



REVOLUTIONARY DRESS  
PRESENTS

# the black panther party



# THIS IS REVOLUT DRESS



A collection and conversation about social and political movements through the lens of what people wore. We're looking at the ways dress has been used as a strategic tool of politics, protest, resistance and revolution, across countries, cultures, and communities of the past and today

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# TIONARY



**DRESS** is a powerful window into so many aspects of human life and behavior. By studying what people wore, we can look for clues that help us understand their daily experiences, beliefs, values, social structures and so much more. We can use what we've learned about past people and movements to inform our choices today, and better recognize how our dress can be one tool amongst many in our collective fight toward liberation.

**NO, WE DON'T MEAN THAT KIND OF DRESS.** While a dress is a specific kind of garment in which a top and skirt are connected in one piece of clothing, dress can also be much broader than that. Dress includes all aspects of how someone presents themselves: including clothing, shoes, jewelry, hair, tattoos, perfumes, and other accessories like headwear or bags. Just like "getting dressed" doesn't always mean putting on a literal dress, dress can apply to all aspects of how you look and how others perceive you.

**It's 1966** and Civil Rights organizations and demonstrations have been blossoming all over the country, and conversations about racist violence and oppressive government policies and systems are more widespread than ever. There are hundreds of organizations all with the goal of equal rights and liberation for Black people; all with their own ideas about what liberation looks like and how to go about achieving it.

(Check out our zine on the Civil Rights Movement to learn more)

### **Enter the Black Panther Party.**

Originally named the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, this group begins as a radical, visionary group of Black youth organizers and college students from Oakland, California who establish neighborhood patrols to protect their communities from police brutality.

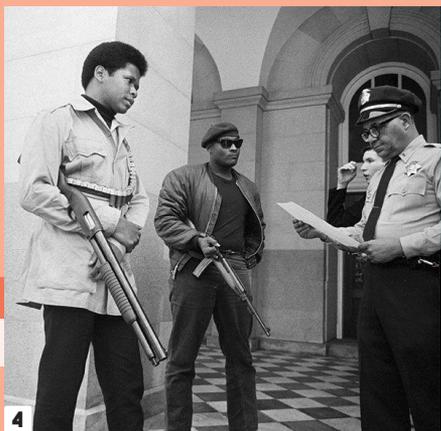




Over the years, the group evolves into much more than a neighborhood patrol. Eventually, they create a series of “survival programs” to provide food and care for their communities in ways that the local and US government are not, as well as advocating for **reparations** for Black people in the United States, among many other demands.<sup>1</sup>



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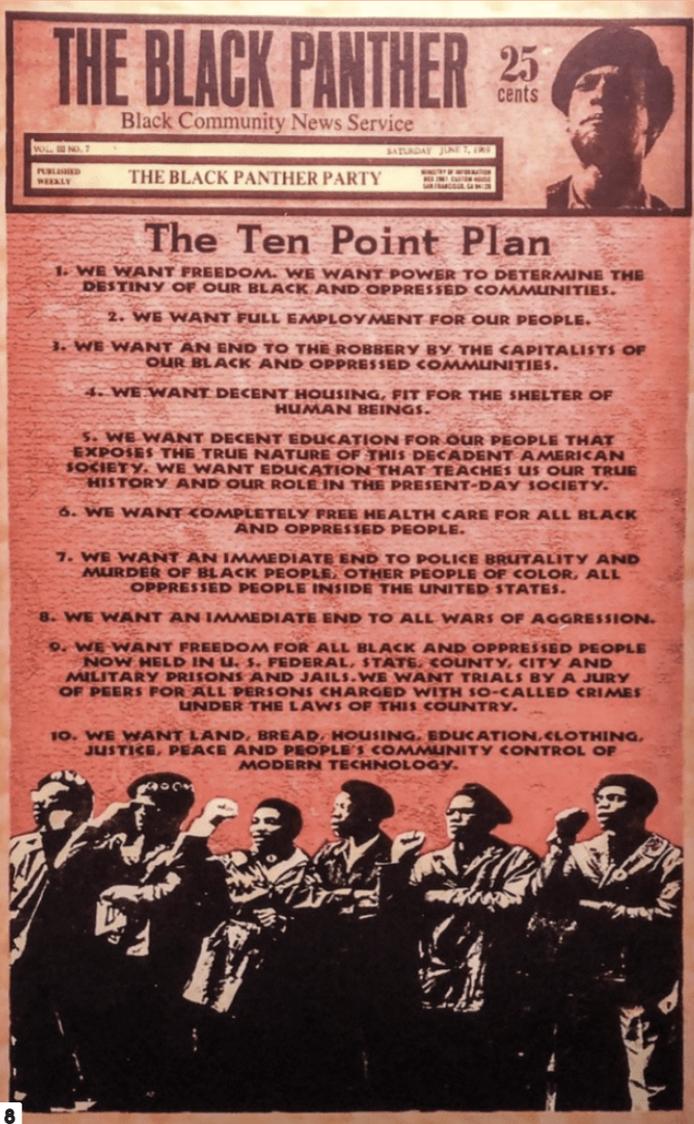
## **reparations:**

