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JACKANAPES: REFLECTIONS ON THE LEGACY OF THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY FOR THE HIP HOP GENERATION

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In Bobby Seale's *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton*, first published in 1970, in the chapter on "Pigs, Problems, Politics, and Panthers," there is a section devoted to describing the activities of the "Jackanapes, Renegades, and Agent Provocateurs." The renegades were those individuals who joined the Black Panther Party (BPP), but continued to "goof off" and failed to obey the rules until they were "busted" by Seale or Huey Newton or other Panther leaders. One time when the party needed money to bail Bobby Seale out of jail after he was arrested for carrying a shotgun, Newton asked a group of Panthers to go out and sell copies of the *Black Panther Paper* to raise money. However, rather than selling the papers, "they got to jiving around with some chicks in North Richmond. When they got back three or four hours later, they had sold only about twenty-five papers and used a lot of gas." When Newton questioned them, one finally shouted, "To hell with selling these papers right now, man! I'm gonna jive with these chicks." After Newton told them to take the girls back and try and sell some papers, they fooled around again. Newton reminded them that when they were in jail in Sacramento, Bobby Seale had worked hard to raise their bail money; "now you guys are jiving around and the brother's in jail and you won't do the same thing for him." So they were "busted" by Newton, but this time they were thrown out of the party.

But the renegades had learned their lesson. After Seale's bail money was raised and he returned to the Oakland office, he found that these busted renegades were still hanging around. They took Seale aside and tried to explain what had happened: "We goofed off, man. We should have been working to help get bail money to help you get out. Bobby, we're sorry man." Newton explained to Seale, "They're going to have to learn how to get themselves together." However, Seale told Newton, "They asked me to forgive them for it and I did." Newton relented and let them back in the party.[1]

Much more dangerous, however, were the "agent provocateurs" and "jackanapes." The agent provocateurs were police and FBI agents who had infiltrated the party and attempted to provoke party members into illegal activities that theoretically they would not have engaged in without this outside provocation. Seale declared, "Agent provocateurs have come into the Party and have deliberately stirred problems and done things in violation of the Party's

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principles and rules."[2] Information on the activities of the FBI to try and destroy the Panther organization from within was published in the 1976 three-volume report by the U.S. Senate, the "Church Commission Report."[3] However, Seale discussed these agents' destructive operations in *Seize the Time* in 1970 and explained how agent provocateurs used the renegades to undermine the party.

> The agent provocateurs used the cats who refused to be politically educated and to follow the revolutionary principles and rules. Half of the cats who didn't follow the program were being led astray by agent provocateur activity. We didn't know it at first, but we felt and knew that something was definitely going wrong.[4]

Even more dangerous than the renegades were the "jackanapes" who not only refused to become "politically educated" and follow the party rules, but also failed to give up their criminal behavior once they became Panthers.

> A jackanape is a fool. He's foolish, but he's not scared of the police. He's foolish in that he'll get himself killed. If you don't straighten him out, and try to politically educate him, *he will definitely bring the Party down.* If there is an agent provocateur around, the agent will hinder your attempts to politically educate these cats, and will lead them to do crazy things based on emotions rather than work based on understanding social change. For example, a jackanape will come walking down the street with a gun in his hand, talking about, "F*** the Pigs, To hell with the pigs, I ain't going to jail." Then he'll be surrounded by 25 cops with shotguns pointed at his head, and he'll go to jail.[5]

Seale contrasted the jackanapes with the "real revolutionaries" who "are like the brothers in the L.A. shootout, where the pigs attacked the office and pulled a pre-dawn raid on them." Seale pointed out that, "those brothers defended that office because they were really defending the community programs that we were trying to set up.

