

Who's Calling the Emergency? The Black Panthers, Securitisation and the Question of Identity

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Abstract

This article intervenes in a debate in cultural disaster studies that interprets disasters as *objects*, whose study opens up an understanding of societies' fears, anxieties and vulnerabilities. Widening the scope of disaster studies, it proposes to view disaster not as an object but as an *optics*, a matrix that frames elements of social life as an emergency. Presenting the case of the American Black Panther Party for Self-Defense through a framework of security studies, the article explores the Black Panthers' politics as a process of *societal securitisation* that allowed African Americans to mobilise politically by proclaiming an emergency. It traces a political trajectory that ranged from an early endorsement of revolutionary violence to the promotion of community services and casts this journey as a negotiation of the question of identity and ontological security in times of crisis. Drawing on Black studies and on stigma theory, it suggests finally, that the Panthers' abandonment of violence represented a shift from identity-politics to an engagement with *structural positionality*.

Keywords: Black Panther Party, Huey P. Newton, Cultural Disaster Studies, State of Exception, Securitisation, Ontological Security, Stigmatisation, Identity Politics, Positionality, Afropessimism

Disaster optics

In recent years, cultural studies have come to play a vital analytical role in attempts to understand modern social and political life as constantly threatened by disaster. Cultural studies argues that the way we perceive disaster is shaped by the various cultural practices that create our common sensibility for disasters and, consequently, determine what we see and how we act in a world ravaged by disaster at an ever-increasing rate. Starting from concrete disasters, scholars of cultural and political theory have interpreted the manifold ways in which humans process and make sense of catastrophe. Dominant frameworks currently employed interpret disaster as trauma (Felman and Laub 1992; Caruth 1996; LaCapra 1998; Kaplan 2005) as an image of the apocalypse (Robinson 1985; Zamora 1989), (Williams 2011; Szendy 2012), as a state of exception (Žižek 2008; Honig 2009; Lazar 2009) and as an expression of society's underlying conditions of vulnerability (Klinenberg 1999; Tierney et al. 2006). While different elements of a disaster emerge as areas of research in these frameworks, all these approaches view disasters directly as an *object* of inquiry. The following article argues that disaster is not just an *object* that humans strive to make sense of but also an *optics*, a sense-making paradigm that we use to imagine, frame, problematise, or construct social life *as* an emergency. Rather than being something given that we simply respond to, our sense of disaster is actively produced through various cultural and social practices.

Drawing on the work of Ole Wæver and the emerging field of security studies, the article presents the case of the American Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) and its chief-theoretician Huey P. Newton to illuminate the performative dynamics of emergency declarations. Building on Wæver's framework of *securitisation* and recent theorisations of ontological security, the argument will firstly be followed that the Black Panthers declared American everyday life a vital threat in order to safeguard a consistent racial identity. The article then presents the Black Panthers' turn towards peaceful community service as a conundrum that cannot be grasped according to the logic of ontological security. Instead, I will suggest that the Panthers' abandonment of armed struggle expressed an insecurity about the feasibility of a politics, based on identity. In conclusion, I will argue that the case of the Panthers highlights an insufficiency in analyses that centre on identity and foregrounds the question of *positionality* as a key issue in the cultural production of emergencies.

The Black Panthers and the Emergency

We, the people, are threatened with genocide because racism and fascism are rampant in this country [...] And the ruling circle in North America is responsible

(Newton [1970] 2002: 160).

With this, Huey P. Newton, the founder of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense began his speech at Boston College on November 18th 1970. In that year, membership in the Black Panther Party peaked with thousands of enrolled members and established offices in over sixty-eight cities across the U.S. Speaking to a numerous crowd on a cold and clear Wednesday¹ Newton laid out the Panthers' view that African Americans were threatened with extermination inside the United States of America. According to Newton, black Americans were systematically oppressed inside a white supremacist society that had only seemingly broken with slavery. Foreshadowing an argument recently elaborated by Saidiya Hartman (1997), Newton argued that the abolition of slavery in the U.S wasn't followed by freedom, as officially proclaimed, but merely transcribed the non-subjectivity of the slave into the limited subjecthood of the criminal, the Ghetto-dweller and the pauper.² In *The Correct Handling of a Revolution*, written in 1967, Newton specified that the founding of the party was to counter this perceived existential threat:

The main function of the party is to awaken the people and teach them the strategic method of resisting a power structure which is prepared not only to combat with massive brutality the people's resistance but to annihilate totally the Black population (Newton [1967] 2002: 143).