a system of making amends for outrageous injustice; in this case, reparations for the evils of chattel slavery and ongoing racism in United States history would be an attempt to give Black people chances to grow their wealth in ways they have often been denied, through direct financial payment or other government assistance

The Black Panther Party stands out amongst other Civil Rights-era organizations for their emphasis on armed resistance to police violence in their communities. While Martin Luther King Jr. and many other Civil Rights groups are calling for nonviolent direct action, the Black Panthers are pushing for their rights to own guns and to fight back against the racist brutality they face on a regular basis.<sup>6</sup>

This lands the group, its founders Huey P Newton and Bobby Seale, and other prominent members like Angela Davis, Fred Hampton and Elaine Brown, at the top of the US government's watch list—as the Black Panther Party is not shy about pointing out the hypocrisy and evils of US leaders, politicians and the most wealthy, both past and present.





The Black Panthers organized around their Ten Point Plan, a list of demands and goals that they believed would create a more just and equitable society for Black Americans. It was originally published by Newton and Seale in 1966, under the title "What We Believe."<sup>6</sup> It was ammended and refined throughout the years, but the spirit of the demands remained the same.

# ★ the panther uniform

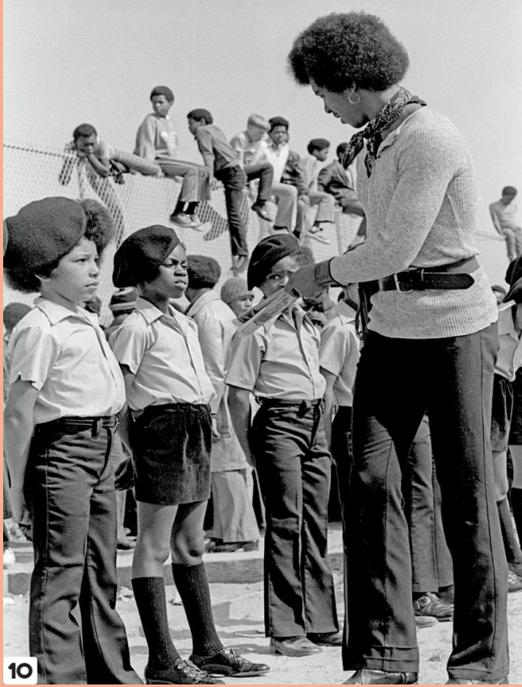
**“A black leather jacket, powder blue shirt, black pants, black shoes, black beret, and optional black gloves.”<sup>2</sup>**



