



**Between Artistic Solidarity and Political Pragmatism: An Examination of the Collaborative
Endeavors of the Black Panther Party and Artists of the 70s**
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Abstract:

The relationship between the Black Panther Party (BPP), Hollywood celebrities, and artists in the 1970s was a complex dynamic. While there were high points of collaboration and support from some celebrities, there were also instances of disagreement and mistrust. The BPP's founder, Huey P. Newton, leveraged his growing platform, even if he disagreed with certain messengers. For instance, in 1974, Newton sought assistance from Hollywood producers to help him escape prosecution charges by smuggling him and his family to Cuba¹. However, not all Hollywood celebrities supported the BPP's radical movement, and some faced severe consequences from the party for their actions. The BPP appreciated the assistance and support from certain celebrities and artists, but there was skepticism regarding their true commitment to the cause. The involvement of manager Ike and rock and roll legend Tina Turner, hired by the BPP to perform and raise funds for community programs, resulted in tensions and a public dispute over payment². The BPP accused the Turners of deliberately undermining their goals and violating their contract. These instances of conflict were part of a broader pattern of misconceptions and accusations faced by the BPP from various sources, including the media, government officials, artists, and famous figures.

The national media's coverage of the BPP added to the confusion and misinterpretation of the party's ideology and methods. The BPP's core ethos remained consistent, as reflected in their

¹ Coleman, Kate. "True Hollywood Story: The Producer and the Black Panther." *Salon*, 12 June 2012, www.salon.com/2012/06/09/true_hollywood_story_the_producer_and_the_black_panther/.

² *Marxists Internet Archive*, 11 Aug. 1973, www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/black-panther/06%20no%2029%201-20%20aug%2014%201971.pdf.

Ten Point Platform and Program, which advocated for freedom, self-determination, employment, an end to exploitation, decent housing, education, police brutality, and justice³.

Many artists tried to support the BPP's cause, but some felt they were not as actively engaged as the hardcore radicals within the party. Black celebrities faced balancing their artistic responsibilities with their obligations as citizens during civil unrest. Some supported the BPP despite the blowback they anticipated from white America. However, for many, associating with the BPP was too risky, considering the potential impact on their careers and financial opportunities. While some of the BPP members first joined the cause and then became involved with the arts, some of the celebrities and artists collaborated with the BPP on their own accord. However, trust was not always present due to unclear alliances and suspicions of exploitation. Some celebrities distanced themselves from the BPP publicly, even after support from the Black community was growing nation-wide via symbolic gestures like the Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympics. There were concerns that certain musicians used BPP rhetoric for personal gain without providing substantial support. As a result, BPP activists sought support from everyday people who were dedicated to social change and willing to contribute their time and resources. Despite obstacles, the BPP and its supporters became crucial in advancing social change within their communities and played an integral role in history.

As the BPP grew and influenced, the media framed the party in a racially biased manner, capitalizing on white America's fears and disapproval. This portrayal elevated the radicals to celebrity status, which some within the party found problematic. The research aims to explore the relationship between the BPP and African American artists during the 1960s and 1970s.

³³ See Panthers, Black. "The Ten-Point Program." *Black Panther's Ten-Point Program*, www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/black-panthers/1966/10/15.htm. "Why Was Denzil Dowell Killed?" The Black Panther Community News Service, April 25, 1967.

Primary sources such as BPP newspapers and interviews with BPP members provide firsthand accounts of working with artists who varied in their radicalism. Secondary sources examine regional interactions and societal impacts of the art and artists.

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I. Introduction:

- A. Background on the Black Panther Party (BPP)*

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense emerged as one of the most influential and controversial organizations of the 20th century. Founded in October 1966 by Huey P. Newton

and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California, the Black Panther Party (BPP) aimed to combat against the many issues faced by African Americans in the United States, including systemic racism, economic oppression, and police brutality⁴. The founders, Newton and Seale, originally met at Oakland, California's Merritt Community College. They became friends and political collaborators for almost five years before they started the BPP (Murch 73).⁵ Even though the founders came together because of their similar educational backgrounds, Historian Donna Murch believed that Seale and Newton shifted away from their former origins of academia and education to focus more on "on-the-ground-organizing" which was more inclusive to the inner-city youth they were trying to reach. "After founding the BPPSD, Newton and Seale downplayed their student origins and ongoing campus support in favor of 'brothers on the block,' who they celebrated as their base," Murch said. "This choice reflected their desire to not only include but also foreground the young people most excluded from traditional uplift and civil rights politics."⁶

The party's ideology encompassed elements of Black nationalism, socialism, and armed self-defense, challenging the status quo and advocating for the empowerment and liberation of Black communities. With their infamous black berets, leather jackets, and clenched-fist salute, the BPP symbolized resistance and resilience.⁷ It captured the attention and imagination of

⁴ "Black Panther Party." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/topic/Black-Panther-Party.