Newton's large audience testifies that, what had begun as a small grassroots organisation, had by 1970 become a nationwide enterprise with considerable public appeal. While the Civil Rights Movement had through peaceful protest abolished the *de jure* segregation in the American South, *de facto* segregation remained operative in the North and West with permanent racial discrimination by housing associations, banks, employers and trade unions (Bloom and Martin 2013). According to the historian Donna Murch, Black Panther membership consisted of the sons and daughters of Blacks from the South "whose families travelled north and west to escape the southern racial regime, only to be confronted with new forms of segregation and repression." (Murch 2010: 6) Contrary to the Civil Rights Movement that had demanded formal citizen rights for America's black population, the Panthers sought to fight the normative stigmatisation of black people that persisted despite formal equality.

Brady Thomas Heiner (2007) summarises the Black Panthers' perception of the threats to their existence as firstly, the view that Blacks constitute an internally colonised community within the U.S and are thus in a situation comparable to other anti-colonial struggles; secondly, that the U.S constitution, its laws and police work as functional agents in the oppression of Blacks; thirdly, that within the context of this intra-national colonisation, black self-defence was synonymous with anti-colonial war and fourthly, that the American prison system played a pivotal role in the criminalisation of black people. Beyond the legal equality granted after desegregation, the Panthers thus diagnosed a structural violence at the heart of American civil society that was set to maintain the normative inferiority of Blacks. Heiner explains

how Newton's first theoretical move lay in unmasking the proclaimed peace in 1960's America, that he recast as a struggle over life and death:

Beneath the law and order of American government, beneath the ostensible peace of the American civil society, a racially fashioned war is being continuously and permanently waged against the black community. The type of peace that American governmental and civil institutions officially prescribe, according to this argument, is not genuinely pacific at all but rather is itself a form of coded warfare (Heiner 2007: 322).

How should we interpret the Panthers' martial rhetoric? What political purpose did the declaration of a hidden civil war serve? Wæver's theory of securitisation allows us to abstract from the immediate content of Newton's declarations and hone in on its performative function that worked both outwards, in relation to whiteness, as well as inwards, in relation to the African American constituency. In *Securitisation and Desecuritisation* from 1995, Wæver asks "what constitutes a security issue today?" Using speech act theory, Wæver argues that something becomes a security issue by performatively declaring it so. Practically, securitisation occurs when a particular issue is taken up and placed within the question of the survival of the state. Traditionally rooted in a state's position of military enmity vis-à-vis another state, contemporary processes of securitisation have expanded to involve issues such as health, drugs, crime or immigration that are all now regularly dramatized as threats to public security. In Wæver's vocabulary, the elevation of an issue into a threat 'securitises' a problem that is dramatically framed as a question of life and death. When performed by a sovereign state, the act of securitisation allows the state to defend itself against the harm allegedly caused by the threat:

By uttering 'security,' a state-representative moves a particular development into a specific area, and thereby claims a special right to use whatever means are necessary to block it (Wæver 1995: 55).

When declared through a securitizing speech act, securitisation institutes a stark binary between *us* (the community that needs to be protected from a threat) and *them* (the unit representing the threat). Initially, Wæver claims, this practice pertained exclusively to the state. Recently however, the power to securitise has shifted to include actors from civil society who engage in a struggle around political issues they elevate into existential threats.³ Applied to the Black Panthers, we can see that Newton's insistence on an existential threat to the black community represents precisely such an act of *societal securitisation*. For Wæver, the goal of state, as well as societal securitisation processes is to ensure the survival of the unit. While state security safeguards sovereignty, societal security is mobilised to protect the identity of the securitising group:

I have therefore suggested a reconceptualization of the security field in terms of a duality of state security and societal security. State security has sovereignty as its ultimate criterion, and societal security has identity. Both usages imply survival. A state that loses its sovereignty does not survive as a state; a society that loses its identity fears that it will no longer be able to live as itself. There are, then, at the collective

level between individual and totality, two organizing centres for the concept of security: state and society (Wæver 1995: 67).