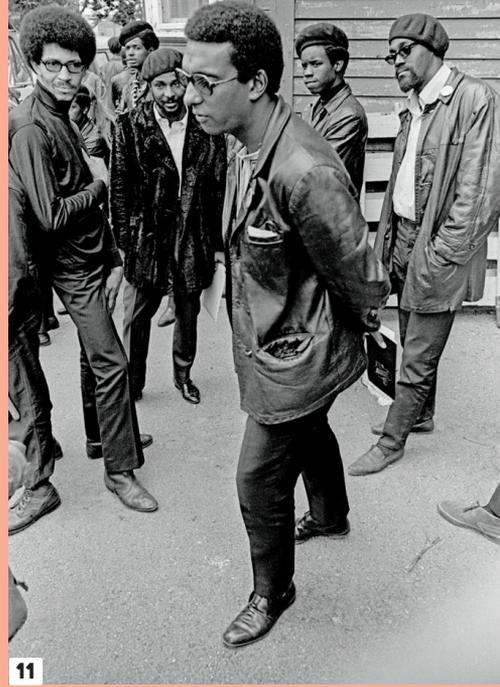
This fairly simple look speaks volumes about the Party's mission and values. With all members dressed the same way, in almost all black, their attire becomes easily recognizable in photos from the media and intentionally evokes the feeling of military dress.<sup>2</sup> Since the Black Panthers are not against

using force and self-defense to keep their communities safe from police and other oppressive powers, their uniform is like that of soldiers or revolutionaries. It communicates how serious they are about Black liberation: as serious as a soldier going into battle.





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The Party's uniform not only makes them appear as a united front, but also succeeds in intimidating those powers who dare to fight against them. On top of this, they're portrayed as stylish and rebellious by media and frequently photographed, which only increases their popularity amongst Black communities across the country.<sup>7</sup>



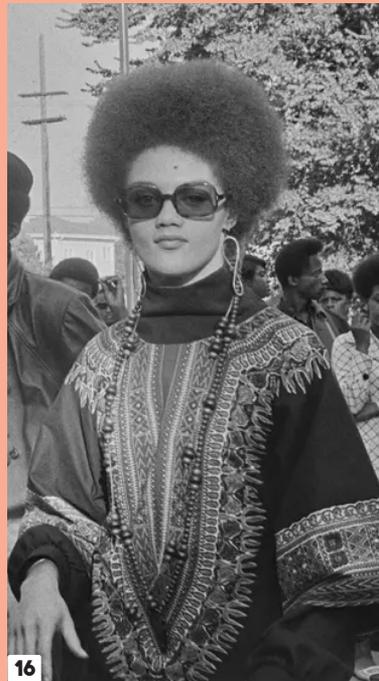
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## iconic black beret:

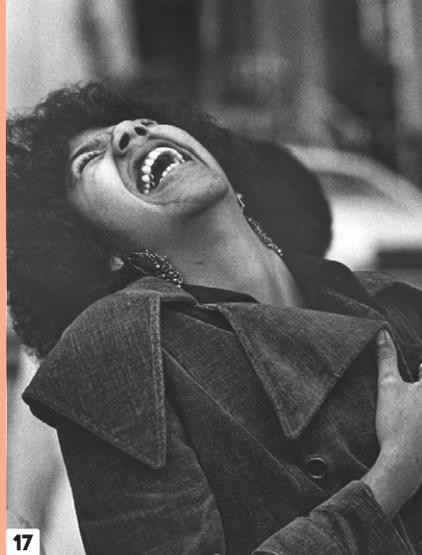
Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale decide that the black beret is an essential part of the Party's ensemble after watching a movie about French resistance to Nazis during World War II, in which the French resisters all wore matching black berets.<sup>2</sup> The Black Panther leaders latch on to the powerful symbolism of the cap, and it doesn't take long for the black beret to become a popular symbol of the Black Power movement, as Black youth across the US begin wearing them in solidarity.<sup>2</sup>



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"We're born with our hair like this, and we just wear it like this. Reason for it, you might say, is like a new awareness among Black people that their own natural physical appearance is beautiful."<sup>7</sup>

**Kathleen Cleaver**



## black is beautiful

At the time of the Panthers, Black radical groups across the country are beginning to popularize phrases such as “Black is beautiful” and “Black power.” Groups begin to adopt the Kente cloth, a colorful woven piece of fabric that can be made into a number of garments, most notably the dashiki. Originating from Ghana, the Kente cloth has complex meanings, with each color and fabric weave symbolizing distinct ideas and messages.<sup>2</sup> In the US, the Kente cloth becomes a symbol of Black pride and a connection to African ancestry.

