

The cultural and political impact of the *Black-Panther* newspaper (1967-1982) on the Black Panther Party (BPP) and American society

Daniel Poole

Abstract

The Black Panther Party (BPP) besides being one of the most iconic black liberation organisations in American history also left deep cultural footprints in American publishing, with many leading members writing best sellers and the party itself helping to create, distribute and advertise these publications. The BPP's newspaper *Black-Panther* ran for 537 issues and was once the bestselling African-American newspaper in the USA. *Black-Panther* was an indispensable BPP organ, bringing the various and largely isolated regional branches together under one roof. The positions and articles within this paper gave the BPP a means to push the beliefs and decisions of its leaders, raise party funds and to formulate strategy. This article evaluates the social and political changes catalysed by the BPP using their newspaper the *Black-Panther* in the fields of gender, social class, and international politics.

Key Words

Black Panther, African-American, COINTELPRO, Feminism, Marxism, Newspaper.

Introduction

The BPP (1966-1982) was founded in California by Marxist activists Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale to protect African-American communities from police violence. Early BPP activities consisted mostly of openly carrying guns while following the police, legal advice workshops and paying bail for African-Americans. When Ronald Reagan (then California governor) enacted the Mulford Act banning open-carry (Morgan 2018), the BPP switched

their attention to creating community support programs. The BPP created over 60 of these programs including children's breakfast programs, healthcare clinics, legal advice seminars, HIV support groups, schools, and food banks (Jones 2010, 31).

Because of the BPP's open support for global communist movements and fearing uprisings by African-Americans, America's Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) employed the Counter Espionage Program (COINTELPRO) against them. COINTELPRO was used to sabotage African-American and Native-American activists, most famously it was used to assassinate BPP leader Fred Hampton and send Martin Luther King blackmail letters encouraging him to commit suicide (Prokop 2018). Using COINTELPRO the FBI assassinated BPP members, raided their offices and charged their activists with fabricated crimes. Other issues such as internal factionalism and distrust fermented by the FBI's forged letter campaigns (Jones 1988, 429-430) further stressed the party.

Throughout most of the BPP's life existed their party newspaper the *Black-Panther* (1967-1982) founded in Oakland one year after the BPP's creation, managed by the BPP's commercial agency Stronghold, and ran for 537 issues. [BPP activists, children](#), and fellow activist groups sold *Black-Panther* on streets and within political gatherings, eventually turning *Black-Panther* into the BPP's main source of funds. *Black-Panther* was originally created to investigate police killings of black people (Davenport 2009, 125), but came to act as a central organ of the BPP, bringing regional branches under one banner and communicating the official strategies and messages of the party. *Black-Panther* also acted as one means of defending the party from media attacks by making the BPP's message clearer to the public.

The primary purposes of *Black Panther* were as follows:

- Formalise political campaigns, messages, and strategies from the BPP leadership for the various regional branches to follow.
- Raise monetary funds for the BPP.
- Inform Americans on foreign revolutions/movements.

Very little research has been conducted concerning this newspaper, which is unusual considering that this publication was once the most widely read black newspaper in the

USA. More research has been written concerning *Black-Panther's* illustrator Emory Douglass and his artworks than the paper itself. *Black-Panther* soon became another COINTELPRO target, with *Black-Panther's* printing and publishing operations being routinely sabotaged by the police (Jones 1988, 426-427), especially so after the election of Richard Nixon (Bloom 2013, 212). Douglass said that working with *Black-Panther* was so dangerous due to police/white-supremacist violence that his family took out a life insurance policy on him after becoming its [illustrator](#). It was Douglass through his work in *Black-Panther* who popularised the American use of 'pig' as a pejorative for police (Walker 2020).

Gender

Early challenges facing the BPP included not only police repression and FBI saboteurs but also social weaknesses within the party membership, specifically lack of women in the first year of the BPP. Many early BPP recruits were more attracted to the weaponry and macho image attached to the armed patrols than to the community programs and other political work that would make up the majority of the party's work. *Black-Panther's* first issue reflected these attitudes, calling themselves the 'cream of black manhood', and portrayed women in the role of the protected instead of the protector of African-American communities. These platitudes soon dissolved in favour of woman with agency and eventually as equals in all matters (Spencer 2008, 92-93). As ultra-macho attitudes faded, women joined the BPP en masse and by the early 70s two-thirds of their members were women (Martin 2014). The first recorded woman to join the BPP was 16-year old Tareka Lewis after tracking down co-founders Newton and Seale, telling them:

'Ya'll have a nice program and everything. It sounds like me. Can I join? Cause ya'll don't have no sisters up in here.' (Spencer 2008, 94)

Accepted immediately, she began working with *Black-Panther* in layout, editorials, and published over 40 illustrations within *Black-Panther* under the alias 'Matilaba' (Spencer 2008, 94-95). Soon after, feminist activist Judy Juanita (aka Judy Hart) became *Black-Panther's* new editor. When becoming editor she took the job from convicted rapist and

notorious wife beater, former editor Eldridge Cleaver. After losing this position, Cleaver split the BPP by creating his own faction. His New-York supporters created a *Black-Panther* newspaper clone called *Right On* which soon fizzled into obscurity, while the female dominated *Black-Panther* grew. These events led to *Black-Panther* containing copyright warnings on future issues.