Wæver's theory of societal security can shed light on emergency politics occurring outside of state sovereignty. The view of securitisation as a performative process allows us to see the power to call an emergency as unequally distributed across the social body. In this process, Wæver recognised a crucial problem that we also encounter with the Black Panthers. While state security has the authority to securitise issues on account of its legal and representative powers, societal security is practically powerless in comparison. It therefore always poses the problem of its own credibility. Lacking in representative powers, social groups have to rely on the persuasive power of their speech acts to make their point. This fact can help explain the rhetorical vehemence with which Huey Newton expressed his claims. According to the securitisation framework, the Panthers were involved in defending their identity against a white supremacist system they perceived as maintaining Blacks in a situation of existential inferiority. Their discourse had to be clear and violent to make their message succeed as a speech act, able to institute societal security. Drawing on Austin and Derrida, Wæver notes that speech acts are always haunted by the possibility of their failure. They put the speaker at risk, since success at credibly conveying securitisation is never guaranteed:

How does a society speak? Society is different from the state in that it does not have institutions of formal representation. Anyone can speak on behalf of society and claim that a security problem has appeared. Under what circumstances should such claims be taken seriously? (Wæver 1995: 69)

In the attempt to credibly securitise the issue of race, Newton used evidence from anthropology and sociology to sharpen his argument of a hidden war against Blacks. In his autobiography *Revolutionary Suicide*, Newton comments on Herbert Hendin's comparative studies of suicide rates in black and white communities (black suicide rates had doubled in the last ten years while white suicide rates remained level). Drawing on Durkheim's famous study on suicide that had fixed social factors as the root causes for suicide above individual, psychological reasons, Newton uses this argument to claim a hidden, deadly mechanism operating at the heart of white America that systematically produced the conditions in which blacks would kill themselves. If, according to Newton, death was what American society had in store for black people, there could be two ways for African Americans to die; either through reactionary suicide or through revolutionary suicide. Reactionary suicide meant to give in to the threatening conditions of the environment by taking one's own life, while revolutionary suicide meant acknowledging the lethal mechanisms that condemned Blacks to social and biological death and rebelling against them. While Newton insisted that this exposed the rebel to a likely death at the hands of the prison system or the police, it was in any case preferable to die a revolutionary death than to give in to the system:

Thus it is better to oppose the forces that would drive me to self-murder than to endure them. Although I risk the likelihood of death, there is at least the possibility, if not the probability, of changing intolerable conditions [...] Revolutionary suicide does not mean that I and my comrades have a death wish; it means just the opposite. We have such a strong desire to live with hope and human dignity that existence without them is impossible. When reactionary forces crush us, we must move against these forces, even at the risk of death (Newton [1973] 2008: 131).

We will see how, rather than being a historical aberrance, the tactic of revolutionary suicide that entails the willingness to die rather than to abandon a constituted identity has historical precedents, among other cases, in the First World War.

Revolutionary Suicide

Following the argument of securitisation, we can trace how the Panthers politicised their everyday as a fight over life and death by proclaiming white America to be racist and genocidal. For a time, the BPP even began to arm itself for fully-fledged war. Heiner comments on this functional equation of politics and war that was at the heart of Black Panther discourse:

It is precisely on account of this perceived failure of American sovereignty to guarantee and protect black people's very right to live – moreover, on account of its persistent and explicit attack on that right – that the BPP conceived of politics and war as functionally inseparable (Heiner 2007: 325).

The notorious documentation of Panther members patrolling the streets of Oakland with shotguns poised, pictures of Newton posing on an African throne, spear and rifle in hand as tokens of Black Nationalism and the seizure of Attica prison in New York, where imprisoned Panthers held forty-two prison guards hostage can be seen as evidence for the militant equation of politics and war that dominated a certain strand of Panther ideology. This radicalism found admirers in European intellectuals from Foucault to Deleuze, who had started theorising politics on the basis of war after the events of May '68 in Paris.⁴ Jean Genet, who visited Newton in California thus defended the Panther leaders' spectacular display of violence with reference to Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*:

Wherever they went the Americans were the masters, so the Panthers should do their best to terrorize the masters by the only means available to them. Spectacle. And the spectacle would work because it was the product of despair [...] Did they have any choice? (Genet 2003: 99)

The doctrine of revolutionary suicide with which Newton commanded Blacks to rather die in battle than keeping an oppressive semblance of peace both confirms and challenges Wæver's insight about securitisation. On the one hand, the Panthers' rhetoric clearly sought to securitise the concept of race in order to build a strong, black constituency against white hegemony. On the other hand, Newton seemed ready to sacrifice the vital integrity of this very same constituency, thus calling into question Wæver's emphasis on securitisation as a means of *survival*. The following

section presents a more nuanced picture of the performative position of the Black Panthers with regard to the black community by elaborating the issue of securitisation within a wider context of the negotiation of identity that in certain cases can become “larger than life”.