> They defended themselves because they realized that *the power structure wanted to rip them off and systematically exterminate them,* that [the power structure] wanted to prevent the organizing and uniting of the people around revolutionary programs. ... As a citizen in the community and a member of the Black Panther Party ... [the real revolutionary will] follow the rules and be very dedicated. He is constantly trying to politically educate himself about revolutionary principles and how they function, to get a broad perspective. He'll also defend himself and his people when we're unjustly attacked by the racist pigs.[6]

And what about the jackanape? Seale noted that "the jackanape generally works from the opportunistic position. He centers things only around himself; he's still selfish. He thinks his pot and his wine are above the Party. He thinks his gun is something that he can use at will, to rip off stuff at will."[7]

David Hilliard, who served as the chairman of the Black Panther Party in the early 1970s while Seale and Newton were imprisoned, published his autobiography *This Side of Glory* in 1993. Hilliard provided details on an

incident of jackanape activity that had also been mentioned by Bobby Seale in 1970 in *Seize the Time*. It is the incident where two members were sent out to pick up eight others using the Panthers' "big white van," which had *"Black Panther Newspaper"* painted in large black letters on the side. After picking up the others, they stopped the van at a diner, and while one Panther went to use the restroom, the other—the jackanape—decided to rob the place. When the other Panther returned, he was shocked by what the other had done, but both jumped into the van and decided to make a run for it. "Within five minutes," the van was spotted by the police and in the ensuing shootout the jackanape wounded a police officer.[8] In *Seize the Time*, Bobby Seale goes on to relate similar incidents, and at one point quotes David Hilliard at that time declaring in frustration, "These jackanapes and fools are going to try and destroy the Party, if we don't watch them."[9]

According to David Hilliard, however, Eldridge Cleaver recommended that the party tolerate the jackanapes and their behavior. Cleaver had settled in San Francisco after being released on parole from Soledad Prison in December 1966. He had been serving time for rape; however, through the efforts of his attorney Beverly Axelrod and several writers who were impressed by his prison writings, he was granted parole. After writing several articles for *Ramparts* magazine, Cleaver was recruited by the Black Panther Party to work on their newspaper, and soon assumed the title "Minister of Information." Following the publication in 1968 of his book of essays *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver gained national and international celebrity.[10] David Hilliard recalled that in 1968 when the party was confronted by the dangerous antics of the jackanapes, "Eldridge insists we protect them, saying they have good value: they'll be the fighters on the first day of the revolution."[11] In 1972 in a well-known article published in *The Black Scholar*, entitled "On Lumpen Ideology," Cleaver provided his explanation for his support of the former criminals who were causing so many problems for the party. For Cleaver, these jackanapes were members of the "lumpen proletariat," or the "permanently unemployed," "who have no secure relationship or vested interest in the means of production and the institutions of a capitalist society." They "have never worked and never will and can't find a job; [they] are unskilled and unfit." They are also "the so-called Criminal Element, those who live by their wits, existing off that which they rip off, who stick guns in the faces of businessmen and say, 'Stick 'em up' or 'give it up.' These 'forgotten people' have been locked out of the economy and robbed of their rightful social heritage."[12]

In the early sections of *Seize the Time*, Bobby Seale noted that initially Huey Newton endorsed this position, pointing out that Newton wanted to recruit "brothers off the block, brothers who had been pimping, brothers who had been peddling dope, brothers who ain't gonna take no shit." The objective was to give them some "political education" (and it was not much political education since it

consisted primarily of the Panthers' "Ten-Point Platform and Program"), and then to organize them, and "you get black men, you get revolutionaries who are too much."[13] However, by the end of *Seize the Time*, Newton is quoted also denouncing some of these "brothers off the block" as jackanapes who will help destroy the party.