⁵ Murch, Donna. "Watts, Lowndes County, Oakland: The Founding of the Black Panther Part." Verso, 14 Oct. 2016, www.versobooks.com/blogs/2882-watts-lowndes-county-oakland-the-founding-of-the-black-panther-party-for-self-defense. s

⁶See Murch (p.73)

⁷ See "Black Panther Party History and Geography." *Black Panther Party History and Geography - Mapping American Social Movements*, depts.washington.edu/moves/BPP_intro.shtml.

people nationwide, particularly young African Americans disillusioned by the slow progress of the Civil Rights Movement. Within a few years, the party grew exponentially, establishing over thirteen chapters⁸ not only in major U.S. cities but also internationally, forging connections with revolutionary movements worldwide.⁹

At its core, the BPP sought to address the socioeconomic inequalities that plagued Black communities. Their Ten Point Platform and Program outlined their demands for fundamental human rights, including access to quality education, employment, housing, and an end to police brutality¹⁰. Here is the ethos of what the BPP Ten Point Platform and Program stated:

“We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community. We want full employment for our people. We want an end to the robbery by the Capitalists of our Black Community. We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings. We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present day society. We want all Black men to be exempt from military service. We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of Black people. We want freedom for all Black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails. We want all Black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their Black Communities, as defined by the Constitution

⁸ See *Black Panther Party History and Geography*

⁹ See Ellmer, Michael. “The Black Panther Party and Their Foreign Affairs.” *Grey Dynamics*, 24 Oct. 2021, greydynamics.com/black-panther-party-and-their-foreign-affairs/.

¹⁰ See Panthers, Black. “*The Ten-Point Program.*”

of the United States. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.”

The party's commitment to armed self-defense aimed to challenge the unjust treatment of African Americans while advocating for community empowerment and self-determination. However, the BPP faced intense scrutiny, both from the government and the media. John Edgar Hoover, the former director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) once declared that "the Black Panther Party, without question, represents the greatest threat to internal security of the

October 1966
Black Panther Party
Platform and Program

What We Want
What We Believe



Huey P. Newton Minister of Defense
Black Panther Party

1. We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community.

We believe that black people will not be free until we are able to determine our destiny.

2. We want full employment for our people.

We believe that the federal government is responsible and obligated to give every man employment or a guaranteed income. We believe that if the white American businessmen will not give full employment, then the means of production should be taken from the businessmen and placed in the community so that the people of the community can organize and employ all of its people and give a high standard of living.

3. We want an end to the robbery by the CAPITALIST of our Black Community.

We believe that this racist government has robbed us and now we are demanding the overdue debt of forty acres and two mules. Forty acres and two mules was promised 100 years ago as restitution for slave labor and mass murder of black people. We will accept the payment in currency which will be distributed to our many communities. The Germans are now aiding the Jews in Israel for the genocide of the Jewish people. The Germans murdered six million Jews. The American racist has taken part in the slaughter of over fifty million black people; therefore, we feel that this is a modest demand that we make.

4. We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings.

We believe that if the white landlords will not give decent housing to our black community, then the housing and the land should be made into cooperatives so that our community, with government aid, can build and make decent housing for its people.

5. We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.

We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else.

6. We want all black men to be exempt from military service.

We believe that Black people should not be forced to fight in the military service to defend a racist government that does not protect us. We will not fight and kill other people of color in the world who, like black people, are being victimized by the white racist government of America. We will protect ourselves from the force and violence of the racist police and the racist military, by whatever means necessary.

7. We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of black people.

We believe we can end police brutality in our black community by organizing black self-defense groups that are dedicated to defending our black community from racist police oppression and brutality. The Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States gives a right to bear arms. We therefore believe that all black people should arm themselves for self-defense.

8. We want freedom for all black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails.

We believe that all black people should be released from the many jails and prisons because they have not received a fair and impartial trial.

9. We want all black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their black communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States.

We believe that the courts should follow the United States Constitution so that black people will receive fair trials. The 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution gives a man a right to be tried by his peer group. A peer is a person from a similar economic, social, religious, geographical, environmental, historical and racial background. To do this the court will be forced to select a jury from the black community from which the black defendant came. We have been, and are being, tried by all-white juries that have no understanding of the "average reasoning man" of the black community.

10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace. And as our major political objective, a United Nations-supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the black colony in which only black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate, for the purpose of determining the will of black people as to their national destiny.

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and, accordingly, all experience hath shown, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But, when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.




Figure 1 BPP Ten Point Program from the Black Panther Newspaper, Oct. 1966

country.”¹¹. He also pledged that 1969 would be “the last year of the Party's existence¹².”

Labeled as a militant and dangerous organization, the BPP was subjected to surveillance, infiltration, and harassment by law enforcement agencies, often resulting in violent confrontations¹³. The party's revolutionary rhetoric, combined with its use of self-defense and armed patrols, drew strong reactions from those who feared the disruption of the existing social order. Throughout its existence, the BPP worked to create an alternative vision for Black liberation, emphasizing community-based programs and activism. From their Free Breakfast for Children program,¹⁴ to healthcare clinics,¹⁵ and community schools,¹⁶ the BPP implemented practical initiatives that directly addressed the needs of Black communities. These programs not only provide essential support but also challenged mainstream narratives and stereotypes that were overtaking the media about the capabilities and aspirations of African Americans.

In exploring the BPP, I delve into its origins, growth, and impact on American society. I examine its ideological underpinnings, its relationships with celebrities and artists, and the

¹¹ See Abdelfatah, Rund, et al. “The Real Black Panthers (2021).” *NPR*, 2 Feb. 2023, [www.npr.org/2023/01/31/1152784993/the-real-black-panthers-2021#:~:text=The%20Real%20Black%20Panthers%20\(2021\)%20%3A%20Throughline%20In%201968%2C,wage%20war%20on%20the%20group.](https://www.npr.org/2023/01/31/1152784993/the-real-black-panthers-2021#:~:text=The%20Real%20Black%20Panthers%20(2021)%20%3A%20Throughline%20In%201968%2C,wage%20war%20on%20the%20group.)