Ontological Security

Following Wæver, several theorists working in security studies have elaborated the link between security and identity to shed light on the politics of self-defence. We have seen that for Wæver, the situation of feeling existentially threatened does not need to be imposed from the outside. Issues are performatively elevated to the level of an existential threat by a social group to demarcate the group’s identity in relation to its inside as well as its outside. Originally developed by R.D. Laing in the realm of clinical psychiatry and imported into sociology by Anthony Giddens, the concept of ontological security has recently been appropriated by Jennifer Mitzen (2006) and Brent Steele (2008) to contradict the “survival assumption” that permeates political theory. The survival assumption – legible in thinkers of the state of exception from Carl Schmitt to Giorgio Agamben but also, residually in Wæver – claims that a political unit’s primary goal is necessarily its biological survival. Steele uses Laing’s concept of ontological security to argue that it is the preservation of a unit’s self-identity, rather than survival, that represents the primary motor of social action. According to Steele, political actors acquire a semi-permanent social identity, related to their own self-image, including the values, mores and behavioural patterns they desire to represent, as well as the expectations, the outside world has come to develop in relation to the unit’s identity. An actor’s primary political interest is the unperturbed continuation of this identity, as it is this continuity, which for Steele provides a sense of existential safety or ontological security. While Steele initially develops his theory in relation to nation states, Wæver has demonstrated the increasing importance of security concerns to actors from civil society. This is how Steele frames the debate around ontological security:

The central argument [...] is that states pursue social actions to serve self-identity needs, even when these actions compromise their physical existence [...]. While physical security is (obviously) important to states, ontological security is more important because its fulfilment affirms a state’s self-identity (i.e. it affirms not only its physical existence but primarily how a state sees itself and secondarily how it wants to be seen by others (Steele 2008: 2-3).

Steele outlines how political actors have historically defended their self-identity, often to the point of jeopardizing their own physical integrity. His analysis of the Belgian decision to fight the far more powerful German army in WWI serves to exemplify the ontological security framework. According to Steele, Belgium’s identity had been internationally ratified as politically neutral. Hence, accepting to align itself with Germany without offering resistance – while providing physical

security in the short term – would have compromised Belgium’s acquired identity, thereby threatening the nation’s sense of ontological security. For Steele, the case of Belgium disproves the established survivalist paradigm. While Belgium’s shattering defeat was practically guaranteed from the outset, the small nation still fought to secure its sense of uncompromised self-continuity. We can draw an analogy between Belgium’s behaviour in WWI and the Black Panthers’ doctrine of revolutionary suicide. While fully aware of being crushed by the U.S police in cases of armed confrontation, the Panthers still advocated this confrontational fight, not in the hope of any real political gains but in order to secure their self-identity as a combatant social group. As Steele specifies:

In such cases a state like Belgium ‘gives practical proof’ that in its consideration self-identity was ‘larger than life.’ The existential angst which befalls all social agents is therefore solved through a painful, costly, and tragic, but also emancipatory, action (Steele 2008: 113).

Through the ontological security framework, we can gain a better understanding of the Panthers’ doctrine of revolutionary suicide. Dramatizing a situation of poverty and racist marginalisation into a “civil war against Blacks” sharpened the antagonism between white hegemony and the black community and thus was likely to guarantee group cohesion among African Americans. In the words of Steele, it ensured ontological security by stabilising the black community’s sense of self. However, apart from the aggressions of a racist system, the Panthers perceived another threat to their identity, coming from within the African American electorate; namely the promise of formal integration into the American mainstream, embodied by the Civil Rights Movement. For the Panthers, this threatened to assimilate Blacks and dissolve their constituency into the wider body politic.

Peace Anxiety

Writing on the relation between ontological security and political conflict, the political scientist Bahar Rumelili has presented a binary schema of political identity that we can apply to our case of 1960’s America. For Rumelili, political identity is constructed along a twofold axis. Both inclusively, by a set of practices, behaviours and values “that can possibly be acquired by any state if it fulfils certain criteria” (2007: 38) or essentially, through traits “assumed to be based on some inherent characteristics.” (ibid.) Following this perspective, we can say that prior to desegregation, full American identity was defined in essential terms by white skin colour and in practice-based terms by a capitalist market economy and the values of democracy, individualism and liberalism. In this context, the Civil Rights Movement demanded the abolition of the essential component of American identity *qua* whiteness and an opening of its parameters to include black people in the practice-based

performance of American citizenship. As is well known, white hegemony responded by somewhat attenuating the power of its essential, race-coded identity and admitting Blacks that were capitalist, democratic and liberally oriented.

