

CHAPTER ONE

How the Panther Lost Its Spots

Primitivism, Marxism, and the Black Panther Party

Nineteenth-century understandings of race identified people of African ancestry as animalistic. Some researchers viewed Africans and Europeans as different species, and because the public was struggling to absorb Darwin's claim that humans may be related to apes, many whites—members of the public and the scientific community alike—saw Africans as the obvious connection between the two (McClintock 49). During this time period and well into the twentieth century, cartoon imagery of African Americans capitalized on such links, depicting blacks as bestial or ape-like. In many racist drawings, animal characteristics were applied broadly, and although apes and monkeys were the most common choices, other animals sometimes took their place. Elephants, frogs, panthers, and tigers, among others, purveyed racist stereotypes. Often, black cartoon characters were not even identifiable as any specific animal—they simply didn't look human. Such depictions reinforced scientific explanations of racial difference and bolstered rationales for segregation: separate lunch counters, drinking fountains, and bathrooms made sense when the public associated African Americans with animals.

Why, then, would black radicals intent on eliminating racial inequality identify with an animal, no matter how fierce? In 1965, the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), which mobilized black

voters in Alabama around registration and black candidates, did just that when it claimed the black panther as a mascot (Austin 12). This set off a wave of interest in the panther as a symbol of black nationalism that would culminate in the most famous example: Huey Newton and Bobby Seale's Black Panther Party (BPP), founded in Oakland, California, in 1966. By choosing the panther insignia, the LCFO and the Black Panther Party revised definitions of black Americans as animals, using sensational depictions of themselves to gain currency in the mass media and creating a new association of the panther with Black Power. Ultimately, the panther and its connections to primitivism would allow the Panthers to critique both the racist Western binary between civilization and "primitive" life and the Marxist notion that the industrial working class was the key to socialist revolution. They created a new urban "primitive" fraught with racist history but essential to defining a new vision of black radicalism.

Seale and Newton devised the Party in response to what they perceived as the ineffectiveness of black nationalist groups that they had worked with as students at Oakland's Merritt College (Austin 29). When they took the panther name and logo, they defined the organization with ten demands and accompanying political analyses, titled "What We Want/What We Believe" (Newton with Blake 115, 121). The demands, which included adequate housing, food, employment, education, an end to police brutality and unfair treatment in the justice system, and black exemption from military service, combined Newton and Seale's interests in Marxism, black nationalism, and the pan-Africanism that had inspired Malcolm X in his last days.¹

While distributing this document in the black community, Newton, Seale, and their first recruit Bobby Hutton instituted an armed citizen patrol against police brutality. Permitted by California law to carry loaded rifles in the open, they trailed Oakland police on duty, observing their behavior at traffic stops or arrests, while Newton, who was taking courses at San Francisco Law School, cited law books to convince officers of the patrol's legality (Seale 64-77; Newton 115, 121). These tense confrontations sparked local interest and white concern, and the party recruited a core of members. Local notoriety turned into national fame in May 1967, when Bobby Seale and a group of fellow

Panthers carried rifles into the California legislature to protest a bill banning loaded guns in public. The bill was intended to quell the Panthers' patrols, but instead it provoked nationwide interest in the group. Soon, Newton and Seale were establishing branches all over the country (Austin xi–xviii). Organized into a hierarchical structure beneath Oakland's Central Committee, members wore the Panther uniform of a black jacket, blue shirt, and black beret. Many were full-time activists who lived collectively and survived off the meager proceeds of their *Black Panther* newspaper sales. In addition to selling the paper, they learned military skills, attended political education classes, organized protests, and built community service programs (215).

Between 1966 and 1971, the Black Panther Party was a cultural force, inspiring other radical groups and challenging white activists to address racism in new ways. In these years, the group earned national fame, had showdowns with the police, fought a host of government charges against its members, and built community programs all over the country that offered free food, medical care, and other local needs. And although a 1971 factional split destroyed its national prominence, a remaining core of members continued activist work until 1982 (Joseph 299). Its wild, if temporary, success was based in part on the BPP's skillful "branding" of itself with the panther name and logo. By choosing the panther as a subtle racial symbol that could be revised, the BPP capitalized on stereotypes to bind together its members and attract white interest.

