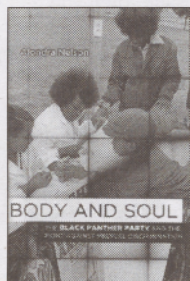


Black healing power



Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination by Alondra Nelson

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The award-winning author Alondra Nelson is a professor of sociology at Columbia University and the author of books addressing health, race and sociology. In "Body and Soul," she skillfully details — in five chapters, between an introduction and conclusion — not only the founding history of the Black Panther Party in 1966, but also topics such as "The Politics of Sickle Cell Anemia." She writes both about the Black Panthers' efforts to raise awareness around this genetic disease and the implications of a medical system that ignored the problems of poor African Americans both in clinical and research settings.

A physician who practiced in Mississippi during the height of the Civil Rights Movement recommended this book to me during a course on health activism. I also — full disclosure — recently began working in Seattle's Central District at Carolyn Downs Clinic, which was named after a now-deceased member of the party who established the Seattle chapter's clinic nearby in 1968. The history of the ideals that led to the foundation of this clinic were important for me to learn, and important for all of us there to read about.

To those well acquainted with the history and politics of the Black Panther Party, it will be no surprise that this account of the party's health activism highlights both the practical and philosophical aspects of their commitment to community health care. However, for those less familiar with the party and its politics, this eye-opening account of their health activism, free clinics,

sickle-cell awareness campaign and fight against medical discrimination will educate and inspire. This book might be summarized as a reminder that while the Black Panther Party is all too often remembered for militancy, "open carry" and revolutionary tactics, its fight for social justice was

broader than is commonly remembered. Indeed, it left a legacy in the world of community health and activism.

To this end, the Panthers' People's Free Medical Clinics went beyond basic preventive care in the modern medical



PHOTO BY STEPHEN SHAMES

A Black Panther Party Medical Clinic, circa 1970s.

The Panthers' People's Free Medical Clinics went beyond basic preventive care in the modern medical sense, and they helped with issues as diverse as housing, employment and social services.

sense, and they helped with issues as diverse as housing, employment and social services. This embodies the principles that we see today in the fight for universal health care as well as for other human rights efforts like a push for living wage and stable housing.

Nelson captures this thinking throughout the book: The "Party worked not only toward preventing the disease but also toward eradicating the societal ills that enabled its persistence and exacerbated its effects." She paints a picture, framed by health concerns, of the same radical politics the party is known for. For instance, it's in the compelling fifth chapter that the fight against medical discrimination becomes particularly salient. Nelson writes here about the Panthers' involvement in contesting the formation of a center in LA that proposed to study the "biological etiology of violence." The Panthers saw this as another version of explaining social and political ills through a biological or pathological filter — and proposing treatments such as brain surgery — rather than addressing the true needs of the community.

The book reads like a sociology dissertation, which may leave the reader hungry for more graceful prose, though the separations into digestible segments make it easy to read several pages at a time, (which is all that some people like myself have time for these days).

The work put into the book, however, is obvious within the first several pages, including its collection of photos and images of original documents.

Nelson ends with 60 pages of meticulously detailed endnotes from an impressive range of sources. It serves as a rabbit hole for people interested in social justice, community organizing and history.

This detailed history provides many lessons relating to our present health care system and health politics. In our current era of "Obamacare," where preventive health and access to basic health services have been raised to the level of kitchen table discussion once again, "Body and Soul" reminds us that we have been here before.

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