While providing undeniable legal gains for African Americans in the South, from an ontological security perspective, this inclusion was at the same time threatening to black self-identity, as blackness now became integrated into the American mainstream. This inclusion diluted what had counted as black (the opposition to white privilege) and, in the words of Steele and Rumelili, it therefore enhanced black ontological insecurity by rupturing a continuous black identity. After desegregation, the Panthers took on the difficult task of mobilising politically around race issues in a situation of newly granted formal equality. This was a time when many within the black community had aligned themselves with the American mainstream in the hope of thereby reaching the end of racism. To safeguard a continuous black identity, the Panthers' point of contention had to be that America preserved a disavowed core of essential whiteness that still kept Blacks in a situation of radical exclusion.

It is possible that the continuous black identity the Panthers were advocating was to a large extent defined precisely by the struggle against normative whiteness. Rumelili has provided evidence of how identities become problematically attached to conflict. For her, "protracted conflicts and the habits and routines that states have formed around them generate a sense of ontological security," (2014: 3) as the conflict becomes a narrative of the individual actors' sense of self. The possibility of conflict resolution on the other hand induces ontological insecurity, as it involves actors giving up their well-kept narratives about themselves (as Greek over Turkish or Israeli over Palestinian in Rumelili's examples). Rumelili's research into ontological security can help explain the attachment that political actors form to certain structures of conflict. In our case, it provides an explanation of why the Panthers persisted with their radical politics especially after the pacifying gains of the Civil Rights Movement. Following Steele's example with regard to Belgium, it becomes understandable why the Panthers indeed preferred death to the assimilation into an identity that went against their established sense of self.

In conclusion, the ontological security framework is able to explain the dramatic early phase of the Panthers, in which the party endorsed a position of Black Nationalism and revolutionary violence. Through an aggressive and harsh political rhetoric, it performatively sharpened the identity distinctions between 'black' and 'white' as well as the 'real' Blacks that were opposed to the white mainstream and the 'integrationists' who had abandoned the struggle and assimilated to whiteness. However, the schema doesn't offer an explanation for the Panthers' sudden turn to community service after 1970, when all armed resistance and most overt aggression was dropped. It will now be argued that, in order to understand this political change we need to shift our gaze away from identity and onto the question of *positionality*.

Community-Building and *Positionality*

While security studies' analysis of the interaction between actors from different identity-groups can provide insights into the Panthers' early position of radical self-defence, the notion of identity-preservation (or ontological security) cannot enlighten us as to why the Panthers suddenly abandoned any talk of blackness in terms of identity. Had they surrendered to the integrationist demands of formal equality? Did they believe they had become a fully integrated part of American society? I suggest interpreting the change of attitude in the Panthers' politics not as a *giving in* to the reformist aims the Panthers had previously rejected. Instead, I propose to read it as a moment of crisis regarding the very notion of identity; or at least, a budding doubt in the feasibility of claims made on the basis of identity. How did this doubt manifest itself for the Black Panthers?

Newton's gradual distancing from the spectacular and identity-building violence he had endorsed in the 1960's and his turn towards a less confrontational politics of community building can be traced most clearly in his dispute with the Panthers' Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver. While Cleaver wanted to push the Party into full-blown armed warfare, Newton opposed this position. Abandoning his provocations in favour of a more attenuated politics, he argued from 1970 onwards that armed resistance was bound to be overpowered by the military superiority of the American police and that, rather than all-out war, the Panthers should adopt a politics of restrained resistance. In an article from 1967, he claimed:

The Black masses are handling the resistance incorrectly. When the brothers in East Oakland [...] amassed the people in the streets, threw bricks and Molotov cocktails to destroy property and create disruption, they were herded into a small area by the gestapo police and immediately contained by the brutal violence of the oppressor's storm troops. Although this manner of resistance is sporadic, short-lived, and costly, it has been transmitted across the country to all the ghettos of the Black nation (Newton [1967] 2002: 142).