Panthers: Spotted, Black, Pink, and Brown

The panther, unlike the gorilla or the chimpanzee, is not a self-evident racial symbol, and the association is even less clear because of the BPP's success in recoding the term. Before Newton and Seale emerged on the political scene, however, panther imagery *was* often problematically linked to race. In a biological sense, *Panthera* is a genus of large cat that includes the lion, tiger, jaguar, and leopard. The common name "panther" is applied to African or Asian leopards, North American cougars, or South American jaguars. The term can describe spotted,

tawny, white, or black animals, but while spotted and tawny animals frequently go by other names, black animals are nearly always given the label “black panther” (Kure 157). In other words, the black panther earns its name for its blackness, not its species, and this sets the animal up as a potential racial signifier.²

In nineteenth-century American poetry, panther imagery often served as a code for racial or ethnic difference. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s epic poem “The Song of Hiawatha,” for instance, describes Native American Hiawatha “treading softly like a panther,” while his poem “Kambalu,” a part of “The Spanish Jew’s Tale” in the series “Tales of a Wayside Inn,” links Jews and panthers indirectly by describing the “miser’s” gold like “the eyes of a panther in the dark” (306, 546). Ralph Waldo Emerson likewise associates the panther with gypsies in his poem “The Romany Girl” (227). In these cases, the panther symbolized a connection between ethnic difference and nature and evoked such traits as sneakiness, a potential for violence, and a desire to be free of civilization’s constraints. Being pantherlike meant having animal characteristics that could not be tamed, and this was often associated with nonwhite people.

The *black* panther emerged in representations of black Americans in the twentieth century, frequently in reference to boxing. During the 1910s and ’20s, interracial boxing matches drew national press, and both white and black newspapers identified African-American boxers such as Harry Wills, Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Senegalese French boxer Louis Fall as black or brown panthers. White newspapers used the name to identify black contenders, while African-American publications used it as a nickname. Wills, then, remained the “black panther” in African-American newspapers even if his opponent was also black. Although white boxers were sometimes given animal characteristics as well, at least one black sportswriter, Roscoe Simmons of the *Chicago Defender*, saw the black panther nickname as evidence of racial animalization: “Hope that [Harry Wills] will be more of a bulldog than a panther,” Simmons wrote, “since the name of some animal will be given him. A panther springs at you. A bulldog takes hold and stays” (Simmons A1). Despite Simmons’s dissent, the title black panther stuck to an array of African-American boxers, signifying fearlessness, stealth,

fierce beauty, and black skin. The nickname also reflected white fears of black violence, as the black newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier* pointed out in 1926, when it recorded that a man accused of murdering three whites was referred to publicly as a “black panther” killer (“Panther Is Executed” 12).

The panther evoked not only ferocity and strength but also “primitive” spaces and feminine “cattiness.” While spotted or tawny panthers could be American animals, black panthers inhabited African and Asian landscapes, making them exotic and linking them in the white imagination to tribal regions that Western explorers had seen as “primitive.” In the 1920s, when references to black panther boxers were popular, artists and writers were simultaneously embracing the “primitive” as a source of inspiration. Pablo Picasso, Alberto Giacometti, Paul Gauguin, and other “primitivist modernists” saw tribal art and “primitive” people as keys to new ideas about abstract art and to more abandoned emotional expressions. Although they focused on African and Oceanic tribal cultures rather than African-American culture, these artists relied on stereotypes that had also haunted African Americans. In the years that followed, black Americans would participate, reluctantly or enthusiastically, in confusing black skin, tribal cultures, and “primitive” imagery.

