white images vs black stereotypes in the early American colonies typically included industrious vs lazy, intelligent vs unintelligent, moral vs immoral, knowledgeable vs ignorant, enabling culture vs disabling culture, law-abiding vs criminal, responsible vs shiftless, virtuous vs lascivious. (Crenshaw 1997: 127) However, the first intellectual to define race in hierarchical terms was the enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant. In his essay *On the Different Races of Man* (1775), he classified individuals by linking their physical appearance to their capacity for moral and intellectual development and arranging them in what he perceived as a natural order: whites on top, blacks on the bottom. As a result, the universal ideals of enlightenment, according to which all individuals are treated as persons deserving respect equally, became racially encoded and in reality applied to whites only. Of crucial importance for the foundation of the United States was that whiteness developed into a form of property encompassing both material possessions and individual rights – protected by law, which thus “recognized and codified racial group identity as an instrumentality of exclusion and exploitation” (Harris 1997: 53). Racial oppression and exploitation have subsequently become an integral part of both polity and society, structurally engrained in the form of institutional racism, which reproduces the economic, social, cultural, and political privileges of whites, thereby guaranteeing white supremacy. The crucial aspect to understand is this: this system of white supremacy is able to reproduce itself even in the absence of racist sentiments. “Once certain socioeconomic structures are established, questions of intent and the conscious aim to discriminate become less important than their internal dynamic,” Mills argues. “Whites’ outrage at the term *white supremacy* misses the point that, whether racist or not, they

are heirs to a system of consolidated structural advantage that will continue to exist unless active moves are made to dismantle it.” (Mills 1998: 146, original emphasis)

From a black perspective, this racial encoding of the world has made blacks strangely invisible. The problem of *Black Invisibility* emanates from a broad range of autobiographical, philosophical and fictional writings throughout the twentieth century and up to Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*. The phrase itself was coined by Ralph Ellison in his novel *Invisible Man*, published in 1952. Its prologue opens with:

“I am an invisible man. [...] I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. [...] it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me. [...] That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.” (Ellison 1972: 3, original emphasis)

As the protagonist in Ellison’s novel is a black person living in a white world, *Black Invisibility* denotes a problem of perception ascribed to whites in relation to blacks. It stands for the physical, psychological, cultural, and social constellation of blacks in a society dominated by whites and thus manifests itself on a structural level as well. That whites have the power to define and determine not only how a black person is perceived by others but also how a black person sees him- or herself, is revealed in W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept of Double Consciousness – a concept which can also be read as a metaphor for *Black Invisibility*: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.” (Du Bois 1969: 45) The other, of course, being the white other.

Ellison’s prologue further elaborates on the existential dimension of *Black Invisibility*: “You wonder whether you aren’t simply a phantom in other people’s minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy.” (Ellison 1972: 4) In a sense, blacks have to justify their continued existence in a white world claiming to be better off without them:

“It is when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you’re a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you.” (Ellison 1972: 4)

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In his autobiography *Dusk of Dawn*, published in 1940, Du Bois captured the existential dimension of *Black Invisibility* in remarkably similar terms:

“It is as though one, looking out from a dark cave in a side of an impending mountain, sees the world passing and speaks to it; speaks courteously and persuasively, showing them how these entombed souls are hindered in their natural movement, expression, and development; and how their loosening from prison would be a matter not simply of courtesy, sympathy, and help to them, but aid to all the world. One talks on evenly and logically in this way, but notices that the passing throng does not even turn its head, or if it does, glances curiously and walks on. It gradually penetrates the minds of the prisoners that the people passing do not hear; that some thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass is between them and the world. [...] Then the people within may become hysterical. They may scream and hurl themselves against the barriers, hardly realizing in their bewilderment that they are screaming in a vacuum unheard and that their antics may actually seem funny to those outside looking in. They may even, here and there, break through in blood and disfigurement, and find themselves faced by a horrified, implacable, and quite overwhelming mob of people frightened for their own very existence.” (Du Bois 1940: 130-131)

