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## **The Panthers and Dr. King: Nuanced Effects on the Black Gay Community**

**Priya Saha**

### **Prelude**

Black gay men in the United States have historically faced rampant discrimination due to both their sexuality and their race. Instead of finding solace within either the black or gay communities, many black gay individuals find that neither community will accept, let alone embrace them. According to Dr. Larry Icard, the gay community has historically embraced the attitudes of the larger American society, which include racism towards African Americans.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, the black community has often understood homosexuality as a white cultural phenomenon, leading many to regard black gay men as outliers and label them with derogatory terms, such as “snow queen.”<sup>2</sup> As a result, instead of finding support in their minority communities, black gay men were often not accepted in either. Some of the homophobia present in today’s black community can be traced to the messages projected during the Civil Rights Movement, ironic when one considers that this was a movement usually associated with promoting acceptance rather than exclusion.

Two distinct arms of the movement, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s non-violent, assimilationist approach of the 1950s and the militaristic self-defense ideology of the Black Panthers, projected nuanced messages of disapproval to the black gay community. Because Dr. King’s approach championed conformity with mainstream heteronormative American culture, black gay men were condemned not only as obstacles in the fight for racial justice,

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Icard, “Black Gay Men and Conflicting Social Identities: Sexual Orientation Versus Racial Identity,” *Journal of Social Work and Human Sexuality*, 4 (October 2008): 86.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 90.

but also as selfish for prioritizing their sexual desires over the plight of the entire black community. Dr. King utilized this approach because conformity was understood to be the most pragmatic strategy to attain equality. Alternatively, the Black Panther Party embraced militaristic self-defense, advocating for a hypermasculine, “Black Macho” persona, therefore putting down black gay men as effeminate individuals emasculated by white supremacy. Both these negative messages about black homosexuality were vastly different; Dr. King’s approach defined homosexuality as a selfish choice, while the Black Panthers understood black gay men to be the unfortunate result of the constant emasculation of black men in American society.

The Black Panther Party eventually altered their position on black homosexuality, recognizing the gay community as equal victims of violence in mainstream society. Therefore, the Black Panthers eventually pivoted their attacks away from black gay men in order to dismantle the entire oppressive white society, which attacked the gay community as it attacked the black community. Because the Black Panther Party embraced total social revolution, the party publicly united with the Gay Liberation front to wage a complete attack on mainstream society.

### **Assimilationist Strategy**

Dr. King’s assimilationist strategy of the 1950s championed conformity, subscribing to many of the ideas included in *The American Dilemma*, published originally in 1944 by Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal. Myrdal identified rampant discrimination, segregation, and institutionalized racism as the primary factors contributing to the inferior position of black Americans.<sup>3</sup> He urged black people to assimilate into white American society, discouraging the embrace of a uniquely black

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<sup>3</sup> David W. Southern, *Gunnar Myrdal and Black-White Relations: The Use and Abuse of An American Dilemma 1944-1969* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), chap. 9.

culture, which he claimed was a “distorted development.”<sup>4</sup> Myrdal asserted that it was advantageous for the black community to “as individuals and as a group to become assimilated into American culture, to acquire the traits held in esteem by the dominant white Americans.”<sup>5</sup> Civil rights leaders not only embraced the book for its acknowledgment of the damaging effects of segregation and discrimination, but also for its pragmatic integration strategy. Using Myrdal’s assimilation strategy, civil rights leaders discouraged aspects of black culture, including homosexuality, that contradicted existing mainstream society.

During the 1950s, American mainstream society was overwhelmingly defined by strong traditional family values. The Civil Rights Movement encouraged African Americans to adopt these values, encouraging heteronormativity at the expense of the gay black community. Myrdal urged the black community to “acquire the traits held in high esteem by dominant white Americans”, and homosexuality was not one of these traits. Thaddeus Russell, author of “The Color of Discipline: Civil Rights and Black Sexuality”, explains that “black homosexuals came to represent all the elements of African American working-class culture that civil rights leaders identified as obstacles to the attainment of citizenship.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, leaders within the movement encouraged strict heteronormativity and traditional family values in the black community and discouraged any expressions of homosexuality.

Martin Luther King Jr. promoted this message of conformity in his sermons and speeches during the 1950s, calling on the black community to elevate itself to the standards of mainstream American culture in order to integrate fully into society. In December of 1957, King delivered the sermon “Some Things We Must Do” in a black church, urging the congregation, to “sit down

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<sup>4</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1944), 928.