Josephine Baker exemplified this crossover and its relationship to panther imagery. As a black American performer, she was ushered into vaudeville roles that presented her as a bumbling blackface caricature like those in nineteenth-century minstrel shows. And although French audiences were first drawn to her in this role when she toured with *La Revue Nègre*, she eventually traded in an American slave caricature for the tribal African “savage”—even as she continued to incorporate American dances like the Charleston (Jules-Rosette 56–61). For her French audience, she was “savage” or “primitive” because she had dark skin, not because she came from a tribal culture, and she was saddled with the same animalistic nicknames that her boxing contemporaries faced. In an inscription to Baker reprinted in *Josephine Baker vue par la Presse Française*, the novelist Colette referred to Baker as “la plus belle panthère,” and Baker wrote in 1931 that “I had a mascot—a panther—Ancestral superstition” (Abatino 51; Rose 157). The panther was

not simply an idea for Baker—in fact, she appeared on stage with a live panther and even adopted the animal as a pet, becoming famous for walking it down Parisian streets on a leash.³

Like the sportswriter who was uncomfortable with the descriptor “black panther,” Baker felt ambivalent. She acquiesced in the label and even embraced it when she adopted the panther as a pet, but she subtly presented herself as the *owner* of a panther rather than a panther herself. In the 1931 poem stating, “I had a mascot—a panther,” Baker distances herself from the association by placing the panther in the past tense. Elsewhere in the poem she refers to her current state: “I do not drink—I am an American / I have a religion / I adore children” (Rose 157). In this list, she separates her identity as an African *American*, a woman, and a mother from the past tense panther—the eroticized and racialized animal that once identified her. Like Harlem Renaissance writers and artists who took pride in the “primitive” as a sign of their African-American heritage, Baker both accepted and challenged white uses of racial imagery.

By the time the Black Panther Party was founded in October 1966, forty years and a continent away from Josephine Baker’s Paris, the panther had marched through a variety of cultural forms, from Nazi Panther tanks and the US Navy’s F9F Panther airplane of the Korean War to Pink Panther cartoons (Seale 62). In its relationship to planes and tanks, the panther connoted strength, masculinity, virility, and sometimes race. For the 761st “Black Panther” Tank Battalion in World War II, the term signaled a segregated unit of black soldiers, while the 66th “Black Panther” Infantry Division of white soldiers used the concept simply to evoke masculinity.

The Pink Panther cartoon figure, on the other hand, introduced the panther as a wily villain, and although the character was not a clear symbol of race relations, the focus on color in the original cartoon reminds viewers of the panther’s ties to racial symbolism. The first Pink Panther animation, *The Pink Phink*, ran before the 1964 movie *The Pink Panther* (a detective movie about a “pink panther” diamond that included no actual panthers). In this short, the blundering human hero attempts to paint his house blue while the panther repeatedly tricks him into painting it pink. The panther is both effeminate in his

obsession with pink and a masculine hipster, accompanied by jazzy music and smoking a cigarette as he saunters through the frame. The emphasis on color wars in 1964, when America was in the throes of the civil rights debate, allows race to lurk in the background. The paper-white hero finds that, no matter what he does to protect his work, the Pink Panther succeeds in painting the world his own color.

Other panther references during this era were much more explicit about their connection to race. Between 1964 and 1966, three directly racialized versions of the panther entered pop culture. In Alex Haley's 1965 *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, M. S. Handler's introduction describes his wife's first meeting with Malcolm X: "it was like having tea with a black panther," she remarks. Handler expands on her metaphor: "The black panther is an aristocrat in the animal kingdom. He is beautiful. He is dangerous. As a man, Malcolm X had the physical bearing and the inner self-confidence of a born aristocrat. And he was potentially dangerous" (ix). Handler invokes the primitivist stereotype: X was dangerous but beautiful and exotic. As a white liberal supporter of civil rights, he argues that X is appealing because he was half-"tamed": a genial guest for tea who remains a threat to the liberal civil rights project. Newton and Seale, admirers and readers of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* who rejected the liberal dream of integration into capitalist society, would soon speak back to Handler's introduction in a way that the martyred X could not.

