



The Revolution Has Been Canceled

A son attends a Panthers reunion with his father.

By Ta-Nehisi Coates • Illustration by Derek Horton

I'm 13 years old and it's late. The law around our house dictates that if the child is not doing homework, there's no reason to be up past 10 p.m. on a school night. But tonight the law has been suspended.

My mother and even my younger brother are gathered in front of the television set, all of us hypnotized by the angry Afro'd figures

flashing across the screen. The footage is old, rendered in black and white, perhaps all the more moving because of it. The men and women brandishing rifles and berets in '60s Chicago are made more ominous still by the narrator's interjections. The people in the news footage are smooth, black, bad.

I will never forget one of them. He wears

his hair shorter than most, and unlike his comrades he wears no beret. He doesn't need one. He's standing in front of a large ragtag crowd of black folks, shaking his finger like a prosecutor, voice barreling through the crowd, through the screen, through me. "I might not be here, I might be dead tomorrow!" he exclaims. "But

when I leave I want you to remember the last words on my lips: I am!"

"I am!" responds the crowd.

"A revolutionary!" he commands.

"A revolutionary!" it shouts back.

My father was once down with those figures who strolled so angrily across the screen that night. They called themselves the Black Panther Party, and from that night on, I was infatuated with the party and my father's relationship to it.

I'm in Oakland with my Pops. It's October 1996, 30 years since the Panthers were formed. We have come, father and son, to be part of their reunion. The first night is just a little social hour at a club called Jeffries. My father is mingling around the room, fraternizing with old comrades, raising drinks and telling tales. In various parts of the room old Panther Party stalwarts—Bobby Seale, Kathleen Cleaver, and Emory Douglas—are surrounded by crowds. Some of those in attendance are longtime supporters and friends; others are just itching to be down.

It's hard to blame them. This is a room full of black revolutionary history, people who fought their version of the fight alongside Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Who wouldn't wanna be down? These are the same folks who exploded onto the national scene by bum-rushing the California State Assembly brandishing rifles and attitudes. I try to imagine what it must have meant to have meent to be trapped in a ghetto in 1967 and to have seen Bobby Seale on the steps of the state capitol denouncing California's and America's government, calling on black people everywhere to take up arms in defense of themselves.

In 1967, my father had just returned from Vietnam. By 1968, he was married with a daughter and had another one coming. On our trip, he points out the guys unloading our plane and explains to me that he used to be one of them—the job paid decently enough for someone with only a GED. One day while he was working on the inside of one of the planes, he picked up a newspaper from the West Coast. There was a story in it about a group of young black men and women who had decided that they were done backing up the Black Panther Party.

I don't know what hooked him. He simply says that they impressed him as being serious. The guns didn't throw him at all—my father has never been one to sit still when he was under attack. When I was being beset by bullies at school, he told me I could either take them on or square off with him, simple as that. My dad, even as a teenager, was much more riveted by Malcolm than Martin. Although living in Baltimore at the time, he thought he was distant from the revolution taking place in other parts of the country.

Then one night while he was hanging out with some friends, a young lady was introduced to him as a Panther. They drove by the group's local office that night, so he'd know where it was. Within weeks he was attending political education classes at the Baltimore Panthers' headquarters.

What makes a man go off and jeopardize his job and livelihood to join some gun-toting revolutionaries? I can't explain it other than to say those were very different times, different stakes, different players. But my Pops did it, as did thousands of others around the country.

When he joined, the Panthers were purging themselves of government agents and consequently weren't accepting new members. The only openings they had were for "community workers," people who were affiliated with the party and worked out in the community, but weren't privy to official party business.

My father did his work as a community worker, but something changed after he had been around awhile. No one ever told him, "You're an official Panther now," but sometime later, after a battery of arrests had crippled the party's Baltimore chapter, he found himself in New York, meeting with his regional superiors. "Coates, you the man now," they said. Somewhat nervous, I imagine, he returned to Baltimore as the defense captain for the Maryland chapter.

He held that post for a couple of years, and after a stint out in California he unceremoniously left the party. "Wasn't the same party I

The Revolution Has Been Canceled

joined," he says by way of explanation.

As a teenager, I asked him a barrage of questions. What was it like to openly carry a rifle through the streets? Did you ever meet Huey Newton? I was never fully satisfied with his answers. He spoke about the party only with great reluctance, his voice carrying a mix of bitterness and pride when he did talk about those days.

I've come to Oakland with him to sort out his past, and by extension, my own. I know that I am the same age many of my father's former comrades were at the time, but I have added very little to that legacy. How did they do it? How did they get the murderers, the thieves, the dope dealers, "the brothers off the block," as Bobby Seale called them, to read Fanon, Dubois, Mao, and Malcolm, and organize into cadres to serve the people?

The reception is a mix of hat-beans, wannabes, and some of the toughest men and women America has ever fought against. I'm pretty sure this scrawny cat in a black beret isn't one of them. He's going on and on about how he was the youngest member in the Seattle chapter. He's telling some unfortunate old lady about how the older Panthers wouldn't let him carry a gun because he was so young. I look him over and decide that if I were in the party I wouldn't give him a gun, either. He talks too damn much.