<sup>5</sup> Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 929.

<sup>6</sup> Thaddeus Russell, “The Color of Discipline: Civil Rights and Black Sexuality,” *American Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2008): 103.

quietly by the wayside and ask ourselves: ‘Where can we improve?’ What are the things that white people are saying about us...We’ve got to lift our moral standards at every hand.”<sup>7</sup> King urged those present to examine their way of life, and then “elevate their own standards” to match those of mainstream white society. He placed a responsibility on black Americans to present themselves as perfect American citizens, which meant conforming to heterosexual values.

In the same sermon, King called on the audience to “walk on the street every day, and let people know that as we walk the street we aren’t thinking about sex every time we turn around.”<sup>8</sup> Frantz Fanon, a prominent black psychiatrist, discussed the rampant hypersexualization of black gay men in white society. In his book, *Black Skin White Masks*, he described that in popular culture, black gay men are “turned into a penis...It is easy to imagine what such descriptions can stimulate...Horror?”<sup>9</sup> According to Fanon, black gay men were understood to be unnatural sexual predators, in some cases inciting a fearful response. Because black gay men were stereotyped as hypersexual predators, they disproportionately contributed to the perception of the black community as hypersexual. Although King did not point directly to gay men in his plea, a simple strategy to “let people know that as we walk the street we aren’t thinking about sex” is to abandon homosexual behavior altogether. Without openly condemning homosexual behavior, King’s sermon acknowledged the barrier that black queerness created in the fight for racial equality, as the presence of homosexuality in the black community was perceived to jeopardize the entire fight for racial equality.

Because The Civil Rights Movement during the 1950s broadcasted messages of conformity and support for heteronormative behavior, black homosexuality came to be

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Some Things We Must Do” (Sermon, Holt Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, 5 Dec. 1957).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (France: Editions de Seuil, 1952), 130.

understood as an obstacle in the fight for racial justice. As a result, gay black men were accused of selfishly prioritizing their own desires over the plight of the black community. In a sermon titled “Conquering Self Centeredness” from August 1957, Dr. King condemned selfish individuals and describes selfishness as a sickness, utilizing language that reflected how homosexuality was also described. He explained that the “consequences, the disruptive effects of such self-centeredness, such egocentric desires, are tragic” and those who give in to such desires “end up victims of distorted and disrupted personality.”<sup>10</sup> Dr. King specifically described these individuals as having a “distorted personality”, which is strikingly similar to how gay men were described in other parts of American society during the 1950s. Furthermore, Adam Clayton Powell Sr., an influential pastor and figure in the Civil Rights Movement asserted that “the individual pursuit of pleasure over the obligations of the community was both the cause and consequence of homosexuality.”<sup>11</sup> Equating black homosexuality with selfishness was an extremely dangerous consequence of the assimilationist approach as black gay men were forced to view their racial and sexual identities in conflicting terms.

Despite the homophobic messages broadcasted by the movement during the 1950s, Bayard Rustin, a gay man, remained an influential figure in the organization. Because the public image of the movement during the 1950s was strictly heterosexual, Rustin was relegated to work behind the scenes and out of public view. Working in the shadows, Rustin served as a close advisor and companion to Dr. King and proved himself to be an invaluable asset to the organization. Rustin was responsible for consolidating the various Civil Rights movements in the south into the massively successful Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Conquering Self-Centeredness,” (Sermon, Hold Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, 11 August 1957).

<sup>11</sup> Russell, *The Color of Discipline*, 104.

<sup>12</sup> Michael R. Gorman, “Bayard Rustin: Friend of Martin Luther King,” *The Latest Issue*, January 1994, 7.

But Rustin's primary accomplishment was organizing the monumental 1963 March on Washington, where Martin Luther King delivered the renowned "I Have a Dream" speech. Rustin's continued involvement in the organization, despite widespread knowledge of his sexuality, demonstrates that while the movement publicly condemned homosexuality, members of the organization did not always internalize this sentiment. The assimilationist, heteronormative strategy was not built on homophobia, but instead the belief that appealing to mainstream white American culture would provide the quickest route to equal rights.