Months later, in July 1966, a similar panther debuted in Marvel's *Fantastic Four* comic series (Ture 106; S. Lee, et al.). Although it appeared in the midst of national discussions about race, Marvel's Black Panther character is a traditional African caricature. He inhabits the mythical village of Wakanda, where tribal villagers wear "togas" and garments resembling ancient Egyptian kilts, and he evolves from foe to friend of the Fantastic Four as he avenges the death of his tribal chieftain father (S. Lee, et al.). The Black Panther propagates stereotypes while reflecting the combination of urban unrest and primitivist imagery that was surfacing in the black community at the time. Marvel's Black Panther is as much an urban figure as a tribal one—he lives not in a tropical jungle but in a high-tech "industrial jungle": "The very branches about us," the heroes observe, "are composed of

delicately constructed wires . . . while the flowers which abound here are highly complex buttons and dials!" (#52: 9). By depicting the Black Panther as a technological sophisticate, Marvel hoped that it would resist racial stereotypes. However, the comic succeeded in conveying white fear about black Americans claiming urban spaces of power. The combination of "primitive" culture and industrial know-how was the Black Panther's most threatening trait, and the Fantastic Four needed to be rescued by the traditional skills of their Native American ally Wyatt Wingfoot. In Marvel's worldview, people of color who stick to their "primitive" skills make safer allies for the white heroes than those who attempt to gain technological prowess.

As examples from nineteenth-century poetry to Josephine Baker to Marvel's Black Panther suggest, the panther had a primitivist history. It evoked the erotic and sensational power of the jungle. But civil rights and emergent Black Power activists were nonetheless attracted to the image. In 1965, national activists associated with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) joined locals in Lowndes County, Alabama, to form an independent political party, the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. Because Lowndes was a majority-black county, activists reasoned, the black community should be able to claim political power by registering voters—if it could overcome white intimidation (Austin; Joseph). Only two black voters were registered in the entire county as of 1965, but by May 1966, the organization had earned a place on the ballot for the local elections (Joseph 127–30).

The origin of the LCFO's panther insignia remains uncertain, and historian Jeffrey Ogbar cites three stories about it. In the first, former SNCC member Willie Mukasa Ricks claimed that it was a reference to a local woman, Mrs. Moore, who was "strong and powerful like a panther" (*Black Power* 76). In his interpretation, the panther connects national SNCC organizers to the "essential" black community, represented by Mrs. Moore, whom he describes as a "peasant" and part of "the people." Mrs. Moore was strong like a black panther because she was a "peasant woman" who had stepped outside her social status to resist. Here, the panther evokes a primal connection to the land and a belief in the natural strength of "natives." SNCC activists appear in this reading like colonial explorers celebrating the innate skills of local people.

The second and third origin stories associate the panther with generic “toughness.” SNCC member Ruth Howard Chambers links the image to Clark College’s panther mascot, while James Forman claims that it was chosen as a strong native animal of Alabama. The panther, like all animals known for ferocity, was a common sports mascot, and tawny colored “panthers,” also known as mountain lions, cougars, or pumas, were native to Alabama. Consequently, we could read these two histories of the panther mascot as expressions of local pride. *Black panthers* existed only in local myth, however, and many sports mascots capitalize on racial and cultural difference, as Native American, Viking, and Fighting Irish mascots demonstrate. Racial connotations, then, may lurk even in apparently generic uses of the panther.

The white media’s enthusiasm for LCFO’s mascot indicates that the name did in fact spark racial connotations beyond toughness. Stokely Carmichael, who helped organize the group, expressed frustration with the racialized interpretation of the panther in a June 1966 appearance on *Face the Nation*. When reporter James Dole referred to the LCFO as the “Black Panther Party,” Carmichael responded:

The name of the organization in Lowndes County is not the Black Panther Party. The symbol happens to be a black panther. The name is the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. I am very concerned about that, you see, because Americans—particularly white America—have been referring to it as the Black Panther Party, and that is their problem with sex and color. They do not refer to the Alabama Democratic Party as the White Rooster Party, and that happens to be the emblem of that party. (CBS News 160–61)

Carmichael’s anger demonstrates his belief that the panther did reflect primitivist black stereotypes. Few took heed of his point, however, either in the mass media, radical organizations, or the black community. Black organizations around the country began adopting the panther symbol, and white viewers persisted in identifying the LCFO as the “Black Panther Party.” The Socialist Workers Party’s Young Socialist Alliance, for instance, published a 1966 pamphlet supporting the LCFO but referring to the organization *solely* as the Black Panther