In his introduction to the excellent anthology *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, the editor Charles E. Jones discussed what he considered the mythologies surrounding the Panthers, including the idea that "the BPP was a 'lumpen-based' organization." Jones examines the educational background of Panther leaders and concluded that most were college students and high school graduates and that "the diversity of the Party membership is often overlooked." He argued that "the socioeconomic profile of the rank-and-file Panthers contradicts the lumpen perception of the organization," and he suggested that "the typical Panther" was a "high school or college student." Indeed, Jones believes that Eldridge Cleaver, "who spent much of his adult life in prison on an assortment of criminal charges," was the Panther leader who closely reflected the profile of the "black lumpen."[14]

The issue of the black lumpen component of the Black Panther Party is revisited in the section of Jones's volume devoted to "The Decline of the Party." There are three essays in that section. Winston Grady-Willis focused on external factors, especially state repression and the commitment of various law enforcement agencies at the local, state, and federal levels to destroy the Black Panther Party. The second article is by Ollie A. Johnson. Utilizing what he refers to as "elite theory," Johnson argues that in the 1970s the Panther leadership centralized the organizational structure, which facilitated an "abuse of power." The leaders became more authoritarian, and "oligarchization" occurred in which "a numerical minority" had gained and misused power and control of the organization. Pointing specifically to Huey Newton, Johnson argues that he used power "irresponsibly and destructively" and his return to power in 1977 after Elaine Brown had been leading the group along a reformist line, "signaled the eventual demise of the Party."[15]

The third article is by Chris Booker and is entitled "Lumpenization: A Critical Error of the Black Panther Party." Booker acknowledges at the outset that "political repression, tactical disagreements, and authoritarianism" all contributed to the demise of the party. However, he argues that "the emphasis on the lumpen was a decisive factor in the Black Panther Party's eventual decline as a national political force."[16] Booker concludes that the recruitment of "that segment closely aligned with the criminal element created a crisis, one that would contribute to the demise of the organization." Booker also pointed out: "One important lesson gleaned from the experience of the Black Panther Party is that organizations that seek to focus on the recruitment of the lumpen should have effective mechanisms to reform new members. The Nation of Islam, for

example, recruits heavily from prisons, but stresses personal transformation with much apparent success. By promoting the personalities and lifestyles of the lumpen, the Black Panther Party contributed to its own demise."[17] It should be noted that in Charles Jones's lengthy introduction and Booker's twenty-five page essay, "Lumpenization and the Black Panther Party," they never addressed the numerous problems with the "jackanapes" mentioned over and over in the Panthers' published writings.

At the same time, Booker's point about the success of the Nation of Islam in turning "black lumpen" into the "Fruit of Islam" is an important topic I discussed in my book *Autobiography and the Making of the African American Intellectual Tradition.*[18] In the discussion of the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, I focused on the fact that the personal transformation that took place for Malcolm and other "black lumpen" who joined the Nation of Islam was considered "miraculous" because it involved a "resurrection from the dead." By most accounts, when someone is raised from the dead, it is generally considered a miracle. And that is how Malcolm characterized his "personal transformation" from Detroit Red to Malcolm X. In relating his exploits as a hustler, for example, Malcolm commented over and over and that his survival during that time was a miracle. "Sometimes recalling all of this, I don't know, to tell the truth, how I am alive today. They say God takes care of fools and babies. I've so often thought that Allah was watching over me. Through all this time of my life, I really *was* dead—mentally dead. I just didn't know that I was." Moreover, every issue of the Nation of Islam's newspaper *Muhammad Speaks* (and continued in the *Final Call*) there is a statement explaining "What the Muslims Believe." Number five among the twelve points states: "We believe in the resurrection of the dead—not in physical resurrection—but in mental resurrection. We believe that the so-called Negroes are the most in need of mental resurrection; therefore, they will be resurrected first."[19]

The personal transformation that occurred for members of the "criminal element," the black lumpen, once they joined the Nation of Islam was often considered "miraculous" by those who witnessed it. Unfortunately, the political education that was offered to the black lumpen who joined the Black Panther Party many times did not produce "real revolutionaries." Charles Jones's conclusion that the Panther membership base included a large number of high school and college students may be accurate, but it was also the case that the party was weakened internally by the antics of the jackanapes.

