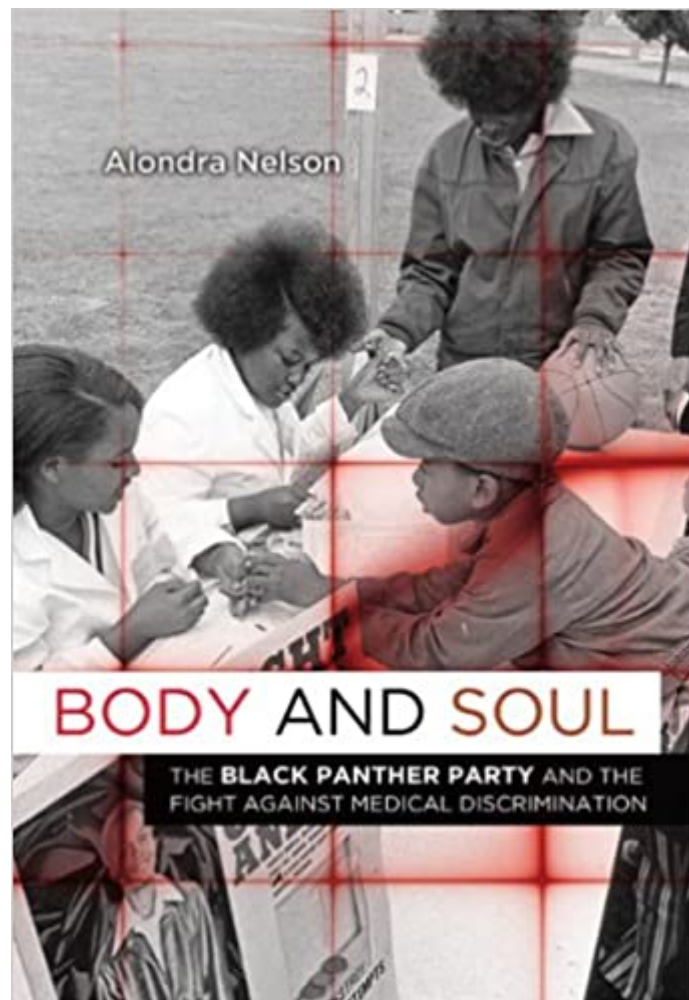




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# Body And Soul: The Black Panther Party And The Fight Against Medical Discrimination



## Synopsis

2013 MIRRA KOMAROVSKY AWARD  
2012 LETITIA WOODS BROWN MEMORIAL AWARD  
2012 ASSOCIATION FOR HUMANIST SOCIOLOGY AWARD  
2012 DISTINGUISHED CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP AWARD, ASA  
2012 C. WRIGHT MILLS AWARD (FINALIST)

Between its founding in 1966 and its formal end in 1980, the Black Panther Party blazed a distinctive trail in American political culture. The Black Panthers are most often remembered for their revolutionary rhetoric and militant action. Here Alondra Nelson deftly recovers an indispensable but lesser-known aspect of the organization's broader struggle for social justice: health care. The Black Panther Party's health activism--its network of free health clinics, its campaign to raise awareness about genetic disease, and its challenges to medical discrimination--was an expression of its founding political philosophy and also a recognition that poor blacks were both underserved by mainstream medicine and overexposed to its harms. Drawing on extensive historical research as well as interviews with former members of the Black Panther Party, Nelson argues that the Party's focus on health care was both practical and ideological. Building on a long tradition of medical self-sufficiency among African Americans, the Panthers' People's Free Medical Clinics administered basic preventive care, tested for lead poisoning and hypertension, and helped with housing, employment, and social services. In 1971, the party launched a campaign to address sickle-cell anemia. In addition to establishing screening programs and educational outreach efforts, it exposed the racial biases of the medical system that had largely ignored sickle-cell anemia, a disease that predominantly affected people of African descent. The Black Panther Party's understanding of health as a basic human right and its engagement with the social implications of genetics anticipated current debates about the politics of health and race. That legacy--and that struggle--continues today in the commitment of health activists and the fight for universal health care.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Nelson...reports exhaustively on the Black Panther Party's role in the radical health movement of the 1970s, positioning the BPP as important players in the long tradition of civil rights health activism...[The] work deserves commendation for its thoughtfulness and thoroughness -Publishers Weekly a much-needed and major work that will set the standard for scholars -American Historical Review Nelson's work stands out as the first major book length treatment of the BPP's medical initiatives -MobilizationBody and Soul is a valuable addition to the literature on this organization, rendering the Black Panthers in greater complexity than most other accounts have achieved, and pointing the way to archival collections largely untapped -Journal of American Studies Body and Soul is well researched and powerfully argued, and it skillfully bridges several scholarly fields...By any measure, Nelson's book is an important contribution -The Crisis highly informative, meticulously documented, extremely relevant, and deeply engaging -The Black Commentator

