Exhibiting in Crisis

All Power to the People: Black Panthers at 50

Lisa Silberstein

fig. 1. Lonnie Wilson, *Untitled (Rally to Free Huey in front of the Alameda County Courthouse)*, July 14, 1968. The OMCA is visible in the background.

The Oakland Tribune Collection, the Oakland Museum of California. Gift of ANG Newspapers.

In October 2016, the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) – which features the history, art, and culture of California – opened *All Power to the People: Black Panthers at 50*.[1] We chose to mount this exhibition to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the Black Panther Party's founding for several reasons.

The topic fit with our institutional identity; OMCA was founded in 1969 as "The People's Museum," and we continue to value and nurture our deep ties to the people of the Bay Area and, specifically, Oakland. The Black Panther Party was founded in Oakland, and the OMCA campus itself is surrounded by important Black Panther sites. The Oakland Auditorium, adjacent to the museum, was the site of Black Panther events for the United Front Against Fascism conference in 1969;[2] the Alameda County Courthouse, where Huey P. Newton, Black Panther Party cofounder, was tried from 1967 to 1970 is directly across the street. The museum was under construction during Newton's trial, and is even featured in photographs of Panther rallies held outside the courthouse (fig. 1). Of all these reasons, perhaps most important is that the exhibition would serve our mission to connect the past to the resonant and urgent concerns of today.

All Power to the People: Black Panthers at 50, like all exhibitions developed at OMCA, involved the collaborative efforts of the project team: a curator, who is responsible for research and identifying collaborators, an experience developer, who advocates for visitors' needs, a designer, and a project manager. As experience developer for *All Power to the People*, I was the lead on community engagement and interpretation for the exhibition.

This article will share how as an exhibition *All Power to the People* used historic subject matter, contemporary content, and opportunities for visitor reflection in order to highlight the ongoing connection between the struggles of the past and crises of the present.

1 *All Power to the People: Black Panthers at 50* was on view at the Oakland Museum of California from October 8, 2016 to February 26, 2017.

2 Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 300.

Black Panther Party

The Black Panther Party was a political organization at the forefront of revolutionary change, creating innovations in a struggle for equity, freedom, and basic human needs. Founded in Oakland in October 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, the Party was initially organized to patrol the police in response to police brutality in African American communities. Newton and Seale later wrote a Ten Point Program, establishing the Black Panther Party as the voice of black people and declaring the Black Panther Party's intentions to take care of a broad range of the community's needs.[3]

In a few years, the Party grew from 40 local members to more than 5,000.[4] There were Black Panther Party chapters nationwide and affiliated organizations internationally. One Panther legacy is its survival programs, which included free health clinics, free schools, and a free breakfast program for children that later served as a model for schools across the United States.

Moments of Crisis

As the Black Panther Party rose to power in the late 1960s, critics demonized them as violent and dangerous; however many people in Oakland and in other cities around the country felt a strong connection with the aims and intentions of the Party and what it represented. While we were determining what form the exhibition would take, this country was in the midst of a crisis that in many ways echoed the issues that the Panthers were trying to address: namely mistreatment and violence against black people.

The public outrage at the decisions not to indict the officers involved in the deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown was national news in 2014. People hit the streets in protest in New York, in Ferguson, Missouri and all over the country amidst a rising national debate over race and law enforcement.

3 Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 70.

4 Ibid., 2.

fig. 2. View of the Ten Point Program in the "Revolution = Innovation" section, 2016.

The context for this exhibition had intensified, and we asked ourselves how to simultaneously develop a major historical exhibition and respond to the contemporary, developing crisis.

An undeniable energy and urgency surged. Organizations – like Black Lives Matter – gained traction and gave birth to a now-familiar rallying cry.

The killing of black men and women, often in police custody, was not new, but there was new attention to this issue. We knew that in today's climate, the Black Panther Party's aims and objectives would now have a deeper resonance, because ending police brutality was one of their central issues. The context for this exhibition had intensified, and we asked ourselves how to simultaneously develop a major historical exhibition and respond to the contemporary, developing crisis.

The more we worked on developing this exhibition, the more we understood that the story of the Black Panther Party had not been told by a museum in a way that reflected the aims and intentions of the organization as catalyst for social change. At the Oakland Museum of California, our staff and leadership are committed to listening to our community, indicating that their stories matter by including them in our museum. The project team for *All Power to the People* shared the plans for the exhibition with our director, board, and executive team and had their support in mounting it.