Despite understanding that opposition to his sexuality was motivated by pragmatism, and not homophobic ideals, Bayard Rustin came to internalize these anti-gay messages, and struggled to reconcile his sexual identity with his racial identity. Rustin's continued involvement coupled with his own internalization of guilt for his homosexuality demonstrates the complexity of the assimilationist Civil Rights message. Although he was directly involved in the movement and accepted by other civil rights leaders, the persistent homophobic sentiment broadcasted by the movement negatively affected Rustin. He came to understand his own sexuality as an obstacle in the fight for racial equality. In a letter to a friend written from jail, Rustin explains, "I know now that for me sex must be sublimated if I am to live with myself and in this world longer"<sup>13</sup>. Rustin's lifestyle and his sexual identity were at odds: it was impossible for him to continue with his activism and embrace his identity as a gay man. Rustin claimed that it "would be better to be dead than to do worse than those I have denounced from the platform as murderers. Violence is not as bad as violence + hypocrisy."<sup>14</sup> As a result of the constant anti-gay rhetoric, Rustin equated homosexuality with violence, claiming he has 'done worse' than the individuals he's accused of murder by embracing his sexuality. As a result, Rustin has branded himself a

<sup>13</sup> Bayard Rustin, *I Must Resist: Bayard Rustin's Life in Letter*, (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2012), 155.

<sup>14</sup> Rustin, *I Must Resist*, 155.

hypocrite for protesting violence while identifying as a gay man. Rustin's personal struggle with reconciling his sexual identity amongst the constant anti-gay messages reveals that despite not being motivated by homophobia, the effects on black gay men was no less severe. Countless individuals in the black gay community suffered self-dread and confliction with their racial and sexual identities as a result of the anti-gay sentiment broadcasted by the movement.

### **The Black Panther Party**

The Black Panthers rose to popularity during the later years of the Civil Rights Movement, utilizing a vastly different strategy than the assimilationist approach Dr. King had advocated for in the early years of the movement. The party embraced revolution as opposed to accommodation, claiming that because the current United States government did not accept or appreciate the black community, "it is their right, it is their duty to throw off such a government, and to provide new guards for their future security."<sup>15</sup> This concept of revolution had a variety of effects on the black gay community during the 1960s and 1970s. In order to establish a public image of revolution, strength, and black power, the Panthers championed hypermasculinity, urging for black men to regain their stolen manhood. Since the Panthers also embraced social revolution, the organization encouraged alliances with other oppressed groups, even eventually allying with the Gay Liberation Front to wage a complete social revolution against mainstream society.

Reestablishing dominance in society for black men was a major pillar of the Black Panther's ideology, as the party blamed white supremacy for the emasculation of black men. Huey Newton, co-founder of the party and Minister of Defense, discussed the crisis of manhood faced by black men in his paper, "Fear and Doubt", published in 1967. He described that a black

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<sup>15</sup> John Brown Society, *An Introduction to the Black Panther Society* (Berkeley: 1968).



man “finds himself void of those things that bring respect and a feeling of worthiness...he feels that he is something less than a man, and it is evident...the white man is ‘THE MAN’, he got everything...and a n\*\*\*\*\* ain’t nothing.”<sup>16</sup> Black men had been deprived of their masculinity and manhood through hundreds of years of slavery, institutionalized segregation, and racism. As a result, Newton claimed that black men were psychologically broken, “confused and in a constant state of rage and doubt.”<sup>17</sup> Newton blamed years of oppression for constructing this stunted black male identity, therefore inciting the Panthers to embrace a powerful sense of masculinity to reassert the dominance of black men.

Homosexuality, a symptom of this black emasculation, was also understood to be a consequence of oppression in American society. Eldridge Cleaver, minister of information for the Black Panthers, attacked homosexuality in *Soul on Ice*, published in 1968. He described the state of black gay men in American society: “The white man has deprived him of his masculinity...and he turns the razor edge of hatred against ‘blackness.’”<sup>18</sup> Not only was black homosexuality the product of oppressive white society, but also resulted in the rejection of one’s own race. Cleaver accused black gay men of internalizing a “racial death-wish,” falling victim to the emasculating effects of white supremacy.<sup>19</sup> The Panthers linked homosexuality with white culture, deeming black queerness an unfortunate consequence of years of emasculation within mainstream culture. Furthermore, as Lisa M. Corrigan discerns in her article, “Queering the Panthers: Rhetorical Adjacency and Black/Queer Liberation Politics”, the Black Panther party also embraced the politics of the Maoist-Leninist groups, who understood homosexuality to be a ‘bourgeois deviation’, or

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<sup>16</sup> Huey Newton, “Fear and Doubt,” in *Essays From the Minister of Defense* (1967), 15-17.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>18</sup> Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1968), 103.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 102.