That the problem of *Black Invisibility* was addressed with increasing urgency among black writers and intellectuals around the middle of the 20th century is no accident: this reflects the fundamental change black people were experiencing as a result of the Great Black Migration. In 1910, 90 percent of the US black population lived in the Southern states, with three out of four blacks living in a rural area. By 1960, not only were 50 percent of all blacks residing outside the South, three out of four also found themselves concentrated in urban ghettos. (Meier / Rudwick 1993: 232) Du Bois’ cave allegory thus captures how blacks who tried to escape de jure segregation in the South soon found themselves concentrated and isolated again in the de facto segregated world of the black ghetto. The system of white supremacy had merely adapted from overtly racist structures to institutional dynamics less readily detectable as racist. *Black Invisibility*, from this vantage point, must thus be seen as making up the essence, the internal functioning logic, of white supremacy. For it masks the systematically privileged status of whites and the systematic disadvantaging of blacks – in other words: it legitimizes the existing social order. Consequentially then, as Charles Mills (1998: 164) points out, whites will – “with complete sincerity” – perceive black agitation for the dismantling of white people’s continuing and systematic privileging in a white supremacy system as a violation of white people’s rights.

This becomes evident when taking into account how Du Bois’ cave allegory actually foreshadowed what would happen 25 years later when tens of thousands of blacks took to the streets in Watts, the center of black Los Angeles, in what

became the first of a series of ghetto revolts that swept across the nation in the second half of the 1960s. For Watts erupted only days after President Lyndon B. Johnson had officially buried the system of de jure segregation in the South by signing the Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965 – and progressive whites across the nation perceived the goals of the civil rights movement as realized. They were accordingly outraged (and frightened into buying arms for self-defense) when blacks in Watts chased the police – who had brutalized a black man and thus triggered the revolt – out of the ghetto and then proceeded to loot and burn. The black ghetto community had indeed broken through the “thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass” – alas “in blood and disfigurement”.

The report by the Governor’s Commission on the Los Angeles Riots (1965) and the genesis of these findings provide an illustrative example of how whites perceived and rationalized black agitation. The collection of testimonies was framed by a clear-cut law and order position from its inception, and the handful of witnesses from the black community were preselected accordingly to include representatives from the hard-working, law-abiding black middle class only – among them the president of the local NAACP, one of the oldest and most conservative civil rights organizations, and a more progressive reverend active in the civil rights movement. The black community at large was deliberately excluded, for fears that its members would use the hearings for “posturing” or “to make a lot of noise” (Jacobs 1966: 255). During the hearings, the commission granted Chief William Parker from the Los Angeles Police Department almost unlimited time and space to present his arguments, while the witnesses from the black community were cut short, interrupted, rebuked or taken aside for a clarification of issues “off the record”.<sup>3</sup> Completely dismissing the evidence presented during the hearings, the commission’s chairman John McCone disputed that any racist mechanisms were at work in the housing and real estate market to confine blacks to the ghetto area: “The only obstacle that stood in the way of Negro occupancy was the owner’s choice. There was no legal restriction. It was a man’s option to do what he wished with his property,” McCone declared (Jacobs 1966: 278-279), thus voicing his conviction that white rights, such as the right to property and its protection, were untouchable. Similarly, the report itself culminated in the contention that “the rioters had no legal or moral justification for the wounds they inflicted” (Governor’s Commission on the Los Angeles Riots 1965: 6) – wounds in white property destroyed during the revolt.

What the commission (and the larger white public) refused to recognize – and what was instantly understood by black ghetto residents across the nation –, was the pattern behind the looting, burning, and defiant posturing opposite the police: the protesters targeted the businesses of white merchants who had been consistently overcharging the local black community, exploiting the customers with unfair credits, and treating them disrespectfully; they



targeted those forces of society whose function it was 'to keep blacks in their place' – the ghetto – and to make them accustomed to living in an inferior position. By challenging the police, the mostly youthful blacks insisted upon their equality as a person to those who had routinely denied them this status, and by chasing the police away, they claimed control over the ghetto streets.<sup>4</sup> Much rather than a riot, the Watts uprising in August 1965 was a revolt, a revolt against the inferior status ascribed to blacks, a revolt against key symbols and representatives of institutional racism – a revolt against *Black Invisibility*.