Calling attention to the jackanapes among the members of the Black Panther Party serves as a perfect segue into a discussion of the Hip Hop generation. *The Journal of African American History* examined many aspects of Hip Hop culture in the Summer 2005 issue devoted to "The History of Hip Hop." This was an attempt to move beyond "pop culture," and offered a scholarly analysis of various aspects of Hip Hop cultural development and evolution.[20] One important

theme that is emphasized in the Special Issue is the continuity from the Black Power era to the early years of Hip Hop, especially with the creation of "socially conscious Hip Hop" by artists such as Public Enemy, Professor X, Africa Bambaataa, Brand Nubian, KRS-One, and others. Historian Derrick Alridge pointed out that "by the mid to late 1980s, black nationalist and other [Hip Hop] groups, inspired by the Nation of Islam, the Five Percent Nation of Islam, and the resurgence in the popularity of black nationalist icons such as Malcolm X, were weighing in on the black condition and espousing a philosophy of self-determination."[21] Alridge and the other contributors to the Special Issue pointed to the direct connections that exist between members of the Black Panther Party and Hip Hop artists such as Tupac Shakur.

At the same time, however, the authors also analyze the "cultural baggage" carried over from the Black Power era with regard to misogynistic and homophobic attitudes and positions. Cherise Cheney, in her article "In Search of the 'Revolutionary Generation': (En)gendering the Golden Age of Black Nationalism," documents the male chauvinist and misogynist beliefs and practices of black male leaders in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements that were re-voiced in the lyrics of male Hip Hop artists during the "Golden Age of Rap" in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Male chauvinist, misogynistic, and homophobic ideas and practices are problematic continuities from the Black Power era to the Hip Hop generation.[22]

In discussions of the black freedom struggle during the middle of the 20th century, historian Peniel Joseph pointed out that the "good" and "heroic" Civil Rights Movement is often contrasted with the "bad 1960s, characterized by the omnipresent Black Panthers, urban rioting, and black separatism."[23] However, the Black Power era brought a significant shift in the social, political, and cultural consciousness of people of African descent, not just in the U.S., but throughout the Diaspora, comparable to the New Negro Movement of the post–World War I era and 1920s. The New Negro Movement brought about significant changes in music, arts, literature, politics, education, and economics for people of African descent.[24] While we have had over eight decades to assess the impact of New Negro consciousness on African American life and culture, we are just beginning to assess the enormous legacy of the Black Power Movement.[25] This Special Issue of *The Journal of African American History* begins a systematic discussion of the national, international, and transnational aspects of the Black Power Movement.

While the Black Power era was extremely important and brought about many positive changes in African American life and culture, we also must be vigilant in identifying the negative aspects as well. And specifically with regard to the Black Panther Party, which in many ways was an iconic Black Power organization, we must recognize that those who brought aspects of the "thug life" into the organization helped to destroy it. In the documents created by the Panthers in the

1960s and 1970s, and in the various memoirs, autobiographies, and other eyewitness accounts, the jackanapes were clearly involved in activities that contributed to the undermining of the Black Panther Party. Unfortunately, it appears that the jackanapes are alive and well and doing a number on the Hip Hop generation. The numerous shootouts that occur between rap artists and their "posses," as well as the widely publicized murders of Tupac Shakur, the Notorious BIG, and other gangsta rappers suggest that there is a need for the members of the Hip Hop generation to learn the hard lessons from their more politically aware predecessors in the Black Panther Party. This is extremely important because in the case of the jackanapes, their criminal behavior helped bring about the destruction of an organization dedicated to black self-determination and the redistribution of wealth from the "haves" to the "have nots" in capitalist America. In the case of the gangsta rappers, gang bangers, thugs, murderers, and other criminals who are lionized and made into Hip Hop celebrities, they are aiding and abetting the destruction of an entire generation (or more) of African American youth. It seems that the more Hip Hop artists and rappers participate in and advocate gun violence for settling conflicts and disputes, the more acceptable it becomes for black youths to use guns to shoot and kill other black youths, particularly young black men who are being murdered in alarming numbers. Instead of contributing to the high rates of black-on-black crime, the Hip Hop artists and celebrities need to do much more with the resources they have to promote alternatives to gun violence for resolving conflicts among black youths.