¹² See “*The Real Black Panthers (2021)*.” *NPR*

¹³ See “*Black Panther Party History and Geography*”

¹⁴ See “How the Black Panthers’ Breakfast Program Both Inspired and Threatened the Government.” *History.Com*, www.history.com/news/free-school-breakfast-black-panther-party.

¹⁵ Pien, Diane. “Black Panther Party’s Free Medical Clinics (1969-1975).”, 20 Jan. 2021, www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/institutions-african-american-history/black-panther-party-free-medical-clinics-1969-1975/.

¹⁶ “Educate to Liberate: Black Panther Liberation Schools.” *The Studio Museum in Harlem*, 13 Jan. 2021, studiomuseum.org/article/educate-liberate-black-panther-liberation-schools.

challenges it faced from internal and external sources. By analyzing primary sources, including party publications, interviews, and secondary literature, I aim to shed light on the multifaceted nature of the BPP's legacy and its enduring significance as a catalyst for social change.

B. Overview of the role of artists in social and political movements

Artists have long been pivotal in shaping and influencing social and political movements. Through their creative expressions, they have challenged the status quo, provoked thought, and mobilized communities, amplifying voices often marginalized or silenced. Artists' ability to evoke emotions, ignite dialogue, and inspire action has made them indispensable agents of change. In times of societal upheaval and injustice, artists have utilized various mediums such as visual arts, music, literature, theater, film, and dance to convey powerful messages and advance the causes they believe in. By addressing social and political issues, they have acted as catalysts, driving conversations, raising awareness, and sparking movements for transformation. Artists have often served as the conscience of society, holding a mirror to its flaws and injustices. They have used their creative platforms to shed light on systemic inequalities, discrimination, and human rights abuses, bringing attention to the struggles of marginalized communities. Through their work, they challenge prevailing narratives and ideologies, offering alternative perspectives that disrupt the dominant discourse.

Music has historically played a significant role in inspiring and galvanizing social and political movements. From folk songs during the Civil Rights Movement like “Lift Every Voice and Sing” by Kim Weston, to protest anthems against war and oppression such as “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” by Gil Scott-Heron, musicians have used their lyrics and melodies to foster solidarity and mobilize masses. These songs have become anthems of

resistance, uniting people from diverse backgrounds under a shared vision of justice and equality. Visual artists, too, have utilized their talents to challenge social norms and advocate for change. From graffiti on city walls to powerful installations in galleries, they have used art as a means of protest, reclaiming public spaces, and amplifying marginalized voices. Artistic expressions can transcend language barriers, reaching a broad audience and sparking conversations that lead to action. Literature and theater have been instrumental in documenting and narrating the experiences of oppressed communities, shedding light on their struggles and resilience. Writers and playwrights have crafted stories that challenge the status quo, expose injustices, and invite audiences to empathize with those whose voices have been suppressed. These narratives create empathy and understanding, fostering dialogue and a collective call for change. Film and documentaries have served as powerful tools for social and political activism, exposing hidden truths, and revealing untold stories. Through the camera lens, filmmakers have brought attention to human rights violations, environmental crises, and other pressing issues, compelling viewers to confront uncomfortable realities and demand accountability.

The impact of artists in social and political movements extends beyond their creative contributions. They often collaborate with grassroots organizations, activists, and communities, lending their platforms, resources, and influence to amplify the voices of those fighting for justice. Artists can shape public opinion, challenge stereotypes, and mobilize support, creating a cultural shift that strengthens the foundations of social movements. However, artists engaging in activism also face challenges and risks. They may encounter censorship, persecution, or backlash for their outspokenness and disruption of the status quo. Yet, despite these obstacles, artists continue to embrace their role as agents of change, using their talents and platforms to challenge power structures and envision a more just and equitable world.

In exploring the role of artists in social and political movements, I delve into their contributions throughout history, highlighting significant artists and their impact on their role in contributing to the BPP movement. By examining their creative expressions, collaborations, and the socio-political contexts in which they operate, I aim to analyze the profound influence of artists in driving social change and shaping the course of human history.

C. Thesis statement: Exploring the Black Panther Party's view on the influence of artists on their cause.

The purpose of this research is to show first-hand accounts from BPP members in the 60s through the 70s to show the correlation relationship of the work between the Black avant-garde artist and the radical members of the party. The main objective is to explore if the BPP members felt that African American artists were utilized properly as a tool to help disseminate their radical messaging, or if they were seen as a hindrance to their party. I do this by utilizing primary sources like the text from *The BPP Newspapers*, in-depth interviews with BPP members from the 60s and 70s and utilizing secondary sources like “The Black Arts Movement Literary Nationalism in the 1960s-1970s” by James E. Smethurst, “Media Bias, Perspective, and State Repression: The Black Panther Party” by Dwight E. Brooks, and more. The primary sources focus on the actual first-hand accounts of activists within the BPP via interviews, their newspapers, or old documentary clips. This will discuss what it was like working with public figures in the Black arts movement who weren’t as radical as them. The secondary sources focus more on how the art, artist, and radical members' interactions intersected and affected society.

