

Chapter Eleven

Why I Joined the Party: An Africana Womanist Reflection

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In *Africana Womanism*, Professor Clenora Hudson-Weems provides a useful theoretical framework for explaining why I joined the Black Panther Party in 1968.¹ As creator of the concept “Africana womanism,” she cites racism as the dominant challenge to Black people. She contends that Black women have historically subordinated their own needs in the interest of the family and community. When I became interested in the Black Panther Party at the age of sixteen, I knew racism and police brutality intimately, but I had no knowledge or understanding of sexism. I was raised, as most Black women of the 1950s and 1960s were, to accept male dominance and to consider myself a helpmate to men. I joined the Black Panther Party because I wanted to help smash racism in America. I joined the Black Panthers because it was the only organization that faced White America forthrightly without begging or carrying signs for equality and justice. I respected and admired their bold image. However, after being in the Party, I experienced and recognized the existence of a double standard for women. Some brothers in leadership positions were sexist. This was a problem that was left unchecked and weakened the foundation of the Black Panther Party.

In 1968, still in my teens, I took a late plane from Philadelphia to Oakland, California, to join the Black Panther Party. As a runaway since the age of fifteen, a witness to vulgar police brutality, and a victim of racism on my first job, I was ready to become a Panther. Their mystique—the black pants, leather jackets, berets, guns, and their talk—aggressive and direct—attracted me and thousands more across America.

I grew up in Philadelphia in the 1960s where I regularly saw the police do a “Rodney King” on Black people. Attending a school where I learned only about White accomplishments and living in an environment where the elders rarely discussed Black advancement, I grew into an unstable young woman without race pride or self-respect. When I worked in a secretarial pool of about twenty White women who deliberately refused to even speak to me, I experienced the trauma of White racism. I had never been around so many Whites before, and their inhumanity literally drove me toward insanity.