Instead of paramilitary activities, the BPP began to invest strongly into their so-called Survival Programs, a range of over twenty-four different community service programs that the party ran free of charge to benefit the black population. The programs included a breakfast-for-schools initiative, in which breakfast was served to children before the start of the school day; health and dental clinics, where medical services were provided, a sickle-cell anaemia screening program; a buses to prisons service where families were transported to and from prisons to visit their relatives; a clothing program and various cultural activities such as a model school, music, poetry and Black History classes. In a televised interview with William Buckley, Newton explained this shift from an emphasis on armed escalation to an investment in community services:

We realized that it wasn't the principle of revolution or the armed principle of our Party, to take the gun and make the gun the only thing that could fight a revolution. So, it was a strategy that was mistaken [...] The media enjoyed the sensationalism of the gun. In many ways, we set ourselves up for the murder we received... We realized

that we had to treat the issues that the people were most concerned about (Newton [1973] 2002: 276).

While Newton still framed the need for the social programs as stemming from the threat of genocide and the necessity for black survival, he simultaneously highlighted a quality in survival that seems to escape the struggle over life and death through the affective categories of self-respect, dignity and enthusiasm:

A Ten-Point Program is not revolutionary in itself, nor is it reformist. It is a survival program. We, the people, are threatened with genocide because racism and fascism are rampant in this country and throughout the world. And the ruling circle in North America is responsible. We intend to change all of that, and in order to change it, there must be a total transformation. But until we can achieve that total transformation, we must exist. In order to exist, we must survive; therefore, we need a survival kit: the Ten-Point Program. It is necessary for our children to grow up healthy with functional and creative minds...Where there is courage, where there is self-respect and dignity, there is a possibility that we can change the conditions and win. This is called *revolutionary enthusiasm* (Newton [1970] 2002: 160-161).

The Survival Programs were thus destined to elevate the morale of their beneficiaries and make them receptive to the *affect* of revolution. More importantly, they had a strong temporal function, stretching the passive time pending death into the active time of survival, a time of holding out and holding on until the right time for revolution had come. They thereby mark Newton's sustained engagement with what one might call a revolutionary philosophy of time. In the article *On the Defection of Eldridge Cleaver*, Newton highlighted that a dispute around time was at the core of his disagreement with Cleaver. While Cleaver "ordered everyone into the streets tomorrow" (Newton [1971] 2002: 207), Newton knew that "a spontaneous revolution is a fantasy." (ibid.) Rather than provoking a revolutionary conflict in the here-and-now, the BPP's inflection around 1970 inaugurated a sustained investment into resistance and survival. Writing on the differentiation between resistance and revolution, Howard Caygill comments on the temporal difference between a revolutionary acceleration of time and the prolonged effort to extend the capacity to resist:

A capacity is precisely a prolongation in time – thus, the struggle for resistance occupies an extended time horizon, unlike the revolutionary bid for power which thrives on the acceleration of time (Caygill 2013: 10).

The Panthers' Survival Programs exemplify this marked shift from a politics of escalation to a sustained politics of survival. Investing into the physical wellbeing of the people as well as into their cultural education, they opened a sheltered space where the black community could exist outside the immediate pressures of direct confrontation and struggle. Crucially and signalling Newton's distance from the earlier endorsement of Black Nationalism, the Panthers' ceased campaigning around issues of an essential black identity. Their Survival Programs carved out a niche of life that for a time withstood the FBI's counter-intelligence operations of

defamation and criminalisation (COINTELPRO). During this time, Newton carefully guarded against advocating the revolution now, while promoting the belief in the longevity and eventual triumph of the movement in the face of likely death:

I have no doubt that the revolution will triumph. The people of the world will prevail, seize power, seize the means of production, and wipe out racism, capitalism, reactionary intercommunalism-reactionary suicide. The people will win a new world (Newton [1973] 2008: 132).

With its substitution of 'Black' with 'the people of the world' and its endorsement of vaguely formulated political aims such as the end of capitalism, racism and a number of other goals from the portfolio of 1960's counterculture, this statement is miles away from the neatly circumscribed Black revolutionary identity the Panthers had endorsed earlier. Rather than antagonistically building a strong identity around blackness (or black ontological security), I argue that Newton here expresses a deep insecurity concerning the very possibility of a positive black ontology. Instead of a struggle around the relative security or insecurity of an ontological position, around what Martin Heidegger calls 'the ontic', we are here dealing with *ontological* insecurity in the strong sense; with an insecurity about the viability of ontic identity.⁵ Formalising this doubt regarding identity-politics, recent work in Black studies has demonstrated that 'blackness' and 'whiteness' are social *positions* before they become invested as *identities* (Patterson 1982; Hartman 1997; Sexton 2008). Writing on the structural relations between Whites and Blacks since the time of the slave trade, Frank Wilderson has argued for an understanding of slavery and segregation as relations of formal domination of one entity (Humans) over a subjugated entity (Slaves). Rather than seeing this conflict as a clash between competing identity narratives, Wilderson recasts it as a struggle around structural domination, regardless of identity. For Wilderson, arguing in Kantian terms, the slave relation forms the condition of possibility for 'black' and 'white' to emerge as identities in the first place. Drawing on Marxism and Psychoanalysis, Wilderson justifies this structuralist view as follows:

I argue that 'Savage', Human and Slave should be theorised in the way we theorise worker and capitalist as positions first and identities second, or as we theorise capitalism as a paradigm, rather than as an experience (Wilderson 2010: 24).

What is at stake here is the difference between fully constituted identities that can be remade or defended at will and the pre-identitarian formal relationality that guarantees the reproduction of systems of power and of domination. Wilderson calls this the *structural positionality* that social actors are born into, and Marx' famous insight about men existing not under "self-selected circumstances" but "under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" might have served as his model here. Let us now see how the shift from *identity* to *positionality* changes the viewpoint on the case of the Black Panthers.

Negotiating Stigma and *Ontological Insecurity*

If we abstract from identity and examine the social position of the Panthers vis-à-vis white hegemony as well as the integrationist black mainstream, we gain a more flexible understanding of the shift in the Panthers' politics away from identity. Contrary to identity, the category of stigma is a normative attribution of inferiority that highlights a power relation, in which the stigmatised appear as *pure negativity* with regard to the 'normal'. Rebecca Adler-Nissen has developed a framework that combines Ervin Goffman's theory of stigma with questions of ontological security. She both reflects and contests Rumelili's differentiation between inclusive and exclusive identity aspects by arguing that stigmatisation, i.e. the normative judgement of behaviours as "deviant" or "morally polluted" easily persists even after successful behavioural adjustment. This explains why, after the Civil Rights Movement the stigma of blackness persisted, despite formal integration into behavioural American-ness. Adler-Nissen insists that stigmatisation always induces a binary between "us" and "them" at the expense of the stigmatised, who are deemed less human or often entirely un-human:

A third feature of stigma imposition occurs when social labels connote a separation of "us" from "them". The 'us' and 'them' designation in the stigmatization process implies that the labeled group is slightly less human, or, in extreme cases, not human at all (Adler-Nissen 2014: 147).

This emphasis on the 'inhumanity' of the stigmatised provides another argument for the Panthers' sudden doubt in identity as a political category. Applied to the black case, we can see that in conditions of structural inferiority (or structural stigma), there is no aspect of identity that can be positively invested in the hope of successful de-stigmatisation. Wilderson reflects this point when he asks: "What is a Black? A subject? An object? A former slave? A slave? The relational status, or lack thereof of black ~~subjectivity~~ (subjectivity under erasure) haunts Black studies as a field just as it haunts the socius" (Wilderson 2014: xi). The problem of investing in an identity that is constituted as negative with regard to the norm has also been elaborated in a number of contemporary critiques of identity politics. The bottom line of these critiques is that, if identities are constituted oppositionally in relation to a normative Other, then reclaiming a stigmatised identity in the hope of normative recognition only reinforces the oppressive hierarchy that instituted the stigma in the first place. The stigmatised might be able to change minimally the valence of their social position but they do not enable the conditions for a non-stigmatising sociality to emerge. Because of this, Wendy Brown has framed identity politics as a struggle for the recognition of our "wounded attachments", that masochistically strengthens the system it is trying to fight:

Politicized identity thus enunciates itself, makes claims for itself, only by entrenching, restating, dramatizing, and inscribing its pain in politics; it can hold out no future—for itself or others—that triumphs over this pain (Brown 1995: 74).

This awkwardness concerning identity can serve as an explanation for the Black Panthers' otherwise obscure change of heart regarding the former endorsement of identity-building violence. Apart from laying down their weapons, the Panthers also began to form alliances with diverse women's movements as well as gay rights activists and other formerly rejected marginalised groups, in the spirit of intersectional struggles that are defined by their social position, rather than by their identity. They realised that the stigma placed on them put into question the very idea of their humanity. Foreshadowing recent work in Black studies, their position expressed the extreme awkwardness of existing as the negative pole of the ontological plenitude of whiteness (expressed as having an identity, a subjectivity, a body, a soul). This ontologically thin ground meant that there was indeed no position left that could be positively invested. I have argued that the Panthers' community services testify to this awkwardness without resolving it. Contrary to the Panthers' beginnings, they represent a much more minimal position that remained invested in blackness only as a negative position with regard to whiteness. Rather than bolstering this marginalised identity through armed escalation, the Panthers now merely acknowledged it as a *position* whose occupants' lives were threatened.