- II. Historical Context of the Black Panther Party
 - A. *Establishment and goals of the BPP*

As previously stated, the Black Panther Party (BPP) was a revolutionary socialist organization founded in 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale.¹⁷ The establishment of the BPP was a response to the widespread racial discrimination, police brutality, and systemic oppression experienced by African Americans in the United States during the Civil Rights Movement. The BPP emerged during one of the most tumultuous periods in American history. Despite the gains of the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans faced severe inequality and violence. The BPP sought to challenge these injustices and provide a platform for African Americans to fight for their rights and liberation. The primary goal of the BPP was to protect and empower African American communities through self-defense, community service programs, and political activism.¹⁸ The organization believed in the need for armed self-defense to protect African Americans from police brutality and violence. They asserted their right to defend themselves against unjust treatment and advocated for the liberation of all oppressed people.

¹⁷ “Black Panther Party History and Geography.” *Black Panther Party History and Geography - Mapping American Social Movements*, depts.washington.edu/moves/BPP_intro.shtml.

¹⁸ See Panthers, Black. “The Ten-Point Program.”

discarded, given poor-quality meals, or would otherwise go hungry, the BPP aimed to improve their well-being and create a foundation for their future success. Between 1969 and 1971, the BPP created 36 breakfast programs across the country from Kansas City to New York City. Over that allotted time, the Panthers fed an estimated 50,000 children nationwide through their program.²⁰ Their work put a lot of pressure on the American government, outlining the issues that inspired the Child Nutrition Act of 1966. The BPP helped inspire the blueprint for establishing the federal government's School Breakfast Program as a permanent program in 1975²¹. In addition to the free breakfast program, the BPP also established health clinics that provided much-needed medical services to underserved African American communities. In 1968, The Peoples' Free Medical Clinics (PFMC) was established because of systemic discrimination against Black individuals in hospitals and private medical practices.²² These clinics offered basic healthcare, health education, and screenings, filling a crucial gap in healthcare access for Black people and other marginalized populations. Focusing on communal health became one of the BPP's main focuses. Still, it wasn't included in the original ten-point party program, which the BPP eventually amended in 1972 as the sixth point.

“WE WANT COMPLETELY FREE HEALTH CARE FOR ALL BLACK AND OPPRESSED PEOPLE. We believe that the government must provide, free of charge, for the people, health facilities which will not only treat our illnesses, most of which have

²⁰ See History.com “*How the Black Panthers' Breakfast Program Both Inspired and Threatened the Government*”

²¹ See History.com “*How the Black Panthers' Breakfast Program Both Inspired and Threatened the Government*”

²² See Pien, Diane. “*Black Panther Party's Free Medical Clinics (1969-1975).*”

come about as a result of our oppression, but which will also develop preventive medical programs to guarantee our future survival.”²³

There were 13 PFMCS built, but they were often harassed by city health inspectors, police raids, and had difficulty finding and keeping volunteer medical staffers. These issues are the reason why all the PFMCS closed except for Seattle’s clinic, which is the only one of the 13 PFMCS that is still operating.²⁴ The BPP's community-focused initiatives extended beyond healthcare and nutrition. They also provided legal aid to those who couldn't afford it, ensuring that African Americans had access to fair legal representation. The BPP would continuously hand out to their community little leaflets that included “Pocket Lawyer of Legal First Aid” so when Black people were getting harassed by the police, they could easily recite and remember

²³ Bassett, Mary T. “Beyond Berets: The Black Panthers as Health Activists.” *American journal of public health* vol. 106,10 (2016): 1741-3. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2016.303412

²⁴ Pien, D. (2020, July 09). Black Panther Party’s Free Medical Clinics (1969-1975). BlackPast.org. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/institutions-african-american-history/black-panther-party-s-free-medical-clinics-1969-1975/>

their rights²⁵. This initiative aimed to combat the systemic biases within the criminal justice system and support individuals facing unjust legal battles.