In presenting an analysis of the positive and negative aspects of the Black Panther Party and the Black Power era in general, it is our hope that members of the Hip Hop generation will come to understand the complicated legacy of the Black Panther Party and will seek to avoid those ideas, beliefs, and practices that contributed to the untimely demise of one of the most heroic and tragic organizations in the history of the black liberation movement.

NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was delivered as the opening address at the conference on "Race, Roots, and Resistance: Revisiting the Legacy of Black Power," held at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 29–31 March 2006.

[1]Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (1970; reprinted Baltimore, MD, 1991), 374–75.
[2]Ibid., 376.
[3]Frank Church, *Final Report of the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities and the Rights of Americans*, 3 Volumes (Washington, DC, 1976); see also Kenneth O'Reilly, *"Racial Matters": The FBI's Secret File on Black America, 1960–1972* (New York, 1989), 293–324.
[4]Seale, *Seize the Time*, 379.
[5]Ibid., 379–80.
[6]Ibid., 380.
[7]Ibid., 380–81.

[8]David Hilliard and Lewis Cole, *This Side of Glory: The Autobiography of David Hilliard and the Story of the Black Panther Party* (Boston, MA, 1993), 155.

[9]Seale, *Seize the Time*, 382.

[10]For background information on Eldridge Cleaver, see Kathleen Cleaver, "Introduction," *Target Zero: A Life in Writing—Eldridge Cleaver* (New York, 2006), xi–xxvi.

[11]Hilliard, *This Side of Glory*, 147. In response to Cleaver's statement, Hilliard also mentioned that another Panther suggested that the jackanapes could serve as the "vanguard for the stupid revolution."

[12]Eldridge Cleaver, "On Lumpen Ideology," *Black Scholar* 3 (1972): 2–10.

[13]Seale, *Seize the Time*, 64.

[14]Charles E. Jones, ed., "Introduction: Reconsidering the Panther History: The Untold Story," *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* (Baltimore, MD, 1998), 45–46.

[15]Winston Grady-Willis, "The Black Panther Party: State Repression and Political Prisoners," and Ollie A. Johnson III, "Explaining the Demise of the Black Panther Party: The Role of Internal Factors," in ibid., 337–414; quote on 392.

[16]Chris Booker, "Lumpenization: A Critical Error for the Black Panther Party," in ibid., 337.

[17]Ibid., 357.

[18]V. P. Franklin, "Malcolm X and the Resurrection of the Dead," in *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths: Autobiography and the Making of the African American Intellectual Tradition* (New York, 1995), 319–45.

[19]Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York, 1965), 125.

[20]Derrick P. Alridge and James B. Stewart, "Introduction: Hip Hop in History: Past, Present, and Future," *The Journal of African American History* 90 (Summer 2005): 190–95.

[21]Derrick Alridge, "From Civil Rights to Hip Hop: Toward a Nexus of Ideas," ibid., 235.

[22]Cherise Cheney, "In Search of the 'Revolutionary Generation': (En)gendering the Golden Age of Black Nationalism," ibid., 278–98.

[23]Peniel E. Joseph, "Introduction: Toward a Historiography of the Black Power Movement," *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights Black Power Era* (New York, 2006), 3–4; see also, Joseph's "Black Liberation without Apology: Reconceptualizing the Black Power Movement," *Black Scholar* 31 (Fall–Winter 2001): 3–19.

[24]One of the best volumes that presents an overview and historical documents from the 1920s New Negro Movement is Michael W. Peplow and Arthur P. Davis, eds., *The New Negro Renaissance: An Anthology* (New York, 1975).

[25]For a comprehensive analysis of the differences between the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power era, see Sundiata Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies," *The Journal of African American History* 92 (Spring 2007): 265–88.