Party despite the fact that the LCFO members interviewed never used this name (*The Black Panther Party*). African Americans also exploited the panther symbol, regardless of its history of racial connotations. In the year between the LCFO's appearance and the founding of Newton and Seale's organization, Black Panther Parties emerged in New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Oakland, Detroit, Chicago, and St. Louis, suggesting that there was something about the panther *name* that had currency in 1966 (Austin 15).⁴ Seale and Newton traced the name of their organization solely to the LCFO, even adopting the same drawing of a leaping panther that it had used (Newton with Blake 113). Although they allowed the panther to resonate with Marvel and Handler's panthers and the Pink Panther, they narrated a simple radical trajectory that ignored the existence of other Black Panther Parties and posited themselves as the sole child of the new Black Power movement. Their panther, they insisted, grew out of black radicalism rather than a history of racism.

The BPP brought new layers of meaning to the panther. While racists identified black Americans as animalistic, the BPP used its animal mascot to guide rather than define its members' behavior. According to organizational lore, panthers did not initiate violence—they attacked only in self-defense (Newton with Blake 120). This supposed panther quality helped control group behavior and public perceptions. Black Americans were not innately *like* panthers, but they could choose to behave in disciplined ways like panthers. Likewise, the Panthers challenged animalistic depictions of black Americans by turning the tradition on its head. In their literature, Black Panther men and women looked fully human, and individual Party members were often recognizable. The panther itself was always an animal on the masthead, never a human-animal mix. Police, judges, and a personified US empire, on the other hand, appeared in the *Black Panther* cartoons and articles as grotesque pigs and rats. In response to white culture's association between "exotic" animals and African-American people, the Panthers saddled whites with notoriously filthy domestic animals. The panther could be pulled out of its mire of racialization, they suggested—but the pig would be much more difficult to rehabilitate.⁵

As James Doyle acknowledged when he referred to LCFO as a “Black Panther Party,” the panther image captured both white and black imaginations, and the BPP capitalized on this. “Positive” stereotypes can strengthen a sense of collective identity, making members feel more powerful than the oppressors. Moreover, because the panther already had cultural meaning, it attracted media attention in a way that a political program could not. The BPP appealed to existing American understandings of race, and only after drawing public attention did it challenge those notions with political actions and theory. The name, of course, was only one element of the BPP’s sensationalism. Its guns, uniforms, and aggressive rhetoric drew new members in, and once they were admitted, the Party employed a rigid structure to educate them on black history, literature, and revolutionary politics. The BPP aimed to rewrite the panther image with activists who would defend the community and articulate antiracist and anticapitalist positions. By some counts, they were extremely successful. In April 1970, a poll revealed that 64% of black Americans claimed that the Black Panther Party gave them a sense of pride (“The Black Mood”).

With the BPP’s propaganda in full swing, the media continued to use panther metaphors in derisive ways, but it could no longer rely on simple primitivist definitions of panthers. Between 1968 and 1976, *Time* and *Newsweek* combined standard descriptors of virile, threatening panthers (exemplified by terms like “snarling,” “pack,” or “pounce”) with more domestic images such as “pussycat,” “purring,” and “Tame Panthers” to describe the Black Panther Party (Morgan). These references no longer reflected a perverse white enjoyment of black virility and potential danger. The threat was now more immediate, and the media responded to a new, black definition of the panther. The words “tame,” “purring,” and “pussycat” suggest that the media felt genuinely threatened by the metaphor of black primitivist violence and now wanted to dampen it.

The BPP slowly lost public prominence after a 1971 factional split between groups led by Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver that concerned, among other issues, the relative importance of violent revolutionary actions and community programs. The faction led by

Huey Newton, which promoted community programs over revolutionary action and dominated on the West Coast, maintained the Party name, newspaper, and community programs until the early 1980s, but the organization had lost its dominant position in national politics. In 1980, the newspaper printed its final issues, and by 1982, when the Party's Oakland Community School shut its doors, it became clear that the BPP was defunct (LeBlanc-Ernest 325). While the Party did not survive, its interpretation of the panther image did. Today, the animal is no longer linked to primitivism and racist assumptions. Instead, it evokes black power and radicalism. When Mos Def and Talib Kweli rap in a 1998 album about "a black cat—a panther," they expect listeners to know that they allude to the Black Panther Party, not to racialized links between panthers and African Americans (Mos Def and Kweli "Astronomy").