In 1970 another woman was made lead editor, Elaine Brown (Davenport 2009, 172), who later become BPP chairwoman in 1974. Working with the *Black-Panther* newspaper often proved a key entry point for women joining the BPP, whether in sales, illustrations, editorial or marketing. During this time *Black-Panther* began to feature Emory Douglass's artistic depictions of black women with weaponry, celebrated as soldiers and artists (Bloom 2013, 96). These images published in *Black-Panther* were also adopted by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) who like Douglass were influenced by revolutionary Chinese art (Barber 2008, 138). According to assistant professor of African studies at CUNY, Mary Philips:

'The newspaper covered these internal issues and highlighted the voices of women. You can see the evolution of gender politics in the organization over time in the newspaper' (Farmer 2019).

As the BPP matured as a party, the doors flung open for greater inclusion not only for women but other groups such as LGBT people. Newton, whose face appeared on the masthead of all *Black-Panther* issues, gave speeches in 1970 in support of homosexual people, seeing them as equal victims of police brutality. These changes in BPP attitudes led the *Black-Panther* to change its name in 1971 from *The Black-Panther: Black Community News Service* to the title [The Black Panther: Intercommunal News Service](#). This was to both symbolise the split from Cleaver's faction and for the greater inclusion of other oppressed groups with *Black-Panther* wished to represent.



Figure 1 (above): *Black Panther's* masthead, February 19, 1972.

Though sexism and homophobia would persist throughout various branches, the *Black-Panther* solidified BPP policy against this discrimination, giving said groups a place in black liberation activism. Eventually ideas of masculinity and femininity in *Black-Panther* began to swing both ways, with both male and female activists using the sex appeal of each gender in their writings as a recruitment tool.

Social class:

As a party founded by Marxists, BPP beliefs on social class were always a central issue aptly reflected in *Black-Panther*. Socialist language concerning the proletariat, bourgeoisie and lumpen was previously popularised in black liberation circles by Malcolm X prior to the BPP's founding. *Black-Panther* articles often discussed [the role of black people within capitalism](#), commonly employing socialist language and denouncing capitalism.

Starting with the second issue, all 537 issues of *Black-Panther* contained a BPP manifesto called the ten-point program, officially titled 'What We Want, What We Believe'. This manifesto was modelled off an earlier program created by Malcolm X titled 'What the Muslims Want' (Bloom 2013, 70).

Originally the third point stated in the BPP manifesto stated: 'We want an end to the robbery by the white men of our Black Community.' However, to better communicate their beliefs on social class and the greater inclusion of other oppressed communities (gay, women, Native-American etc.), this was changed in later issues to: ['We want an end to the robbery by the capitalists of our black and oppressed communities.'](#)

Putting these beliefs into practice, *Black-Panther* ran special issues supporting strikes and boycotts of capitalists who refused to support BPP community programs, foodbanks, and children's breakfast clubs. These programs themselves were an extension of the Marxist beliefs of the BPP and were intended as socialist programs. One businessman who refused to support the BPP's breakfast programs was described in *Black-Panther* as a 'capitalist-pig' (Bloom 2013, 185), as the newspaper often chastised business owners who wanted to conduct business in African-American communities yet refused to support said communities.

Another key example of socialist language utilised by *Black-Panther* is the term 'paper-panther', used in *Black-Panther* illustrations to describe RAM, an organisation which falsely took credit for BPP activities (Bloom 2013, 94). The pejorative 'paper-panther' is a play on Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong's slogan 'paper-tiger' used to describe capitalists, imperialists, and fascists.

What this employment of socialist language by *Black-Panther* meant for the BPP was the solidification of the party as a socialist party and the belief that capitalism was responsible for American racism. These beliefs expressed themselves in BPP community programs and *Black-Panther's* support of labour strikes and boycotts as rebellion against capitalist. Although their revolution against capitalism never came to fruition, their community programs organised through *Black-Panther* became the origin of many government support programs for underprivileged communities.