During those five days in August 1965, the later founders and early leaders of the Black Panther Party were virtually glued to their TV screens and radio stations, as they all recalled. (Hilliard / Cole 1993: 114-115; Seale 1991: 37; Cleaver 1968: 26-27) What they and their neighborhood friends experienced essentially paralleled what the revolting Watts youth were going through. Burning, setting fire, being set afire and going through fire – both literally and symbolically – amounted to an act of cleansing and initiation into a different physical and psychological state. Watts signaled the change from Civil Rights to Black Power – from the hope for integration to the fight for black liberation. "We had seen Watts rise up the previous year. We had seen how the police attacked the Watts community after causing the trouble in the first place. We had seen Martin Luther King come to Watts in an effort to calm the people, and we had seen his philosophy of nonviolence rejected," Huey P. Newton recalled in his autobiography. "Everything we had seen convinced us that our time had come. Out of this need sprang the Black Panther Party." (Newton 1995b: 110)

When Newton and Bobby Seale started to organize the black community of Oakland around the issues of community control and black self-determination in October 1966, their 10-point program *What We Want – What We Believe* fully addressed the complaints voiced during the Watts revolt: police brutality, exploitation through white business owners in the ghetto, unemployment and discrimination in the job market, in housing and in public schools. Both Newton and Seale were enrolled at Merritt College and worked at a local antipoverty center at the time. They had dug deep into the history of black people in the United States and, among others, had devoured the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois and Ralph Ellison.<sup>5</sup> Du Bois, as well as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, who had been murdered in February 1965, had introduced them to the anticolonial struggles in Asia and Africa after World War II and the growing momentum these movements were gaining while progress for blacks in the US still crept along "at horse and buggy pace", as King formulated in his famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail*.

Newton and Seale were thus keenly aware of the historical time and crossroads they were standing at in the fall of 1966: the cry for Black Power had been launched only weeks ago and started to tear the civil rights movement

apart, while it became ever more clear with the growing opposition to the war in Vietnam that antiracism and anticolonialism were linked struggles that could not be separated – just as Du Bois had remained steadfast in his belief that the problem of race would never be resolved unless it was treated as a global problem. Moreover, just as Du Bois had always endorsed socialism over capitalism when it came to fighting racism, the Panthers exhibited a pronouncedly anticapitalistic stance. Newton and Eldridge Cleaver, the Party's key ideologists, eclectically appropriated Marxist-Leninist theories and quotations from Mao Tse-tung, the founding father of the People's Republic of China, or the North-Korean leader Kim Il Sung and sought ways to adapt successful socialist revolutions like the one in Cuba to the United States – always with a mindful eye towards the necessity to reshape Party ideology as circumstances changed.

Their socialist stance notwithstanding, race always provided the foundation of both the Black Panthers' theoretical outlook and their principles of practice. In his booklet *On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party (Part 1)*, Cleaver renounced all forms of dogmatism and insisted that the analysis and adaptation of an ideological or theoretical perspective must always be done by blacks themselves, in their own terms and with their own definitions resulting from their black experience and black existence. Among the many reasons why the Panthers found Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* from 1961, which detailed how to struggle against colonialism, to be the most useful guide to revolution inside the United States, the underlying prerequisite was this: "Given the racist history of the United States, it is very difficult for Black people to comfortably call themselves Marxist-Leninists or anything else that takes its name from White people," Cleaver explained in his booklet. "Not until we reach Fanon do we find a major Marxist-Leninist theoretician who was primarily concerned about the problems of Black people, wherever they may be found." Fanon's basic contention being that "what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging or not belonging to a given race." (Fanon 1966: 32) And while the Panthers had invoked the US Declaration of Independence by adopting its key passages into the appendix of their 10-point program, they were adamant in indicting the US Constitution as the racist foundation on which the United States had been erected as a white supremacy system. As the incarcerated leadership of the New York Panthers captured it in a letter written in March 1970:

"[T]he history of this nation has most definitely developed a dual set of social, economic and political realities, as well as dynamics. One white, and the other Black (the Black experience or ghetto reality) [...] Color became the crucial variable, and the foundation of the system of Black slavery. [...] After much refinement, sophistication and development, it has remained to become embedded in the national character, making itself clear in organized society, its institutions, and the attitudes of the dominant white

culture to this very day. For us to state that there are two realities (experiences) that exist in this nation, is a statement of fact. When we speak of American traditions, let us not forget the tradition of injustice inflicted again and again upon those whom tradition has been created to exclude, exploit, dehumanize and murder.” (Foner 1970: 196-197)

The crucial aspect of this racial encoding lay, as the Panthers argued, in its rendering black experience and black existence invisible, in order to legitimate white supremacy:

“To be sure, the entire country had to share in this denial; to justify the inhuman treatment of other human beings, the American had to conceal from himself and others his oppression of Blacks, but again the white dominant society has long had absolute power, especially over Black people – so it was no difficult matter to ignore them, define them, forget them, and if they persisted, pacify or punish them. [...] ‘Traditional American justice’, its very application has created what it claims to remedy, for its eyes are truly covered: it does not see the Black reality, nor does it consider or know of the Black experience, least of all consider it valid.” (Foner 1970: 197)

The centrality the Panthers ascribed to race as a category of analysis guided them in positioning themselves within the black protest movement and vis-à-vis the larger New Left movements. Their radical rejection of the civil rights movement and its goal of integration, for instance, was based on the contention that, as Seale formulated, “integration as it is popularly conceived means going to a white school, white neighborhood, white church, etc. This assumes that the only way black people can become equal is to be white. It automatically assumes black inferiority and white superiority.” (*TBP*, May 25, 1969: 4) Conversely, the Panthers hailed Malcolm X precisely because in speech after speech he had driven home how defining a feature race was in American life. On the one hand, Malcolm X had been educating his black audiences about their condition in relation to the US government and society from both a historical and contemporary political perspective, in order to raise black people’s commitment to oppose white supremacy “by any means necessary”. On the other hand, he had always presented a mirror to whites, confronting them with their attitudes and behavior and the functioning of ‘their system’ from a black perspective.

But the Panthers were not the only ones claiming heritage to Malcolm X – more or less the entire Black Power movement did, after Stokely Carmichael from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had first launched the rallying cry of Black Power in the summer of 1966. Originally, the Panthers had also paid tribute to Carmichael and the political concept of Black Power he advanced in his book a year later.<sup>6</sup> The Panthers applauded Carmichael primarily because he had arrived at essentially the same conclusions, namely, that the United States were a white supremacy system functioning on the basis

of *Black Invisibility*. “Racist assumptions of white superiority have been so deeply engrained into the fiber of the society,” Carmichael wrote, that they “are taken for granted and frequently not even recognized.” (Carmichael / Hamilton 1967: 5)

However, what distinguished the Panthers’ conception of race from other Black Power advocates and groups was that they did not make race essential. Much rather, they regarded race as “shaping one’s being without being one’s shape”, to pick up Charles W. Mills’ (1998: xiv) lucid formulation. Limited conceptions of blackness that remained hung-up on skin color were resolutely opposed as mirrored racism unable to challenge *Black Invisibility*. After first drafting Stokely Carmichael into the Black Panther Party in June 1967 because he had distinguished himself “in the struggle for the total liberation of Black people from oppression in racist white America,” as Newton (1995a: 9-10) reasoned, the BPP formally expelled Carmichael two years later. In his *Open Letter to Stokely Carmichael* from July 1969, Eldridge Cleaver charged Carmichael with being “unable to distinguish your friends from your enemies because all you could see was the color of the cat’s skin,” in reference to several instances in which Carmichael defended black politicians and policemen – functionaries of the white supremacy system whose skin color did little to change the racist mechanisms engrained in the institution they served. “You speak about an ‘undying love for black people’. An undying love for black people that denies the humanity of other people is doomed. It was an undying love of white people for each other which led them to deny the humanity of colored people and which has stripped white people of humanity itself.” (Foner 1970: 106-108)