‘counterrevolutionary,’ which stood in direct contention with their revolutionary purpose.<sup>20</sup>

The Panthers sought to promote a hypermasculine ‘Black Macho’ public persona. Furthermore, strong, traditionally masculine men contributed to the Panther’s embrace of militaristic self-defense and necessary violence. Cleaver advocated for black men to fight back against the oppressive system, claiming that “we shall have our manhood. We shall have it, or the earth will be levelled by our attempts to gain it.”<sup>21</sup> The Panthers encouraged the violent expression of masculinity, which was exclusively heterosexual in nature. Michelle Wallace, a civil rights and women’s rights activist critiqued this overtly masculine presentation of the Panthers: “their actions represented an unprecedented boldness in the sons of slaves...The gains would have been more lasting if an improved self-image had not been so hopelessly dependent upon ‘Black Macho’ — a male chauvinist that was frequently cruel, narcissistic and shortsighted.”<sup>22</sup> As Wallace explained, the Panthers encouraged this hypermasculinity to stand in contrast to their identity as “sons of slaves”, as the institution of slavery stripped all autonomy and masculinity from black men.

This empowering embodiment of black male identity had negative consequences, as the party was often described as a hypermasculine cult. Because homosexuality was understood to be a twisted product of oppression, the hypermasculine persona of the Panthers did not leave room for black queer behavior. The image below of Huey Newton embodying the strong, hypermasculine persona was regularly featured in the Black Panther newspapers.

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<sup>20</sup> Lisa M. Corrigan, “Queering the Panthers: Rhetorical Adjacency and Black/Queer Liberation Politics,” *Journal in GLBTG Worldmaking*, 6 (2019), 11.

<sup>21</sup> Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 61.

<sup>22</sup> Michelle Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of The Superwoman* (New York: The Dial Press, 1975), 73.



Huey Newton sitting on a throne-like chair, holding a spear in his left hand and staff in his right hand. His strong gaze coupled with the weapons in his hands invokes the “Black Macho” persona, while the objects in the background and the zebra skin rug provide connections to African culture.<sup>23</sup>

In a 1969 article published in the *Berkeley Tribe*, Leo Laurence, cofounder of the Committee for Homosexual Freedom, described how a “one Panther in Los Angeles resigned, fearing rejection by Panther brothers and sisters should his homosexuality become known...He’s a proud black man, but he’s also a proud homosexual.”<sup>24</sup> The constant hypermasculine and subtly anti-gay rhetoric promoted by the Panthers had real consequences for members within the movement. Some gay members of the party feared their homosexuality would result in their banishment, and

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<sup>23</sup> *Black Panther Minister of Defense*, 4 May 1968, photograph, The Black Panther Party Newspaper Volume 2.

<sup>24</sup> Leo Laurence, “Ronald Raps, Leo Listens,” *Berkeley Tribe*, 26 December 1969.

therefore chose to resign. Despite the potentially hostile environment for black gay members, the radical ideology of the Panthers attracted minorities from other communities.

The sentiment that led the Panthers to dismiss homosexuality as a twisted product of white supremacy is the same ideology that forced the Panthers to eventually show support for the Gay Liberation movement. The intense revolutionary ideology of the Panthers advocated for a complete rejection of mainstream, white, cultural norms. Unlike the assimilationist movement, the Panthers were not concerned with conforming to any aspect of mainstream culture, allowing the group to wage a complete revolution against the oppressive white culture. As a result of radical revolutionary thought, the Black Panthers “created a space...for gender and sexual outsiders to rearticulate themselves discursively as empowered by their outsider status and association with revolutionaries.”<sup>25</sup> Members of other minority groups identified with the revolutionary rhetoric of the Panthers. Because the party’s goal was complete social revolution, the Panthers formed alliances with other oppressed groups with the goal of waging a revolution against mainstream society.