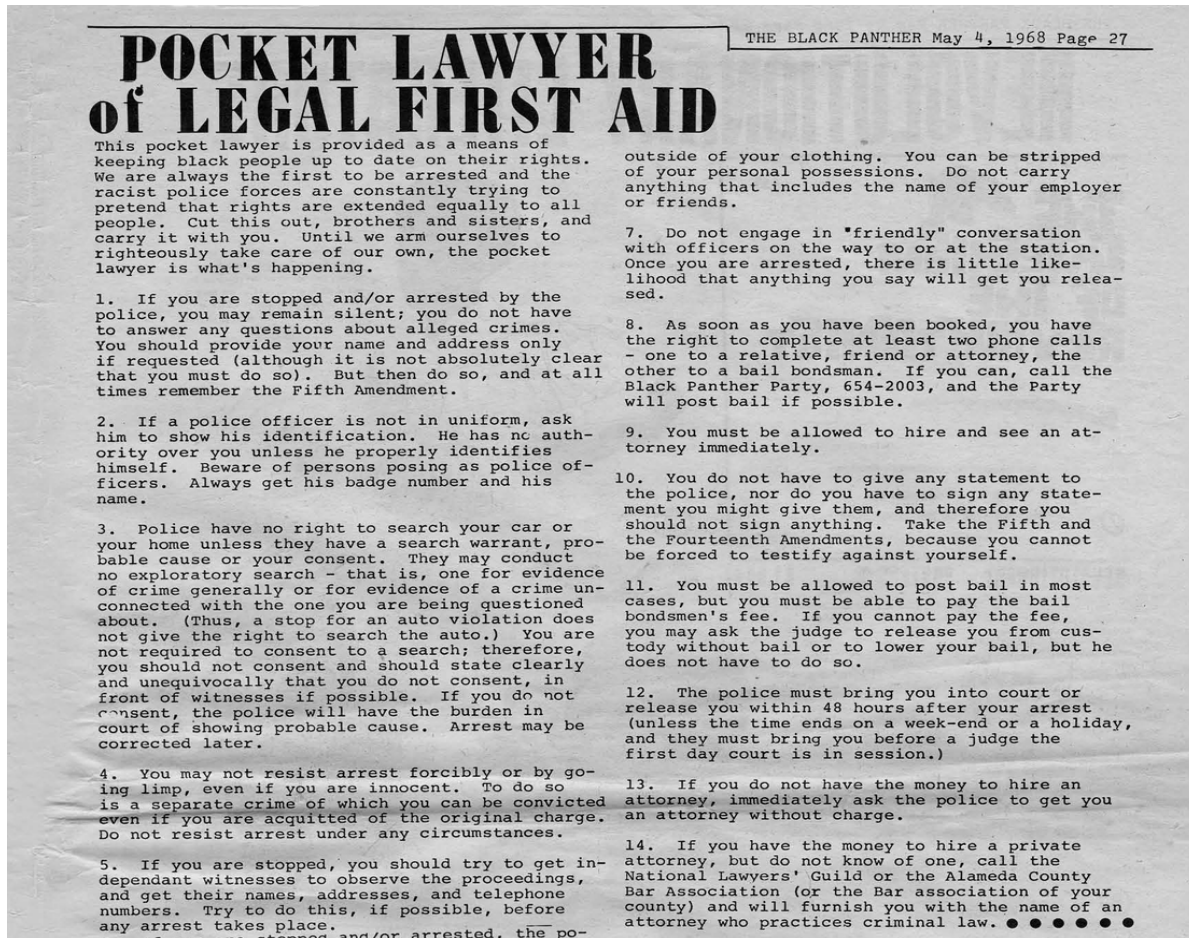


Figure 3 BPP Pocket Lawyer Legal Aid, The Black Panther Newspaper, May 4th 1968

Even though the BPP's activism was prevalent nationally, its activism extended beyond the boundaries of the United States. For instance, the BPP fiercely opposed the Vietnam War and saw it as a racist and imperialist endeavor. They vehemently expressed solidarity with the

²⁵ "Black Panther Party, 'Pocket Lawyer of Legal First Aid,' circa 1969." *Everyday People Highlights of the Civil Rights Movement from the Beverly Axelrod Papers*, exhibitions.lib.udel.edu/everyday-people/exhibition-item/black-panther-party-pocket-lawyer-of-legal-first-aid-circa-1969/.

Vietnamese, specifically with the National Front for the Liberation of the South, a political group in Vietnam that opposed the South Vietnamese government and American imperialist forces.²⁶ They saw the war as an example of the U.S. government's disregard for human life and its prioritization of profit and power. The BPP also believed that resources used for war should be redirected to address social and economic injustices at home, particularly within African American communities (Malloy 18).²⁷ They decided to actively organize protests and demonstrations against the war, calling for ending U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. The Vietnam War wasn't the only war the BPP fought against morally. The BPP sought to build alliances with other revolutionary groups and movements worldwide, including supporting the Palestinian liberation movement, the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, etc. The BPP also established connections with groups such as the Young Lords in Puerto Rico and the British Black Panther Movement in the United Kingdom²⁸. These alliances aimed to exchange knowledge and strategies, share resources, and foster a sense of global solidarity among oppressed peoples. They believed that the struggle for racial equality in America was interconnected with the liberation movements happening globally. The BPP built alliances with other revolutionary groups and was trying to build an international movement against imperialism, capitalism, and racial oppression. The BPP's activities and ideology were often

²⁶ “Vietnamese National Liberation Front.” *The Black Panther Party History and Theory*, wp.nyu.edu/gallatin-bpparchive2021/international-branches/vietnamese-national-liberation-front/.

²⁷ See Malloy, Sean. “Out of Oakland: Black Panther Party Internationalism during the Cold War.” *School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts*, 1 Jan. 1970, ssha.ucmerced.edu/content/out-oakland-black-panther-party-internationalism-during-cold-war (18-25).

²⁸ See Malloy 107-129

misrepresented in the media, contributing to its negative public image. While the party's armed self-defense measures garnered attention and were deemed violent, they were rooted in the belief that African Americans had the right to protect themselves against systemic violence. They also utilized this as a tactic, since “the right of the people to keep and bear Arms,” was protected in the United States Constitution under The Second Amendment (“Constitution of the United States,” art. 1, sec. 8).

In examining the establishment and goals of the BPP, it becomes clear that the party was a product of its time, responding to the socio-political climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The BPP's focus on self-defense, community empowerment, and political activism resonated with Black and other marginalized communities nationally and internationally, contributing to a broader conversation about racial inequality and systemic oppression. The party's goals and actions challenged existing power structures and continue to serve as a reminder of the ongoing struggle for social justice. Despite its eventual decline, the BPP's legacy as a symbol of resistance and advocacy for social justice remains impactful. The party's establishment and goals challenged the status quo, called attention to the systemic issues affecting African Americans, and inspired a new generation of activists. The BPP's efforts paved the way for future movements fighting for racial equality, police reform, and educational, social, and economic justice.