Deep Listening

If we wanted our exhibition to feel connected to a broad audience, listening deeply and widely would be essential to our process. We met with over 125 people during the development of *All Power to the People*. We wanted to actively listen and consider reactions to, and perspectives on, the Black Panther Party from a wide range of citizens. Innovative community engagement practices, some of which we developed for this exhibition, offered a way forward and informed every aspect of the exhibition development, including design and the selection of objects.

Creative Convening A creative convening is an OMCA community engagement practice – an opportunity for the exhibition project team to hear from those with expertise in the subject matter. At the Black Panther convening, we invited former Party members, scholars, artists, policy makers, and community organizers.

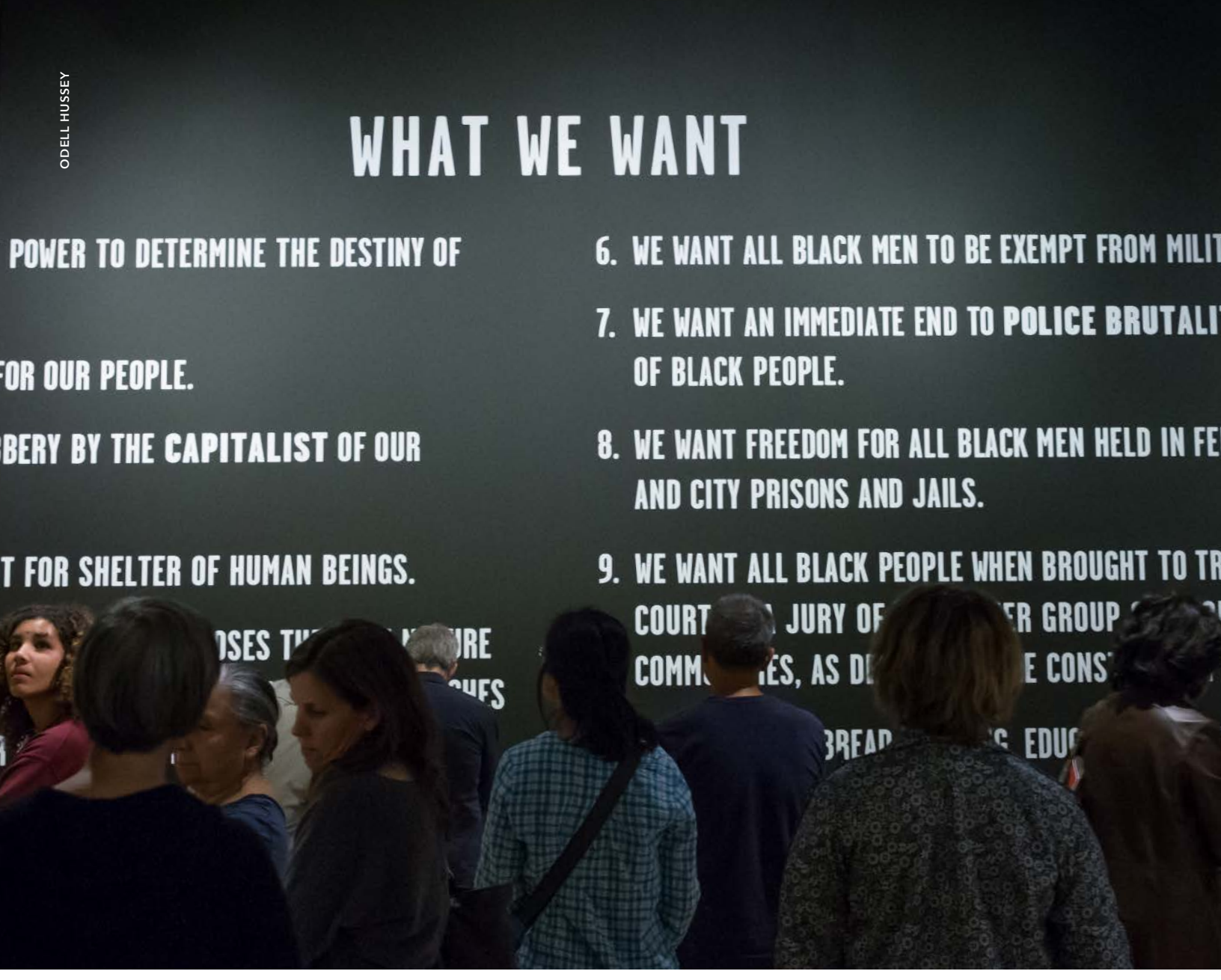
Our questions to them were direct: "If we are going to do an exhibition about the Black Panthers, what do we need to talk about?" We heard the need to highlight the presence of women, the FBI's counterintelligence program, the survival programs, and the Party's coalition building. Participant feedback directly influenced the exhibition's structure and interpretation.