Black Panthers Meet Black Arts Movement

By transforming the panther from a primitivist image into a symbol of Black Power, the Black Panthers made a substantial contribution to American culture as well as politics. This is an important point because the Panthers and many who have studied them make clear distinctions between cultural and political change. In the 1960s and '70s, cultural trends often accompanied political sentiments, whether it was long hair and ripped jeans for white radicals or Afros and dashikis for black activists. But the political work of sitting in meetings, waking up in the early morning to serve breakfast to children, or risking one's life in confrontations with police was much more difficult than growing an Afro or buying a dashiki. As a result, committed activists of all ethnicities sometimes distanced themselves from what they identified as "cultural nationalism"—a belief that cultural changes, including dress, hairstyle, and communal traditions, were essential to changing society. As Panther Linda Harrison explained in a 1969 issue of the *Black Panther*, "cultural nationalism ignores the political and concrete, and concentrates on a myth and fantasy." As a result, she derided those who believed that "there is dignity inherent in wearing naturals;

that a buba makes a slave a man” (Harrison 151).⁶ Like many of her Panther comrades, Harrison wanted to emphasize her political work rather than her dress or hairstyle.

Personal disputes between the Panthers and Maulana Ron Karenga’s cultural nationalist Us organization exacerbated these negative associations. Us was an LA-based group that developed independent black cultural traditions while fighting for racial equality, and Karenga is best known for founding Kwanzaa (Ngozi-Brown). His local competition with the Panthers caught the attention of the FBI, which sought to aggravate the conflict until a 1969 confrontation left two Panthers dead (Churchill and Vander Wall, *COINTELPRO Papers* 130–35; Swearingen 82–83).⁷ The severity of the dispute with Us may have contributed to the Panthers’ negative view of cultural nationalism in general, and their animosity spread to poets, dramatists, and others associated with the Black Arts Movement (BAM).

The Black Arts Movement describes a group of black writers and visual artists who were inspired by the activism of the 1960s and hoped to make their work politically relevant. Artists like Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, and Sonia Sanchez targeted the black community with accessible, politically radical literature. Black Arts poems were handed out as broadsides or flyers, while visual art was painted on the walls of abandoned buildings in black communities. Because many espoused black nationalism, Black Arts participants had initially been friendly with the Black Panthers. In 1967, San Francisco’s artists and Panthers had lived together in a collective known as Black House and had joined forces for local events. A May 1967 “Black Experience” conference at Merritt College, for instance, combined art and politics when it featured a lecture by Huey Newton and poetry readings by Sonia Sanchez, LeRoi Jones (the future Amiri Baraka), Marvin Jackmon, and Ed Bullins (Bay Area Black Panther Party Collection, box 1, folder 26). Such interactions were short-lived, however. While Baraka briefly used Black House as a rehearsal space during his tenure as a professor at San Francisco State College, Eldridge Cleaver and his Panther comrades soon ousted artists from the building, deeming them counterrevolutionaries (Baraka, *Autobiography* 351–60). Later, Baraka was vilified in the *Black Panther* newspaper for his affiliations with the Us organization, which

he maintained for approximately two years until he, too, moved away from *Karenga and Us* around 1969 (353).

When Black Arts writer Larry Neal famously claimed that the BAM was the “aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept,” he glossed over the strained relationships between the Panthers and their artistic contemporaries (Neal 272). Nonetheless, Neal’s statement remains instructive. As scholars continue to define the parameters of the Black Arts Movement, we should recognize disagreements but also look beyond factional fights to see political and aesthetic continuities. Just because the Panthers distanced themselves from cultural nationalism and the Black Arts Movement does not mean that critics should do the same. In fact, I think it is useful to use the critical tools and aesthetic themes of the Black Arts Movement to analyze the Black Panther Party. James Smethurst has already begun the project of breaking down the barriers between “cultural nationalism” and what the Panthers identified as their own “revolutionary nationalism” in his study *The Black Arts Movement*. He notes that Black Arts writers were influenced by political traditions of Marxism, black nationalism, the Nation of Islam, and the Civil Rights Movement, and many of them were activists. Smethurst’s claims can be expanded and reversed as we look from the perspective of the Panthers toward the Black Arts Movement. The Black Arts Movement contributed to the Black Power movement materially, by building black cultural institutions and radically revising aesthetic forms, but they also brought aesthetic and political strategies to the Black Panthers. Their investigations of revolutionary ethics and their vision of participatory, community-based art influenced the way the Black Panthers produced their propaganda and the way it was received. Moreover, while Black Arts Movement participants aimed to create a black aesthetic, the Panthers built on this by contributing a Black Power cultural aesthetic.

