

On Being a Black Panther

Herman Bell

Because I wanted to improve the quality of life for Black people and to be part of a well-structured political body that sought to uplift, educate and discipline black social consciousness for self-determination, I became a Black Panther. Treated as second-class citizens, scorned and degraded, and subjected to unprovoked physical abuse, is also why I became a Black Panther. America, the land and culture to which I was born, has always been a house of bondage and unfulfilled promises to me; thus, it has exerted a compelling influence on my opinion of it and the world around me. Historically, she has demanded so much of Black people and has given so little in return.

Wanting to help create a better life for my people, and since marching, praying and demonstrating were not for me, I resolved to ally myself with a political body and community of individuals fighting against a vicious political and economic system in the u.s. controlled by a privileged social class. It is a class that actively represses and exploits Black people; a class that derives tremendous monetary and social benefits from our pain and suffering. These are people who manipulate public and private institutions; police agencies, banks, employment, real estate, newspapers, insurance companies, public education and the like to achieve their aims. I regarded it as a fight for the very survival of Black people. And I grew to understand how the underpinnings of these institutions work against the poor and people of colour—an understanding that comes not to the idle and incurious, but to people who are well-seasoned in their fight against social injustice, poverty, hard times and bad luck in order to overcome them.

And in telling the story of the Black Panther Party (BPP) to the sons and daughters of former afrikan slaves, who continue to live under the hegemony of this vicious political and economic system, they will know that this story is about them and their legacy; that it is a legacy that they can feel proud about and build on. History shows that people will seek their freedom regardless, however long they have been subjugated and down-trodden. How did I become a Black Panther? History showed me the way. Self-repair after damage or injury is the natural order of things. The urge to restore oneself to a sound condition is an act of nature. Conflict arises when an aggrieved people, spurred on by a long train of injury and abuse, heed this innate impulse. Are Black people expected to act biologically different than anybody else?

Life simply goes on. And in the interim, from one generation to the next, things happen: the times, the people and the conditions change. Are Black people somehow exempt from this process, as though we breathe, feed and feel different pain than anybody else, and are we to accept a legacy of poverty, abuse and domination as our natural allotment in life? I don't think so.

The Party exuded an air of expectation and confidence that was rarely savoured in the Black community; it created social programs and challenged social traditions and thereby gave Black people hope and a reason to dream of new possibilities. It furnished us with the tools and political analysis with which to build our own future. While it was a very Black thing, the Party was also universal in its scope and reached out to all people. And "haters" living outside our community hated the existence of this Black thing.

Without a trace of unfettered thought, without even a dream of hope and new possibilities that might appeal unbidden in the still of night, how can a people climb off their knees if otherwise uninspired? The BPP embodied that unbidden dream, that unfettered thought and it is why the u.s. government made its destruction a national priority. To hark back in u.s. history not long ago, we are reminded that blackmen had rights that no whitemen were bound to respect; reminded that u.s. laws mandated that escaped slaves be returned to their owners; that the u.s. government presided over a segregated society as the law of the land, and that it turned a blind eye to white mob violence and decades of routine lynching of Black people that too often took on a festive air; and it permitted use of private and public institutions to further humiliate, terrorize and deprive Black people of basic human rights and self-dignity so as to control and super-exploit them.

In these matters, history adjudges the u.s. government as disingenuous, as not being an honest broker, and that it now aims to protect a reputation and standing in the very matters that its predecessors disclaimed responsibility for. In his April 4th, 1967 "Beyond Viet Nam" speech, Dr. King said: "I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken out clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world—my own government (the u.s.a.)." Then and now the u.s. government continues to condone the use of terror and violence as a policy instrument to control Black people.

I joined the BPP because I wanted to be part of something bigger than myself, part of something that affirmed my self-worth and self-identity, that

protected my rights, my safety and well-being; part of something that told me I matter and that I can accomplish things.

How can you feel the pain in my people's heart, the tiredness in their souls, the callouses on their hands if you don't know them? I've seen them on street corners, in rat and roach-infested tenements, in unemployment lines cashing cheques not commensurate with their labour; in crowded classrooms instructed by tired, over-worked and under-paid teachers; in gin joints, pool halls and in alleyways shooting dice; in newspapers looking for "the number" that never comes. I've seen the hustler, con-man, dope-dealer and pimp plying their wares in my neighbourhood. I've seen my people in church crying and praying and singing in jubilation, hoping for a change to come; seen them tired and despondent and picking up their weary feet going to work the very next day. I've seen a policeman's authority brutalize a "colored man's" self-respect; seen the charity of a condescending smile that says: "I am glad that I am not Black like you", or a stern look that says: "Keep in your place". How could people not want to disentangle themselves from this nightmare of an appointed place? The Black Panther knew and felt the people's pain and this is why I became a Panther.

Herman Bell, born in the rural south, spent his youth in New York City. When he moved to Oakland on a football scholarship with the University of California, he was introduced to the Black Panther Party and, as a member, participated in their community programs. State aggression drove him underground. He was captured in 1973 and convicted in 1975 of the 1971 killing of two policemen in New York City. Along with his co-defendants (the New York Three), Jalil Muntaqim and Albert Nuh Washington, he was sentenced to 25 years to life.

During the course of his 33 years of imprisonment, Herman completed a university degree and was active with inside and outside communities, working on issues as varied as prisoners' rights and the environment. Despite his impressive institutional record and accomplishments, he was denied parole for the second time in February, 2006.