The Black Panthers and the Gay Liberation movement became more closely linked following the Stonewall Riots, marked by several nights of upheaval that publicly demonstrated the police brutality faced by the gay community. As historian Lisa M. Corrigan discusses, police brutality provided a concrete point of shared oppression between the Panthers and the gay community, strengthening the alliance and cooperation between the two groups.<sup>26</sup> Ending police brutality was a primary goal of the Panther’s 10 Point Program, encouraging the self-defense of black individuals against murderous police officers, referred to as pigs by the Panthers.<sup>27</sup> The Stonewall Riots offered a public view of the

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<sup>25</sup> Amy Abugo Ongiri, “Prisoner of Love: Affiliation, Sexuality, and the Black Panther Party,” *Journal of African American History* 94, no. 1 (2009): 70.

<sup>26</sup> Corrigan, *Queering The Panthers*, 7.

<sup>27</sup> John Brown Society, *An Introduction to the Black Panther Society*.

gay community violently protesting police brutality, fighting back and chanting “kill the cops”, inciting a different perception of the gay community than in previous years. The Panthers related with the gay community’s violent struggle with the police, and therefore felt a strong sense of solidarity with the Gay Liberation movement. The Black Panthers publicly demonstrated support for the Gay Liberation movement in 1970, with Huey Newton’s letter to the gay and women’s liberation movements. Newton expressed the necessity for oppressed groups to work together, recognize each other’s unique oppressions and fight for social revolution. He claimed that the gay community “might be the most oppressed people in the society,” and advocated for a coalition of movements to further the goal of complete revolution.<sup>28</sup> Many members of the party internalized this ideology of acceptance. Leo Laurence, a gay activist described that he “asked several Panthers what they thought about homosexual liberation... ‘Right on!’ came back the answer every time. ‘I’m for anybody who is after freedom.’”<sup>29</sup> This notion of complete social revolution for all oppressed groups was not just a public message voiced by the leaders of the party, but an ideology internalized by the ordinary members of the movement. As a result, many Panthers were accepting of homosexuality, despite the overwhelming hyper-masculine and “Black Macho” messages that the movement publicly broadcasted.

Although Newton publicly declared the Panther’s support for Gay Liberation and ordinary members of the party embraced homosexuality, the Black Panthers struggled to shake the negative perceptions about their hypermasculine reputation, which had become an identifying aspect of the group. As Corrigan explains, despite the progressive views of the party, the Panthers continued to be dismissed as a “brutal, thoughtless, hypermasculine organization.”<sup>30</sup> Because the Panthers built their organization

<sup>28</sup> Huey Newton to The Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements, 5 May 1970, Reveal Digital.

<sup>29</sup> Laurence, “Ronald Raps, Leo Listens,” 1969.

<sup>30</sup> Corrigan, *Queering The Panthers*, 13.

around the strong persona of the “Black Macho” and embraced this image in public appearances, the party struggled to show meaningful support to the gay community. The result was a series of complicated, contradictory messages towards the black gay community, as Panthers voiced their support for gay liberation, while at the same time closeted gay members of the party felt the need to resign instead of risking exposure.

## **Conclusion**

The Black Panther Party and the assimilationists of the 1950s each utilized a strategy they believed to be the most effective in gaining equality in American society. Although vastly different, The Black Panthers and Dr. King’s approach each had uniquely negative effects on the black gay population. The assimilationist movement championed conformity to mainstream American culture, leaving no acceptable space for black gay men. Black queerness was therefore recognized as a selfish trait that stood in the way of achieving racial equality. As their movement developed, the Black Panthers came to view homosexuals as equal victims of heteronormative white violence. Over time, they came to reject their previous argument that black homosexuality was the result of white emasculation, publicly uniting with the Gay Liberation Front and encouraging total social revolution.

These messages have lasting effects on individuals. Although the Civil Rights Movement was primarily a fight for racial justice, understanding the effect it had on other marginalized groups is imperative. As a result of these negative messages put forth by Civil Rights leaders, black gay men were not only fighting for their rights as black men, but also struggling within the black community to assert their rights as gay men.

## **Author Bio:**

Priya Saha is a senior at Santa Clara majoring History and Political Science. She has enjoyed taking history classes on a wide variety of topics, from the French Revolution to Gay and Lesbian

American History. Her favorite areas of research are military history and the Civil Rights Movement. In addition to her history research, she also co-authoring a political science journal article.