Listening Circles Listening circles were a community engagement practice that we developed. Our listening circles were inspired by trainings from the International Coalition of the Sites of Conscience around their arc of dialogue method, which pairs an experience shared by all participants with a sequence of questions designed to build trust, communication, and, ultimately, understanding.[5] We also adopted the Levine Museum of the New South's practice of using listening sessions to empower constituents and use their input in exhibition design.[6]

A year before the exhibition opened, we held four listening circles: one with OMCA frontline staff – gallery guides (paid staff members who roam exhibitions and answer visitor questions), visitor services staff, and OMCA docents; one with the museum's board; and two with external stakeholders – a teen group and young adults.

5 Tammy Bormann and David Campt, *Sites of Conscience Facilitation* (New York: International Sites of Conscience, n.d.).

6 Janeen Bryant and Kamille Bostick, "What's the Big Idea? Using Listening Sessions to Build Relationships and Relevance," *History News* 65, no. 3 (2013): 5.



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What we heard in the listening circles provided insights on how to interpret the content and design the exhibition for various audiences. The one with the board, in particular, established support from OMCA leadership and buy-in for the exhibition's bold direction. All the listening circles confirmed that people needed context, and as result, we included key moments in Black Panther history in the exhibition. After reading aloud the Panthers' Ten Points in the listening circles, many people reflected that they could have been written today. Thus we featured Ten Points prominently in the exhibition, written in large type on a wall (fig. 2).

Bringing Visitors Into These Conversations

We created an in-gallery video that featured former Panthers and participants from the convening and listening circles to bring our visitors into these conversations. The video participants spoke directly into the camera about the Black Panther Party and its legacy, and reflected on the issues we are still grappling with 50 years after the Party's founding. Despite the fact that the video was at the end of the exhibition, it was viewed by most visitors (93 percent) and had a long dwell time (average 17 minutes).[7] It was long

7 OMCA internally evaluates our exhibitions with both qualitative and quantitative studies. The statistics in this article, unless noted, are taken from OMCA's All Power to the People Summative Evaluation.

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fig. 3. Visitors watching the *Black Panthers Today* video, 2016.

(44 minutes), but seating was provided and, on average, visitors watched about 37 percent of it. The area was often so full that visitors sat on the floor (fig. 3). We received frequent requests from visitors to purchase the video to share with family members across the country or in classrooms.

Spaces for Visitor Reflection

At the convening, former Black Panther Party member Ericka Huggins indicated the need to acknowledge the loss and trauma felt by Black Panther Party members, many of whom experienced violence, incarceration, and surveillance by the government while part of the Party. We knew that highlighting the facts of systemic racism, and drawing comparisons between the experiences of Black Panther Party members and what is happening today, could potentially be emotional and difficult for our visitors. We wanted to include quiet places for visitors to pause and reflect if they felt the need, so we placed church pews and other seating throughout the exhibition.

Our aim with the exhibition was not to present an exhaustive history of the Panthers but to create something affective and powerful. To that end, the exhibition featured historical artifacts and photographs as well as contemporary art, all presented simply with minimal interpretation and ample space for visitors to bring their own experiences to what was on view. This afforded opportunities to reflect on the ideas and concerns of the Black Panthers and helped to spark connections with what is happening today.

fig. 4. Visitors adding names of Black Panther Party members in the "Who Were the Black Panthers?" section, 2016.

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We provided places for visitors to take opportunities to share their thoughts. We created a feedback wall where visitors could contribute the names of Black Panthers to acknowledge or remember (fig. 4). We also included comment books in which visitors could record their stories, as well as a reading list to inspire further learning.

Not Shying Away from Difficult Subjects

We knew visitors would arrive at the exhibition with their own experiences and preconceptions. There was back and forth among the project team about being “neutral” or “balanced” and what that meant for OMCA. Working on the project for two years, we came to understand the complexity and underrepresentation of the full Black Panther Party story. Ultimately, we decided that we could not be “neutral.” The exhibition needed to be bold and direct about the systemic racism to which the Black Panther Party was responding.