"This book is a revelation. Alondra Nelson uncovers two remarkable histories in Body and Soul. First, she provides the deep context for our current conversation about the health disparities that plague the African-American community and that are, as she puts it, "quite literally sickening."Second, she adds immeasurably to our knowledge of the Black Panther Party, complicating its commonplace designation as a radical, militant organization to unearth its dedication and hard work in advocating for and providing equal and quality health care for even the most underserved African Americans. Nelson is the first scholar I know of to bring these two histories into dialogue with each other, and she does so with spectacular results. This is a tremendously important book." --Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Alphonse Fletcher University Professor, Harvard University"In Body and Soul, Alondra Nelson combines careful research, deep political insight, and passionate commitment to tell the little-known story of the Black Panther Party's health activism in the late 1960s. In doing so, and in showing how the problems of poverty, discrimination, and access to medical care remain hauntingly similar more than forty years later, Nelson reminds us that the struggle continues, particularly for African Americans, and that social policies have profound moral implications." --Rebecca Skloot, author of The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks"The activities

of the Black Panther Party have long been reduced to stories of violent police confrontations and empty propaganda. By taking seriously the claims and the practices of the Black Panthers with respect to the health of Black people, Alondra Nelson has provided a critical corrective to earlier studies. More importantly, this is a brilliant analysis of a significant moment in the long tradition of health advocacy on the part of African Americans. That health was a cornerstone of Black Panther politics reveals how deeply access to good health care has shaped Black lives and politics in the past and today. "Body and Soul is a major achievement and will be indispensable to anyone who wants to understand how healthcare and citizenship became so intertwined in American life." -- Evelyn Hammonds, Barbara Gutmann Rosenkrantz Professor of the History of Science and of African and African American Studies, Dean of Harvard College, Harvard University "In her revisionist account, Nelson insightfully guides the reader through the range of campaigns by which the Black Panther Party paved the way to broad efforts to promote biomedical inclusion and democratize access to medical knowledge and practice." --Steven Epstein, author of *Inclusion: The Politics of Difference in Medical Research*

I purchased this book as a research resource for a college history project on the People's Free Medical Clinic in Baltimore, MD. To my disappointment the book's publication release date was not until November 1st. I took a chance and contacted Professor Nelson and to my delight she sent me a pre-release advance of this book. In the chapter, "The People's Free Medical Clinics", Professor Nelson provides an honest, plain-spoken history of the Black Panthers response to the state of low quality or non-existent healthcare in poor communities. It begins with a heart wrenching example of a poor child's death due to improper medical diagnosis. The story proceeds with descriptions of living conditions for poor people, and their frequent experiences with disrespectful, unprofessional encounters with medical staff. Out of this situation comes "a rallying cry for support for the Party's own healthcare facilities - "our people are dying of medical miscare--we must all work to make the People's Free Health Clinics a reality". "In this book, Professor Nelson presents the history of the Black Panther Party's efforts to provide much needed healthcare to poor people. It is an eye-opening illustration of the Black Panther Party as a force behind a movement - in keeping with a theme that still resonates today - Healthcare is a right, not a privilege. I highly recommend reading this book for an honest presentation of a balanced story of the positive work the Black Panther Party did during the Civil Rights Era in America. Pamela C. Ranberg (History student at the University of Baltimore)

This is the other history akin to Howard Zinn's analysis of not retelling his story. Good public health perspectives and eloquently unpacked.

Eye opening.

great book, and arrived in great condition.

Definitely an important history that should become part of school curriculum in the US. It details the history of medical practices among black, disenfranchised people before the Black Panthers that lay the groundwork for their thinking. I like how the Panthers validated lay people's experiences, in this case poor black people, with the medical establishment, which can be arrogant and dismissive of lay people. Empowering them by listening to them and actually accompanying them to medical visits to speak their cause, or urge them to speak for themselves, and demanding respectful treatment. The legal means they used for fighting injustice and for setting up free clinics is detailed, and is useful information for anybody faced with the same discriminatory practices. It gives examples of Panther members who used the information gathered during this era later up to and including today.

I assigned this book to my MA level Medical Sociology class at Bay Area university. The students loved it and it really vividly helped them see the ways in which health is socially shaped and distributed. Moreover, I was surprised to learn that my students really know very little about the Panthers and I am glad we got to read this as a local history lesson as well.

Great read, extremely informative for research purposes in clear language. Extensive interviews and references to primary sources. Would highly recommend to those interested in racial, gender, communal/relational practices of Black Americans that correlate to the Medical-Healthcare-Industrial Complex.

This book demonstrates the Black Panther Party as an organic health structure for all poor Americans and not the belief that it was an organization of crime and hate, as shown in the public media.

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