But he has something I want. A tape he's lentling, on a small black-and-white TV, has the same footage that caused me to fall in love with the party almost 10 years ago. I pull up a chair from one of the dinner tables, cop a squat, and instantly I'm somewhere else.

That same Chicago scene flashes across the screen. Fred Hampton stares out into the crowd, again shaking his finger, his voice

booming through the years. "I might not be here, I might dead tomorrow!" he exclaims, "But when I leave I want you to remember the last words on my lips: I am!"

"I am!" responds the crowd.
"A revolutionary!" he exhorts.
"A revolutioneer!"

I do the call and response without even thinking about it. I'm still that 13-year-old kid even though I am now 21, the same age Hampton was when he was assassinated in his sleep by the Chicago police. Later investigations would suggest that the FBI had assisted in the cold-blooded murder, and that Hampton had been drugged. Though I share my age in common with Hampton, I'm not looking for the FBI to roll up on me anytime soon. In fact, nothing people my age do would merit those kinds of coemies.

Which brings me to a group of young bucks who've just stepped into the club; five brothers and one sister decked out in black berets, black pants, black shirts, and dark shades. It's an augmented, updated version of the party's official uniform.

I can hear the sneers around me, the unspoken dinns and sucking of teeth. While none of the old-timers are openly hostile, you can feel the climate tighten. I can read the face of every Panther in the room, and what's being said isn't, "Thanks for continuing our legacy."

When it came to the party, the guns and the berets were always the easiest things to fit on, which is why Huey Newton would eventually scrap the Panther uniform. They overshadowed the party's outreach, its commitment to uplifting while fighting back. Feeding people and providing health care was always as much a part of the Panther way as taking on the police.

Yet the broad-based defiance of those years has been reduced to a single icon: the black beret. And so it is the beret that these neophytes identify with, not what it took to make it mean something. A lot of Panthers died in those berets, most of them comrades of the Panthers assembled here tonight. It is predictable that they wouldn't take kindly to a

crew of young kids copping their image 30 years later.

As I watch these neo-Panthers I am reminded of a photo-essay that appeared in *The Source* a couple of years ago. It featured a model who was a dead ringer for Angela Davis. The fashion shoot was an echo of some famous photos that had been taken of Davis years ago. The model impersonating Davis was being fingerprinted, and under the photo the credits appeared: "blouse by Benetton," or maybe it was "jacket by Donna Karan."

This is what we have taken from our past. Struggle, or rather the appearance of struggle, is now a fashion statement. Like the neo-Panthers who prowl the reunion, my age-set is long on image and short on deeds. I try to go back to watching the video, but something about this whole scene strikes me: It's 1996, and the real Panthers in the room hung their berets up years ago, yet here are these six jokers profling. To say it's not the same doesn't even begin to explain it. For this generation, there will be no police kicking down our doors or trumping up charges against us, no FBI plots to sow chaos among the opposition. We aren't even worth it.

This is not to romanticize the Panthers. Many of those I idealized became drug addicts or alcoholics, or went insane. Huey Newton's dead. Eldridge Cleaver is a right-fringe Republican. And more than a few Panthers are doing life, for crimes they may or may not have committed.

But you can talk about the price until you're hoarse; at least the Panthers had a vision they were willing to pay in blood for. A lot of us young kids have ignored that vision, and settled for mystique instead.

Mystique misses the point entirely. While much of the black power movement was busy sewing dashikis, writing poems, or growing Afros, the Panthers were out patrolling the police, feeding children breakfast, and giving free health care. When J. Edgar Hoover's COINTELPRO destroyed the Party it left a gaping hole that's never been filled.

From the 1960s into the early '70s, the vanguard of black American leadership took some tremendous hits. We lost Malcolm and Martin, arguably the two most visionary leaders black America has ever produced. Dubois, though he wasn't murdered, died in 1963. We lost Medgar Evers, and many of the black nationalist groups faded for good. The Panthers were still limping along into the early '80s, but the Party was actually over years before that.

To expect to replace them overnight is preposterous, but nobody's even stepping up to the plate. Too many of us are content to talk the talk, musing about the bad old days instead of advancing and adapting to the challenges that linger and the new ones that have arisen. We end up as caricatures of the late 1960s, living in a world of kente and mud cloth, constantly quoting the one chapter of *Wretched of the Earth* we've managed to get through. Our elders watch us muddle about and shake their heads, whispering about how we've seen Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* too many times.

It's been 30 years since the Panthers formed. Unable to adapt to the post-integration era, half of our leadership is off chasing dinosaur solutions (boycotts and the like), while the other half is mingling with Third World dictators. And we're left with wannabes, like these jokers holding up the corner at the Panther reunion.

Their commitment is about as deep as the plastic shades they wear, a guise for a hollow cast of characters, and an equally hollow generation. These neo-Panthers feed no children, provide no health care or clothing. While the black community rumbles under the assault of crack, fratricide, and teenage pregnancy, the young turks mug at the mirror, too vicious, too cool, too tragic, to risk ruffling their berets.

As we leave the club my father tells me that he wouldn't have been surprised if someone in that room had jumped on "one of them young boys," and commenced to ass-kicking. I look at him and smirk like he's joking. He looks back at me, stares hard—and I know that he isn't. CP