The Panthers do not wear Kente cloth or dashikis as part of their group uniform, but they do have their own ways of furthering the “Black is beautiful” message.<sup>2</sup> Many members don the Afro hairstyle, especially the women in the movement like Kathleen Cleaver and Angela Davis. This is a notable change, as Black women at the time are socially pressured into wearing their hair in styles that align more closely with white hair and beauty standards.





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## people's free clothing program

The Black Panther Party is perhaps most notably remembered for its Free Breakfast for Children program, which is eventually adopted by the US government and implemented across the country). But this initiative is only one of many “survival programs” created by the Party. Programs like free access to medical care and testing, free rides for the elderly,

free groceries and free youth education are all part of their vision of Black liberation.<sup>1</sup> Included in the plan is the People's Free Clothing Program, which consists of free shoes for children, free coats during the winter months, and access to “**new, stylish, and quality clothing free to the community.**”<sup>1</sup>



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### manifesto:

a public declaration of beliefs, goals, vision for the future, policies etc; usually in written form

The Black Panther Party's **manifesto** called the Ten-Point Plan (sometimes called Ten-Point Program) outlines their demands and vision for the future.

The **tenth point** of the program reads:

**we want land, bread  
housing, education,  
clothing, justice and peace.**

In this statement, the Panthers demand the things they believe to be essential for their communities—things they have not always been guaranteed, and in many cases, things that have been intentionally taken away from them. This tenth point says that clothing is as important to survival as food and shelter, as much a part of liberation as justice and peace.





Not only do the Panthers think of clothing as a basic need, necessary to ensure good health amongst their community members, but they see it as a mode of creative self-expression essential for their neighborhoods to thrive. As we know, the Black Panthers are known for their own iconic look. So in providing stylish, quality clothing to the people, we see their liberatory mission and bold image to overlap.<sup>4</sup>



“Photographers took advantage. I mean they took our pictures. They put them on newspapers. They put them on magazines. And that look that we projected, you know, the big Afro, the leather jacket, the shades. That became a hit.”<sup>7</sup>



**Kathleen Cleaver**

(Black Panther Party member)



“The Panthers didn’t invent the idea of “Black is beautiful.” People had already started wearing Afros and dashikis. One of the things the Panthers did was that ‘Urban Black is beautiful.’ That look just blew people away.”<sup>7</sup>

## **jamal joseph**

(Black Panther Party member)



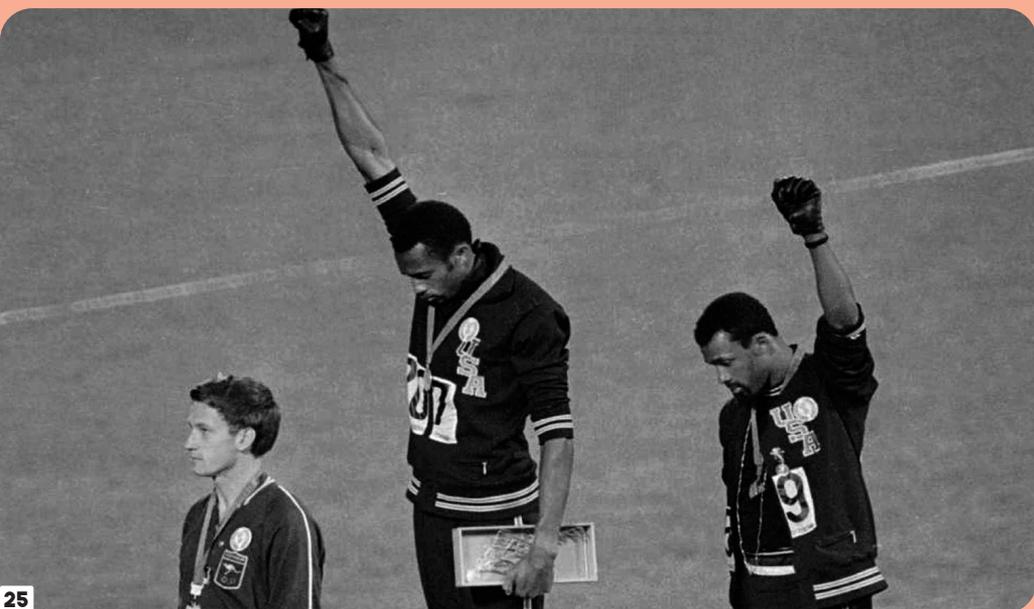
“If you were a young Black man living in the city anywhere, you wanted to be like [the Black Panthers]. You wanted to dress like this.”<sup>7</sup>

