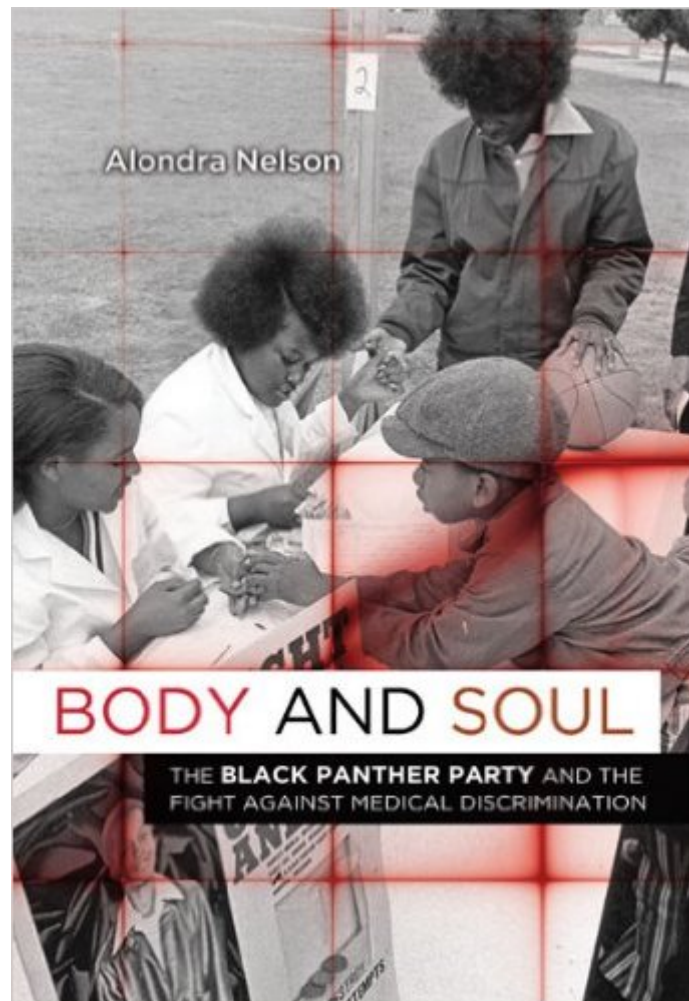


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Body And Soul: The Black Panther Party And The Fight Against Medical Discrimination



Synopsis

2013 MIRRA KOMAROVSKY AWARD
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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

"Quando dou comida aos pobres chamam-me de santo. Quando pergunto por que eles são pobres chamam-me de comunista." "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist." Dom Helder Pessoa Câmara (1909 – 1999), Catholic Archbishop of Olinda and Recife, Brazil, 1964 to 1985

Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination by Alondra Nelson. University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 289 pp. Professor Alondra Nelson (Twitter) has written a book which all activists should read. It focuses on the advocacy, activism and ideology of the Black Panther Party (BPP) in healthcare. The BPP saw healthcare in the United States as proof of white supremacy and regarded its provision as a necessity for movement building and outreach. Over time, it required each of its branches to establish a community health center. The health centers were required to staff or have access to biomedical professionals and empower the patients in decisions regarding their treatment. They promoted a view of health beyond the biomedical model. Poor health outcomes among black Americans were the inevitable result of policies which limited their political clout and economic opportunities, and only revolutionary socialism could address these issues. Healthcare was one example of a good which should be provided regardless of profit, and these community health centers were proof of this concept. Most fascinating to me was the BPP's work in the field of sickle cell anemia and its resistance to the medicalization of violence. Sickle cell anemia is familiar to me.

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