B. Socio-political climate during the late 60s - 70s

The socio-political climate during the era of the Black Panther Party (BPP) was marked by intense racial tensions, widespread social inequality, and a growing movement for civil rights and Black empowerment. The late 1960s and early 1970s were characterized by significant social and political upheaval in the United States, providing both challenges and opportunities

for the BPP's emergence and activism. The BPP emerged in response to the deep-rooted racial discrimination and systemic oppression faced by African Americans. Despite the gains made by the Civil Rights Movement in 1965, racial inequality persisted, particularly in urban areas where African Americans faced high poverty levels, unemployment, and limited access to quality education and healthcare. The BPP sought to address these disparities by empowering and informing Black communities through direct action, community service programs, and political advocacy.

The late 1960s and 1970s witnessed the continuation and intensification of the Civil Rights Movement. The movement expanded its focus beyond intracommunal support to address the numerous disparities and injustices they faced. Activists and organizations such as Malcolm X, Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the National Urban League played crucial roles in advocating for the nationwide spread of civil rights and the embracing of Black equity. However, the assassinations of civil rights leaders, such as Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, led to national protests and heightened, violent tensions. African Americans and their allies continued to push for social change and equal rights, highlighting issues like school desegregation, affirmative action, and community empowerment. The BPP's activism intersected with other socio-political movements of the time. They forged alliances with other civil rights organizations, such as the SCLC, and participated in initiatives like the "Poor People's Campaign," which aimed to address poverty and economic inequality.²⁹ The Panthers' commitment to addressing multiple facets of oppression, including race, class, and gender, reflected their broader understanding of the interconnected nature of social issues.

²⁹ See "Poor People's Campaign." *Poor People's Campaign*, www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/.



Figure 4 "Police Slaughter Black People" article, The Black Panther Newspaper, July 20th, 1969

Police brutality was a pervasive issue, particularly in African American communities. Incidents of racially motivated violence and excessive force by law enforcement fueled anger and frustration, which heightened tensions between the police and Black communities. The BPP's emphasis on armed self-defense was a response to this violence, as they sought to protect their communities from police brutality and other forms of oppression. Despite the positive impact of their community programs and activism nationally and internationally, the BPP faced relentless opposition from the government and law enforcement agencies. They were subjected to surveillance, infiltration, and targeted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI)

Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO), which aimed to dismantle and discredit the organization and was headed by J. Edgar Hoover. Some of the most notable violent confrontations the BPP had with local law enforcement across the country include Oakland Police Department officers that gunned down the Black Panther headquarters in 1968,³⁰ the Los Angeles Police Department raid on the Black Panther Party in 1969,³¹ shooting and arresting Huey Newton at a traffic stop in 1967,³² the Chicago Police Department raid that was responsible for killing Black Panther leader Fred Hampton in 1969,³³ and many more instances. The Vietnam War also played a significant role in shaping the socio-political climate during the BPP era. The war fueled anti-establishment and anti-military sentiments that created a sense of disillusionment among many Americans. The BPP denounced the war as racist and imperialist and later called for solidarity with other liberation movements worldwide.

The BPP's activities and ideology were met with mixed reactions from the public and government. The party's militancy and calls for armed self-defense drew both support and criticism. While many African Americans saw the BPP as a necessary response to ongoing racial injustice and violent interactions with the police and government, the mainstream media often portrayed the party as a violent and dangerous organization, contributing to negative public

³⁰ "OPD Officers Attack Black Panther Headquarters." OPD Officers Attack Black Panther Headquarters - Bay Area Television Archive, diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/223883.

³¹ "Police at the Black Panthers' Office, Los Angeles, 1969." CSUN University Library Digital Collection, digital-collections.csun.edu/digital/collection/Bradley/id/2230/.

³² Williams, Yohuru R. "In the Name of the Law: The 1967 Shooting of Huey Newton and Law Enforcement's Permissive Environment." *Negro History Bulletin*, vol. 61, no. 2, 1998, pp. 6–18. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24767366>.

³³ Madeo. "Dec. 4, 1969: Chicago Police Assassinate Black Panther Leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark." *Calendar.Eji.Org*, calendar.eji.org/racial-injustice/dec/4.

perceptions. The government's response to the BPP was marked by intense surveillance, infiltration, and suppression. Despite these challenges, the BPP's impact on the socio-political climate of the time cannot be overlooked. The party played a crucial role in mobilizing and empowering African American communities. Their community services programs, such as the free breakfast program for children and health clinics, addressed immediate needs and highlighted the government's failure to provide essential services to Black and other marginalized communities. The BPP's political activism also contributed to a broader shift in the public consciousness. Their calls for racial equality, self-determination, and an end to systemic oppression resonated with many African Americans and activists across various social justice movements. The BPP's Ten-Point Program articulated a clear agenda for change, focusing on issues such as housing, education, employment, and an end to police brutality.

The socio-political climate during the era of the BPP was complex and dynamic. While the organization faced significant challenges and opposition, its activism and demands for justice left an indelible mark on American history. The BPP's legacy continues to inspire and inform contemporary movements for civil rights and social justice, highlighting the ongoing struggle for equality and the need to address systemic oppression in all its forms.

C. Key figures and leadership within the BPP

The Black Panther Party (BPP) comprised several key figures and leaders who played crucial roles in shaping the organization's ideology, strategies, and impact. While the party had many dedicated members, a few were influential figures within the BPP.