Cultural nationalist groups who took pride in their curly hair-do and wore colorful African gowns were particularly scorned for their belief “that there is dignity inherent in wearing naturals; that a baba makes a slave a man; and that a common language, Swahili, makes all of us brothers,” as Panther Linda Harrison put it: “cultural nationalism offers no challenge or offense against the prevailing order.” Much rather, as she and various other Panthers pointed out in 1969, the Nixon administration had already exploited cultural Black Power by commercializing it under the slogan black capitalism. “No black capitalist can function unless he plays the white man’s game,” Newton charged. “The rules of black capitalism, and the limits of black capitalism are set by the white power structure.”<sup>7</sup> Essentially, then, the Panthers criticized cultural nationalists for their limited conception of race as being one’s shape and completely ignoring how it shaped one’s being.

From their very inception, the Panthers had exhibited an emphatic antiracist stance. As Newton pointed out at the occasion of his very first press conference in May 1967: “we’re not anti-white. I don’t hate a person because of the color of his skin. I hate the oppression that we’re subjected to daily by

racist pigs and other racists who attack and murder and brutalize us, those who have been brutalizing us for 400 years.” (Seale 1991: 172) In the years to come, the Panthers would repeat this time and again, as Seale maintained, emphasizing at the same time that what they hated was “what is being done to us and the system that creates what is being done to us” (*TBP*, March 3, 1969: 10). Repeatedly, they took refuge to Malcolm X, who had turned into a fervent antiracist towards the end of his life, quoting him in the Party newspaper as saying: “We are anti-exploitation, anti-degradation, and anti-oppression – if the white man doesn’t want us to be anti-him then let him stop oppressing, degrading and exploiting us.”<sup>8</sup> Just as they saw through the racial encoding of the US system and society, the Panthers were convinced that whites were not born racists, but were turned into racists by the system’s very functioning. “[T]he values taught in this country inevitably result in whites’ having racist attitudes,” Cleaver maintained. “But I think a lot of whites are made racists against their essential humanity and without their conscious knowledge.” (Cleaver 1969: 177)

Unlike the majority of Black Power advocates, the Panthers were thus ready to work together with whites – based on the premise that whites recognize and struggle to overcome their racially-encoded conceptions of black people. Dhoruba Bin Wahad, one of the incarcerated New York BPP leaders, later explained how a well-meaning white individual would typically claim that he was not responsible for the situation of blacks since he wasn’t there during slavery. “But that’s not the point,” Bin Wahad clarified. “The point is that he inherited white-skin privilege, and he doesn’t question or challenge it.” (Fletcher / Jones / Lotringer 1993: 36) The coalitions the BPP formed with whites and groups from other ethnic minorities thus rested on the contention that theirs was a struggle to overcome race – by going through race (and not around it).

What further distinguished the Panthers in their coalition politics and their perception of viable strategies to challenge white supremacy was the centrality they ascribed to the common historical roots the United States shared with other countries of the so-called Third World: colonialism and the racial encoding of enlightenment ideals. They recognized, in other words, that white supremacy was a world-wide phenomenon. And this realization led them to repudiate black nationalism, a highly fashionable concept among Black Power advocates in the second half of the 1960s. Trying to establish a separate black nation was futile, Newton argued, because it would only further concentrate and isolate blacks, concluding that “the only way that we are going to be free is to wipe out once and for all the oppressive structure of America.” (Newton 1995a: 98) For blacks in the United States shared a common fate with other nonwhite peoples around the globe, the Panthers were convinced, namely, their situation as a colonized people:

“Our black communities are colonized and controlled from the outside – The politics in our communities are controlled from outside, the economics of our communities are controlled from outside, and, we ourselves are controlled by the racist police who come into our communities from outside and occupy them, patrolling, terrorizing, and brutalizing our people like a foreign army in a conquered land.”<sup>9</sup>