Even taking ideological disagreements into account, there are many reasons to see continuities between the Black Panthers and the Black Arts Movement. If Baraka’s 1965 founding of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BART/S) in Harlem was an informal starting point for the BAM, it predated the Panthers by little over a year, and both movements thrived in the late 1960s and began to decline in the early to mid-1970s (Baraka, *Autobiography* 293–95).

Their contemporaneous rise and fall, coupled with their shared desire for Black Power and leftist change, made even adamantly conflicting movements somewhat porous. Before the split between the Panthers and the Us Organization, Bobby Seale performed in plays by Ed Bullins and Marvin X (the former Marvin Jackmon), and even after tensions developed, some direct relationships remained (Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement* 170). Visual artist Fundi, who collaborated with Baraka on his illustrated book-length poem *In Our Terribleness*, contributed a celebratory drawing of Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver to the journal *Black Politics* in 1969; Sonia Sanchez published numerous poems in *The Black Panther* in 1968; and BPP artist Emory Douglas returned the favor by illustrating the cover of her 1969 collection *Home Coming* (Bay Area BPP Collection, box 2, folder 4). For people entering the movement, moreover, artistic expressions of black nationalism seemed to confirm the Black Panthers' perspective rather than negate it. Black Panther and later Black Liberation Movement member Assata Shakur remembers that the plays of Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins helped inspire her political activism (Shakur 175).

Realizing the influential power of literature, the BPP emphasized the importance of black literary history in its member education process even as it denounced cultural nationalism. The Party's reading list, published in early issues of *The Black Panther*, highlighted political theory and African/African-American history, but it also included Arna Bontemps's *American Negro Poetry* collection and Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*. Bontemps's collection, published in 1963, grounded Panther readers in two important eras of black American poetry before the Black Arts Movement. Bontemps included the Harlem Renaissance work of Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Helene Johnson, and he also introduced readers to poetry by writers who would later ally themselves with the Black Arts Movement (Dudley Randall, Margaret Walker, Margaret Danner, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ted Joans, LeRoi Jones, and Mari Evans). Even if the Panthers couldn't get along with living artists, they recognized the role of African-American arts in political and cultural education.

As Smethurst observes, the BAM reciprocated by insisting on the crucial juncture between art and radical politics. Participants in the BAM believed that the construction of black institutions was just as

important as the production of African-American art. Many helped forge long-lasting political and artistic organizations, and they saw their art as a form of *movement*, both physical and political.

Amiri Baraka's 1966 poem "Black Art" expresses this sentiment, elevating political movements and people into art forms. His poem, controversial for its anti-Semitic references and exhortations to violence, remains a seminal text of the Black Arts Movement. Baraka famously writes that:

Poems are bullshit unless they are
teeth or trees or lemons piled
on a step. Or black ladies dying
of men leaving nickel hearts
beating them down.

Most critics have read this poem as a manifesto to politicize aesthetics. I suggest, however, that Baraka is defining political action *as* an aesthetic. The active, political poems in "Black Art" appear as people, whether "black ladies," "wrestlers," or "assassins." "Let Black People understand," Baraka says, "that they / [. . .] / Are poems & poets & / all the loveliness here in the world" (*The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* 219–20). People, in this text, are not simply artists but poems—they are pieces of art and the creators of that art. As poems and poets, they must take action to avoid being "bullshit." Baraka says that the best poetry appears in the political actions of people, and in doing so he permits us to see the Black Panther Party as a *poem*.