We discovered the museum had a Ku Klux Klan robe from Oakland in its collection. Initially we proposed to include it in the exhibition and showed it displayed upright, but there were strong reactions from OMCA staff members to the subject matter and display. We considered pulling it, but several former Black Panther Party members encouraged us to include it because it helped convey the bigotry and hatred that gave rise to the Party. We were sensitive to its display, and decided to show it laying down in a crypt-like setting at the beginning of the show, to acknowledge its power but not glorify it (fig. 5).

We were bold and direct about the surveillance and repression that the Panthers experienced at the hands of both the government and the police. However, because of the feedback we had received from members of our board and volunteers who participated in the listening circles, we made efforts to speak with Oakland law enforcement about the exhibition. As a result of those conversations, we made sure to include label text that acknowledged the messiness of the times and the wrongs that were committed on both sides.

We directly acknowledged Black Lives Matter, and included a piece by the artist Ellen Bepp, which featured the names of the 100 unarmed African Americans killed by police in 2014. The contemporary art throughout the exhibition provided ways to reflect on the themes surrounding the Black Panthers that continue to have resonance. Artist Carrie Mae Weems produced a video for the exhibition about surveillance. It included footage of the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police in 1992; footage from the death of Eric Garner at the hands of a New York City police officer in 2014; the shooting death of Alton Sterling by two Baton Rouge police officers in 2016; and the death of Philando Castile, who was shot and killed by a Minnesota police officer the same year.

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fig. 5. Ku Klux Klan robe display in the section titled “Matter of Fact,” 2016.

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fig. 6. Visitors looking at photographer Bryan Shih's "Black Panther Portrait Project," 2016.

Public Response

Our deep listening with OMCA staff, board, and volunteers and our discussions with various members of our community, including former Panthers and young people today, helped us represent the Black Panther Party authentically, and to reconcile the many challenges posed by the project. The result was a moving exhibition that drew large, diverse audiences (62 percent were people of color) to OMCA.

Over 84,300 visitors came to the *All Power to the People: Black Panthers at 50* during its nearly five-month run (fig. 6). That number represents about 42 percent of OMCA's typical annual attendance. Visitors had overwhelmingly positive opinions about the exhibition based on their in-depth interview responses. Seventy-one percent of people who visited *All Power to the People* said they would recommend it to a friend, which is the highest percentage for any exhibition in the last two years. We had frequent requests to make the exhibition permanent or to travel it around the country, which demonstrated a strong desire that it be shared with others.

All Power to the People appealed to diverse audiences and successfully drove museum attendance. Visitors were younger than typical OMCA visitors: roughly 25 percent of visitors were 18 to 24. The last weekend of the exhibition (Friday through Sunday), 700 people joined OMCA as members – 10 percent of the total OMCA membership. These new members are younger and include more people of color than traditional OMCA members, which indicates that this exhibition was successful in connecting new audiences to OMCA.

All Power to the People saw a spike in attendance after the presidential election and again after the inauguration. The outcome of the 2016 election added another layer of resonance for many visitors. The Black Panthers' objectives to fight fascism and support the needs of oppressed people had a new tenor.

In general, we judged the exhibition successful on a number of levels: level of engagement by and amongst visitors; the diversity and large number of visitors; and that our visitor outcomes were achieved. Our research showed that nearly all visitors visited all sections, with an average exhibition dwell time of 58 minutes. Studies have shown that typically, few visitors dwell longer than 45 minutes in exhibitions.[8] According to our timing and tracking study, visitors were frequently observed talking with one another in the exhibition. We learned from the exit interviews that prior knowledge of the Black Panthers varied; however, most interviewees learned something new about the Party, and importantly, most readily connected the Black Panthers' cause with similar issues today.

One of the most poignant and telling moments occurred on the last Friday of the exhibition when the "Mothers of the Movement" attended *All Power to the People* together: Lezley McSpadden, mother of Michael Brown, who was killed in 2014; Gwen Carr, whose son Eric Garner was killed in 2014; Tressa Sherrod, mother of John Crawford III, who was killed in 2014; and Wanda Johnson, whose son, Oscar Grant, was killed in 2009. The fact that these women felt moved to visit together spoke to the container for grief that was created in the exhibition, and how *All Power to the People* drew deep palpable connections between the Black Panther Party and the urgent crises we face today. ▮

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8 Beverly Serrell, *Paying Attention: Visitors and Museum Exhibitions* (Washington DC: American Association of Museums, 1998), 19.