The idea of the ghetto as internal colony and the consequential conception of the police as an occupying army was not entirely unprecedented. Contemporary black writers and intellectuals such as James Baldwin or Kenneth B. Clark had already made fleeting references to the analogy, as had Malcolm X and, at least implicitly, the revolting ghetto youth of Watts in their repeated linking between Watts and Vietnam.<sup>10</sup> And while Stokely Carmichael’s book on Black Power was certainly important in elaborating the colonial analogy, it is primarily the Panthers who must be credited with broadly popularizing it. For they not only founded their analysis of the situation of US ghetto blacks on Frantz Fanon’s seminal study of the Algerian liberation struggle, they were instrumental in turning *The Wretched of the Earth* into what became the bible for the black revolutionary towards the end of the 1960s. (Cleaver 1998: 214; Singh 1998: 76) In fact, they closely modeled themselves after what Fanon had depicted as the vanguard of the revolution. The organizational features Fanon found indispensable for such a vanguard were all followed – or at least aspired to – within the Black Panther Party: internal hierarchy and structural discipline, organizational presence on the local level across the country, a leadership that is politically and intellectually sophisticated, and a strict orientation to the needs of the people in the black community.<sup>11</sup>

Basically, the colonial analogy is reflected already in the BPP’s 10-point program. Its individual points address the racist functioning of major US institutions both public and private – namely, the job, business, and housing market (#2, 3, 4), the educational system (#5) and, clearly with the greatest emphasis, the executive and judicial systems (#6, 7, 8, 9). The colonial analogy was woven into each of these points: on the economic level, property and property rights were identified as white privilege on the one hand and black exploitation on the other, particularly in the area of jobs and employment (#2), but also concerning the exploitation of black labor (#2, 3), the ownership and operation of businesses (#3), and the ownership and conditions of housing (#4). The dehumanization of blacks as expressed in white indifference and disrespect and the humiliating treatment of blacks was pointed out in relation to the housing conditions of blacks (#4), in the educational system (#5), and in executive and judicial institutions such as the police, courts, and the military (#6, 7, 8, 9). On the political level, the various aspects of black oppression were exemplified in the denial of freedom (#1, 7, 8, 9), the denial of justice (#8, 9), and the violence with which this oppression was executed (#6, 7). In sum, the

program painted black communities as typical internal colonies, characterized by heteronomy (#1-10), exploitation (#2, 3, 6), oppression (#6, 7, 8, 9), and the relegating of blacks to an inferior status (#4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9). (cf. Foner 1970: 2-4)

The single most important aspect of Fanon's study which the Panthers took up was that colonialism was inextricably tied to violence. "The agents of government speak the language of pure force," Fanon (1966: 31) contended, pointing out how the policeman or soldier was "the bringer of violence into the home and into the mind of the native." A violence of existential dimensions, as its purpose was to dehumanize the natives – "breaking in the native", as Fanon (1966: 35) put it – in order to exploit them. What constitutes the actual uniqueness of Fanon's conception of violence is that the system's violence – and thereby the colonial system itself – can only be overcome through violence, that "it will only yield when confronted with greater violence" (Fanon 1966: 48). Not only did he thus raise violence to the sine qua non of an anticolonial liberation struggle, he morally justified it, arguing that since violence was the language of the white settler, the black native must subvert and instrumentalize this very violence and thus claim it as legitimate. (Fanon 1966: 65) This was a point Malcolm X tirelessly drove home in his speeches: black self-defense was "by any means necessary" – explicitly, as he never failed to state, including violence. In one of his rhetorical drives against 'the white man', he told his audience: "[S]ee the language he speaks, the language of a brute, the language of someone who has no sense of morality, who absolutely ignores law [...] He's talking the language of violence [...] Let's learn his language. If his language is with a shotgun, get a shotgun. Yes, I said if he only understands the language of a rifle, get a rifle." (Breitman 1990: 108)