This reading illuminates how the Black Panther Party benefited from its simultaneously political and cultural status. With the Black Arts Movement producing violent rhetoric as poetry, the Black Panthers could claim refuge from accusations of real violence by associating their behavior and language with poetry. The Party used metaphorical language and imagery not only to recruit members but also to limit its culpability for violent rhetoric. Although the FBI was targeting many radical groups in this period through its Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO), the Panthers singled themselves out for special attention with phrases like "off the pigs," cartoon images of Panthers shooting police officers, and language about armed revolution.

Violent rhetoric attracted media attention and potential members, but it also drew police repression. The FBI employed informants, *agents provocateurs*, wiretapping, burglary, and frame-ups to investigate and destroy the Panthers. In the most egregious example, police murdered Chicago Black Panther leader Fred Hampton while he was asleep (or drugged) in his bed during a 1969 raid orchestrated by COINTELPRO.⁸

The BPP used the hazy line between metaphorical and intentional speech in ways that both attracted and deflected such attacks. When the US House's Committee on Internal Security investigated the Kansas City Chapter of the Panthers in 1970, for instance, attorneys and witnesses fought over the interpretations of Panther expressions. Were they metaphors or proof of illegal action? The committee's attorney Donald G. Sanders devoted several questions to the phrase "off the pigs" while examining Kansas City pastor Phillip Lawson:

Mr. Lawson. [The term] is symbolic of the desire of young people in the black community and young adults in other communities to remove from the community those kinds of law enforcement officers who are brutalizing the people, so "off" is within that context. Shouting "off the pig," as I understand it, is to get off, to get away, to leave.

Mr. Sanders. [. . .] We have had a number of witnesses before this committee in previous hearings who have testified that "off the pig" means "kill the cops" or in perhaps one larger context, "kill any officer of the Establishment." Is this not your understanding of the meaning of that term?

Mr. Lawson. It is not my understanding of the meaning of that term. "Off the pigs" is a symbolic kind of a chant, like "right on" has a symbolic kind of meaning in our society, "so be it." It is not necessarily saying that everyone who says "off the pigs" is going to go out and start killing somebody. (United States, *Black Panther Party, Part One* 2637)

In this case, Lawson attempted to interpret "off the pigs" as a metaphor, and his semantics were central to the Panthers' project of generating uncertainty around their rhetoric. While many Panther members did see the phrase "off the pig" as figurative, others construed

it as a literal call to assault police. Former Panthers Eddie Thibideaux and Masai Hewitt claim that Panthers sometimes attacked officers and stole their weapons, and members Elbert “Big Man” Howard and Emory Douglas maintain that the Party’s April 6, 1968 shootout with police began after Oakland Panthers ambushed a police cruiser with gunfire (Austin 91, 166–68; Joseph 228).

Some members would have rejected such offensive measures, using “off the pigs” as a metaphor at all times, but even those who supported literal interpretations retreated to literary readings of the term when they faced legal challenges. For example, the Panthers insisted that Huey Newton had not fired any shots during the infamous encounter between him and two Oakland policemen that left Officer John Frey dead in October 1967 (Austin 86). The “Free Huey” campaign, which coincided with Newton’s imprisonment and trial, relied on the notion of police aggression and Panther victimization. The officers, Panthers implied, had shot one another in their eagerness to kill Newton. In Panther autobiographies like Newton’s or Assata Shakur’s, moments of Panther-police confrontation and, in Shakur’s case, escape from prison, remain shrouded in unconsciousness or authorial silence. After witnessing an officer shoot him, Newton says that “there were some shots, a rapid volley, but I have no idea where they came from. They seemed to be all around me” (171). Somewhere in this haze of shots, Frey is killed. Shakur describes an encounter with police that leaves Panther Zayd Shakur and New Jersey State Trooper Werner Foerster dead in a similar manner (Sullivan 89):

There were lights and sirens. Zayd was dead. My mind knew that Zayd was dead. The air was like cold glass. Huge bubbles rose and burst. Each one felt like an explosion in my chest. My mouth tasted like blood and dirt. The car spun around me and then something like sleep overtook me. In the background i could hear what sounded like gunfire. But i was fading and dreaming. (Assata Shakur 3)

Police bullets did severely wound both Shakur and Newton in these battles, so their vague memories may be the result of physical injury. But the absence of more specific information about their confrontations,