Internationalism

Articles and illustrations supporting socialist and anti-colonial revolutions were common in *Black Panther*, sometimes featured within special '[international news' sections](#). Common examples included support for North Korea, Palestine, Vietnam, Cuba, Angola and Algeria. In [Emory's Black-Panther illustrations](#), Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos were compared to American ghettos, both victimised by the same government. The most brazen example of *Black-Panther's* content concerning foreign revolutions comes from their frequent and open

support for a communist victory in Vietnam, published during the height of the Vietnam War.

The BPP's links with China were by far the strongest of any country. Before the *Black-Panther* newspaper, BPP supporters sold *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* to raise money to buy shotguns for their armed patrols (Chao 2016). Years later China returned the favour, buying thousands of subscriptions to the *Black-Panther* for libraries, allowing China to fund the BPP through the publishing industry while plausibly denying it financed them. The USSR used similar strategies when buying *Daily Worker* subscriptions to fund British communists (Haylett 2005).

Mao took a strong interest in African-Americans, personally hosting visits by NAACP co-founder Du Bois and granting asylum to African-American activists fleeing persecution including, Robert and Mabel Williams, Aubrey Pankey, Vicki Garvin and William Worthy. These African-American refugees profoundly impacted Mao's political views, which in turn influenced Chinese government policy and built the foundation for Sino-BPP relations.

'The evil system of colonialism and imperialism arose and throve with the enslavement of Negroes and the trade in Negroes, and it will surely come to its end with the complete emancipation of the black people.' - Mao Zedong, 1963 (Tse-Tung, 1963)

As the influence of black activists grew on Mao, depictions of African-Americans as allies against capitalism became common themes in Chinese print culture (Duan 2017). Chinese art began depicting African-Americans revolting against American imperialism and allying with other races against capitalism.



Figure 2 (left): *Black-Panther* cover, October 3, 1970. **Figure 3 (right):** Typical style of Chinese art depicting African-Americans, by Cao Youcheng (1966). Image courtesy of chinese posters.net.

Chinese artistic influences appeared throughout *Black-Panther*, with similar styles being adapted by Douglass who incorporated Mao quotes into his illustrations.

Within his auto-biography *Revolutionary Suicide*, Newton credited Mao as his inspiration for creating the BPP and that during his 1971 journey within China he felt ‘absolutely free for the first time in my life’. This trip was publicised in *Black-Panther* to [help sales of *Revolutionary Suicide*](#) and was chosen to coincide with Nixon’s visit to China as part of a failed BPP attempt to contact him through the Chinese.

These experiences solidified *Black-Panther’s* editorial policy of supporting foreign anti-colonial movements. Similar to *Black-Panther’s* depiction of women (and later LGBT people) as fellow victims and comrades in the fight against capitalist-imperialism, the paper sought to depict foreign revolutionary movements in similar fashions.

Conclusion

Black-Panther greatest achievement was catalysing the greater cooperation of various oppressed groups, promoting the concept you can support women's rights simultaneously while defending worker's rights, the rights of LGBT people, Native-Americans and African-Americans.

Outside of newspaper publishing, numerous influential Panthers (during and after the BPP) turned to more traditional book publishing methods to spread their message, many of which became staples of black liberation literature. Such titles include:

- (BPP co-founder) Huey P. Newton's autobiography, *Revolutionary Suicide*
- (BPP co-founder) Bobby Seale's *Seize the Time*
- (BPP activist and professor) Angela Davis's *If They Come in the Morning*
- (BPP chairwoman 1974-1977) Elaine Brown's memoirs *A Taste of Power*.
- (BPP Chief of Staff) David Hilliard, author of several BPP histories.
- (BPP activist, Tupac's aunt and first woman to make #1 on the FBI's most wanted terrorist list) Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography*.

Black-Panther gave advertising space to other black liberation authors such as George Jackson's *Blood in my Eye* which like many works by black activist authors, the BPP helped to finance, advertise, and copy-edit, even when said publications were published by other organisations.

The FBI also recognised publishing as a key tool of black liberation movements, attacking black owned bookshops and censoring black liberation literature (Davis 2018). An example of COINTELPRO in publishing is the *Black Panther Colouring Book* which was falsely attributed as a BPP publication but was actually created by the FBI to discredit the panthers (Staff 2010).

These publishing roots outlived the BPP, with Newton's widow Fredrika Newton using book publishing to fight for black liberation, writing the introductions to *Huey: Spirit of the Panther*, *The Huey P. Newton Reader* and Penguin's republishing of *Revolutionary Suicide*. Expertise in publishing was a requirement to rise within the ranks of the BPP, as the party's

experiences with publishing were the keys to its success as an organisation. In all areas from party finances, organising collective action, social change within the party as seen with women and LGBT people to issues of foreign policy, *Black-Panther* sparked these changes. This article shows that further study is needed to understand the BPP's dynamic yet criminally under-researched relationships with the American publishing industry.

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