In Fanon's contention, violence thus employed became a "cleansing force": "It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction," the Algerian psychiatrist argued, "it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect." (Fanon 1966: 73) On a quite existential level then, Fanon perceived violence as man recreating himself – as part of an initiation ritual through which the native reclaimed his or her status of full personhood and human identity. And this was precisely what countless blacks had witnessed as the Watts revolt unfolded on their TV screens. What's more, as Fanon argued, violence thus became an "illuminating force", revolutionizing the natives' consciousness: "Yesterday they were completely irresponsible; today they mean to understand everything and make all decisions. Illuminated by violence, the consciousness of the people rebels against any pacification." (Fanon 1966: 74) Viewed as metaphor, this illuminating power of violence is the power to create *Black Visibility* – not only on the physical and psychological, but also on the structural levels. Once achieved, this *Black Visibility* would spark the actual revolution: "Violence alone, violence committed by the people, violence

organized and educated by its leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and gives the key to them.” (Fanon 1966: 117)

The Black Panthers now argued on a similarly metaphorical level when claiming heritage to Fanon and Malcolm X with the formula “Frantz Fanon put it on paper, [...] Malcolm X put [it] into words, and [...] Huey P. Newton put it into action”.<sup>12</sup> Over the course of their existence until the split in 1971, the Panthers would make excessive use of violence – predominantly, however, on the rhetorical and performative levels, and not in the form of actual acts of aggression. (Austin 2006: 112) During all the armed confrontations while patrolling the police between October 1966 and May 1967, for instance, not a single shot was fired. (Bloom / Martin 2013: 66) The Panthers tried to employ violence as an ‘illuminating force’, a force of education towards realizing *Black Visibility*. The colonial analogy they had developed was absolutely instrumental in this process, for it fundamentally challenged the hegemonial discourse about the black community as a culture of poverty, a notion popularized with the Moynihan Report in 1965. According to this notion, members of the urban black underclass exhibited various forms of disorganizations on the personal and familial level which precluded them from escaping poverty.<sup>13</sup> The colonial analogy as a counter-narrative provided the Black Panthers with a conceptual vantage point from which they launched an all-out attack against *Black Invisibility*.

Put differently, as this book will argue, the Black Panthers were engaged in a struggle for *Black Visibility* on the physical, psychological, and structural level – a *Black Visibility* that would, as they hoped, ultimately disrupt the functioning and reproduction of white supremacy and thus revolutionize US government and society. Chapter One will depict how the Panthers pursued to project a radically different image of blacks into the public, an image that would put them on an equal plane with whites and fundamentally question whites’ assumed superiority. Thus propelling themselves onto the public stage was, as Chapter Two will detail, part and parcel of the Panthers’ larger strategy to expose the racist functioning of key US institutions – a strategy that possessed a subversive and provocative undercurrent that profoundly challenged the government’s performance. All the while, the Panthers employed a rhetoric that was both violent and excessive, intending to provoke the government to a point where it would resort to a retaliating response through which it would publicly delegitimize itself.

And the government did respond. It retorted, as Chapter Three will demonstrate, precisely to the Panthers’ struggle for *Black Visibility*. In fact, the government’s response can be framed as following a *Back-to-Black-Invisibility* imperative: local, state, and federal executive agencies launched coordinated attacks on the BPP’s key *Black Visibility* assets and worked together to deliberately



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reinforce racial stereotypes and thus reaffirm white supremacy. The mass media played an important, yet highly ambivalent role in all these processes. Chapter Four explores how the Panthers at once capitalized on the media and opposed them, and how they created a highly efficient and sophisticated counter-public sphere through their own media. Placing the Black Panthers' struggle in the context of the contemporary movements for social change, the final chapter shows how the Panthers were not only rooted in the history of black protest and its fight for racial social justice, but strategically employed their struggle for *Black Visibility* to thus oblige the New Left movements to unite with them in a common struggle against white supremacy. When deliberating to what respects the Black Panthers were actually successful and why they failed in others, what is ultimately up for discussion is the larger meaning of their struggle in the context of race relations in the United States then and now.