The End of Identity

The case of the Black Panthers documents how an emergency is produced through politics and through rhetoric as *an optics* that frames political positions and identities. Moreover it shows how declarations of emergency occur on a politically contested terrain, constituting a discursive process, whose success centres on its performative delivery. My argument suggested that the Black Panthers engaged in a process of societal securitisation to cast as a disaster, a situation that the U.S had disavowed as normal. Huey Newton's rhetoric was in this context analysed as serving a dual performative function. It sought to secure a radical black identity with regard to white hegemony as well as in opposition to the integrationist demands of the Civil Rights Movement. The analysis of the Panthers' sudden departure from identity-based politics was used to highlight an analytical limit within security studies that was addressed through Black studies' discussion of positionality. In addition, stigma theory was used to show how attributions of inferiority run deeper than identity and touch the social location of a subject in its deep ontological positioning as *negativity pure and simple*.

Referring to Wendy Brown and to Adler-Nissen's work on stigma and humanness, the question that security studies and cultural disaster studies need to address is: Can there be a politics that severs its "wounded attachments" to identitarian integration and instead addresses the structural level at which social positions are allocated? Following recent work in the so-called post-foundational tradition (Lacoue-Labarthe 1990; Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 2005; Marchart 2007)⁶, we can suggest this would mean shifting the focus from *politics*, as the arena of the

parliament, of parties and of policies that constitute our political reality as 'politics as usual' to *the political* as the space that constitutes the ground of our social order and firstly enables its normative coding. Methodologically this shift entails detaching disaster research from any already constituted *object* of research and recalibrating it as *an optics* that zooms in on the construction of the political field itself.

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Notes

¹ The American Records of the Weather Bureau shows a temperature of 40 Fahrenheit (4,4 Celsius) and no rain for this day. See <http://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/027.html>. (Accessed on 15.11.2014)

² In her book *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman reconstructs the transitional period between black slavery and freedom and argues that the legal ascription of subjecthood to blacks served to make African Americans legally accountable for crimes. Against liberal equations of subjecthood and freedom, Hartman argues that full subjectivity only further constrained blacks and controversially calls into question the presumed discontinuity between freedom and slavery.

³ Wæver's theory of securitisation forms an interesting parallel to other attempts to theorise the performative politics of states of exception. While Giorgio Agamben (Agamben 1998) reserves hardly any room for performativity and instead grounds the state of exception in the formalism of the legal realm, Adi Ophir (Ophir 2010) has theorised man-made disasters as resulting from discursive processes of 'catastrophisation' that, similarly to Wæver's theory of securitisation constitute a practice of framing political life as a disaster.

⁴ Brady Thomas Heiner claims that Foucault's preoccupation with war in his lecture series "Society Must Be Defended" originated in an exploration of the racial politics of the U.S and especially his knowledge of the Black Panther Party that he gained through Jean Genet.

⁵ With the concept of 'ontological difference', Martin Heidegger (Heidegger 1991) distinguished between the realm of empirical beings or *Seiende* and the domain of being itself, or *Sein*. For Heidegger the sensory reality that offers itself to our experience is the realm of the ontic (*Seiendes*) whereas the foundation, origin or cause of this reality is the ontological (*Sein*) that transcends the ontic and escapes our perception. Applied to politics, the ontic is the empirical reality of constituted identities whereas the ontological is the existential, performative and symbolic, operation through which these identities are differentially constituted in the first place. Heidegger critiques Western metaphysics for always having sought to ground the ontic in a firm ontological principle such as substance, spirit or essence. For Heidegger, metaphysics has thereby failed to recognise the performative dimension of its own grounding operation (ibid: 51).

⁶ Oliver Marchart (Marchart 2007) proposes to call this difference between the empirical reality of politics and their enabling conditions the 'political difference'. With this formulation, Marchart effectively distils the paradigmatic theoretical movement of many post-Heideggerian thinkers. The 'political difference' constitutes the main concern of the studies undertaken by Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Lacoue-Labarthe at the 'Centre des Recherches Philosophiques sur le Politique', founded at the ENS Paris in 1980. Because the political difference deprives subjects of any foundational identity, Marchart calls the ethics that this difference solicits post-foundational.

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