## **julian bond** ★

(SNCC member)

**“My raised right hand stood for power in Black America. Carlos’ raised left hand stood for unity of Black America. Together they formed an arch of unity and power. The black scarf around my neck stood for Black pride. The black socks with no shoes stood for Black poverty in racist America. The totality of our effort was the regaining of Black dignity.”<sup>2</sup>**

**★ tommie smith**



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The uniform of the Party becomes so synonymous with Black Power and pride that Black people across the country start wearing it too, even those who aren't actual members of the party. In the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, multiple African American Olympians and medal-winners, including Tommie Smith and John Carlos, wear black leather gloves or black berets to symbolize their

solidarity with the Black Power movement.

Though none of these Olympians are members of the Black Panther party, these accessories are so strongly associated with the movement that the message is understood loud and clear. Smith and Carlos are both stripped of their medals for wearing black gloves and raising their fist in the air as a symbol of Black power.<sup>2</sup>



The Black Panthers are radical and revolutionary in a way that puts white America and the US government face to face with the racist, oppressive systems that served (and still serve) to keep Black people and communities from thriving. Their powerful message comes with a cost though, as many of the group's most influential leaders face harassment, arrest, exile and even death at the hands of the US government and police.

Their programs and direct action set the stage for modern movements like Black Lives Matter and local community programs across the country. Dress was just one small tool among many in the Black Panther Party's arsenal of strategies to unify their people, bring liberation to Black communities and imagine a more equitable future.



# reflection



**1.** The Black Panther Party wore a uniform of nearly all black to symbolize that they were “embracing their Blackness from head to toe.”<sup>2</sup> They were proud of the group they belonged to and their uniform exhibited that pride. What do you wear to symbolize a group, team or community that you belong to? Why do you wear it?

**2.** Not only did the Black Panthers exhibit the power of dress by creating an iconic uniform that communicated their beliefs, they also argued that clothing and style was an integral part of liberation with their free clothing program. In what ways is clothing necessary for good health and survival? In what ways is it necessary for social and emotional well-being?



**3.** The Black Panther Party began with young adults who saw needs in their community and began organizing to meet those needs. They created “survival programs” like protection from police violence, access to healthy meals, free coats and shoes, free schools led by community elders, access to medical care: all things that helped their neighbors thrive. What sort of similar programs exist in your community? What sort of programs need to be created?



# dig deeper



## read

1. *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs*, David Hilliard
2. “Fashion Statement or Political Statement: The Use of Fashion to Express Black Pride during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1960’s,” Mary Vargas
3. *Black power: Radical politics and African American identity*, J. Ogbar
4. “On the Black Panther Party’s Free Clothing Program: Q&A with Alondra Nelson,” M.T. Pham
5. “Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia,” Angela Davis
6. “The Black Panther Party’s Ten-Point Program, 50 years later,” Andrew Beale, Cassady Rosenblum, et al.



## watch

7. *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution*, PBS
8. *Dope is Death*, directed by Mia Donovan

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