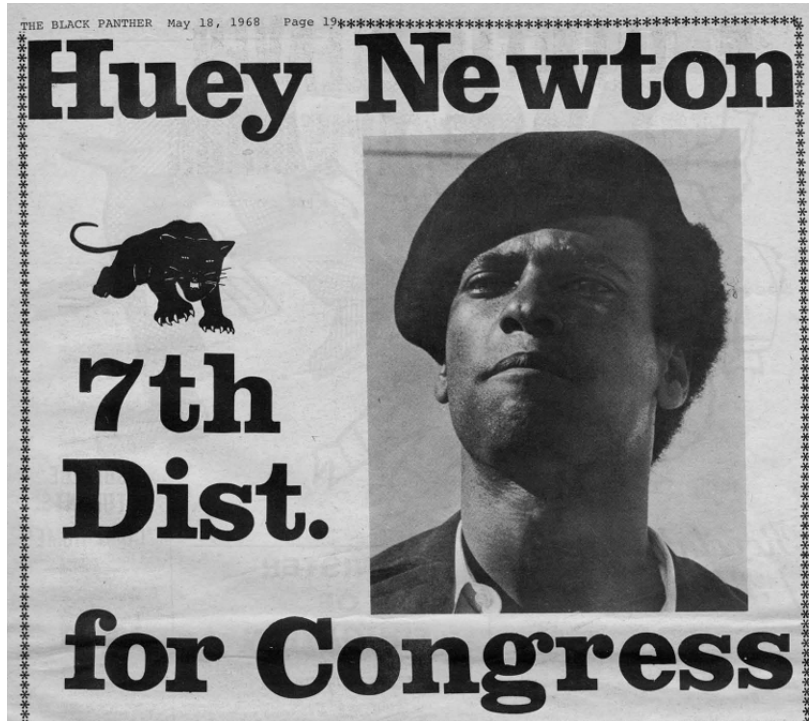


Figure 5 Huey Newton political ad, The Black Panther Newspaper, May 18th 1968

Huey P. Newton was one of the co-founders of the BPP and served as its leading figure. He played a central role in formulating the party's ideology and strategies. Newton, along with Bobby Seale, developed the Ten-Point Program, which outlined the BPP's demands for social and economic justice. Newton emphasized the importance of armed self-defense to protect the Black community from police brutality and advocated for the right of oppressed people to defend themselves. Newton believed that “Black men and women who refuse to live under oppression are dangerous to white society because they become symbols of hope to their brothers and sisters, inspiring them to follow their example.”³⁴ However, Newton faced an abundance of legal troubles throughout his life. In 1967, while being targeted at a stop sign, he was attacked by

³⁴ “An Interview with Huey P. Newton (1968).” Pacifica Radio Archives, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yE39MFcyyUs>.

undercover police officers. He defended himself and fought back but was charged and convicted of voluntary manslaughter in the death of one Oakland officer. Newton served two years in prison before the case was overturned on appeal. After two more trials, the charges were eventually dismissed due to lack of evidence and irregularities in the legal proceedings.³⁵ Despite his legal battles, Newton continued to organize and mobilize communities. His leadership and intellectual contributions were instrumental in shaping the BPP's identity. For instance, Newton was the main one who sought to merge the struggles of the African American community with broader issues of class struggle and international solidarity. He engaged with socialist and communist ideologies, exploring the potential for alliances across racial and ethnic lines. Tragically, Newton's life was cut short on August 22, 1989, when he was shot and killed in West Oakland by Tyrone Robinson, a member of the Black Guerilla Family (BGF).³⁶ The BGF is an African American Black power prison and street gang created in 1966 by George Jackson, George "Big Jake" Lewis, and W. L. Nolen.³⁷ The BGF and the BPP had very strained relations for nearly two decades before the Newtons' death. Newton's last words to Robinson were "You can kill my body, and you can take my life, but you can never kill my soul. My soul will live forever!" before being shot three times.

³⁵ Special, Emil Caldwell. "Newton Is Cleared of Charges in Slaying." *The New York Times*, 16 Dec. 1971, www.nytimes.com/1971/12/16/archives/newton-is-cleared-of-charges-in-slaying.html.

³⁶ "Huey P. Newton (February 17, 1942- August 22, 1989)." *National Archives and Records Administration*, www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/individuals/huey-newton.

³⁷ Fenton, Justin. "Black Guerilla Family (Maryland) Handbook." *DocumentCloud*, www.documentcloud.org/documents/552065-black-guerilla-family-maryland-handbook.html.

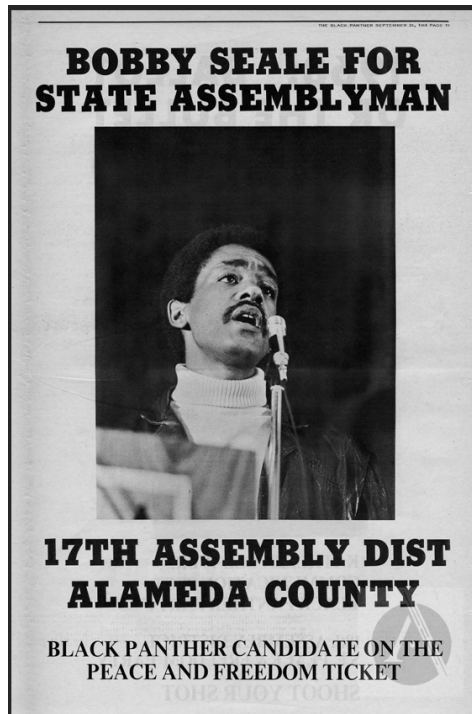


Figure 6 Bobby Seale political ad, The Black Panther Newspaper, September 1968

Bobby Seale, alongside Newton, co-founded the BPP and became the party's chairman. Seale was an articulate spokesperson and an effective organizer. He played a significant role in mobilizing communities and spreading the BPP's message. Seale also played a crucial role in shaping the party's ideology and political platform. He co-authored the BPP's Ten-Point Program, which outlined the party's demands and goals. Seale's leadership skills were evident in his ability to organize events, such as rallies and demonstrations, and articulate the party's objectives and demands to the public. During a recorded testimony during his trial in 1969, Seale said:

“We cannot continue using these tactics where we lose 3000 arrested or we lose 1 or 200 dead. We gotta stop. So we want to start running in threes, fours, and fives. Small groups using proper revolutionary tactics. So we can disassemble those pigs who occupy our community, who occupy our community like foreign troops. Black people, we're saying we're lost. We seem to be lost in a world of white racist, decadent America. I'm

saying that we have a right to defend ourselves as human beings. And if some pig comes up to us unjustly treating us unjustly, then we have to bring our pieces out and start barbecuing some of that pork.”³⁸

In 1969, he and several other party members were charged with conspiracy to incite riots during the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The following trial, the "Chicago Eight" trial, garnered national attention and highlighted the government's efforts to suppress and discredit the Black Panther Party. Seale's courtroom antics and refusal to be silenced made him a symbol of resistance against an unjust legal system. “All I did in Chicago was to exercise my legal right to speak on my own behalf and I was given four years in jail as a result. But I think the most serious injustice perpetrated by the court system in America is the inability of a black man to get a jury of his peers.”³⁹ Seale's charisma and organizational acumen helped establish the BPP as a force to be reckoned with.

³⁸ Linder, Douglas O. “Testimony of Bobby G. Seale.” *Famous Trials*, famous-trials.com/chicago8/1333-seale.

³⁹ “Staggerlee: A Conversation with Black Panther Bobby Seale (1970).” *YouTube*, Prelinger Archives, 22 July 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ur5SKBLcEc>.



Figure 7 Angela Davis, *The Black Panther Newspaper*, June 10th 1972

Angela Davis, although not a founding member, became an influential figure within the BPP. She joined the party in the late 1960s and was actively involved due to her advocating for prison abolition and involvement in the BPP's legal defense efforts. Davis once said “Prisons do not disappear problems, they disappear human beings. And the practice of disappearing vast numbers of people from poor, immigrant, and racially marginalized communities has become big business.”⁴⁰ In 1970, Davis became a nationally recognized figure when she was charged with kidnapping, murder, and conspiracy in connection with a violent courtroom incident involving the attempted escape of three imprisoned Black Panthers.

⁴⁰ Davis, Angela. “History Is A Weapon.” *Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex*, www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/davisprison.html

“When you talk about a revolution, most people think violence; without realizing that the real content of any kind of revolutionary thrust lies in the principles and the goals that you're striving for - not in the way that you reach them. On the other hand, because of the way this society is organized; because of the violence that exists on the surface everywhere - you'd have to expect that there are going to be such explosions. You have to expect things like that as reactions.”⁴¹

Davis's subsequent arrest and imprisonment sparked an international movement advocating for her release, with the rallying cry "Free Angela Davis." She spent 16 months in jail before being acquitted of all charges by an all-white jury in 1972. Davis is now a professor who has taught at numerous universities and institutions, including the University of California Los Angeles, Syracuse University, and Rutgers University. Her lectures and speeches have inspired generations of activists, scholars, and individuals committed to social change. Davis's political activism and intellectual contributions made her a prominent figure within the BPP and the broader civil rights movement.

⁴¹ Olsson, Göran. “The Black Power Mixtape.” *YouTube*, 9 Sept. 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_dCL2F571Q&pp=ygUYdGhlIGJsYWNRiHBvd2VyIG1peHRhcGUg.

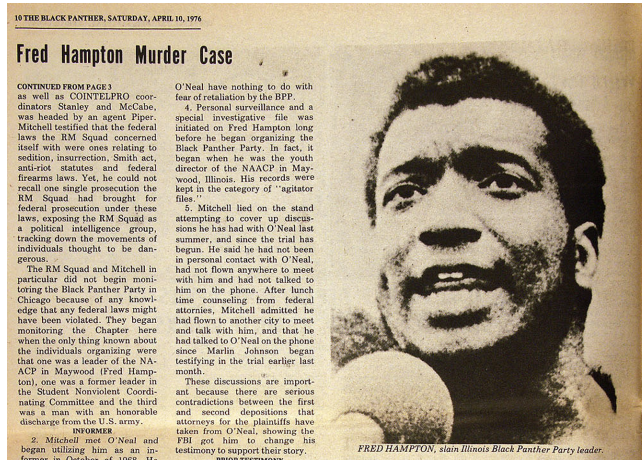


Figure 8 "Fred Hampton Murder Case," *The Black Panther Newspaper*, April 10th, 1976

Fred Hampton was a young, charismatic and influential leader within the BPP. As the chairman of the BPP's Illinois chapter, he organized and mobilized African American communities in Chicago. Hampton's emphasis on community organizing and coalition-building helped expand the BPP's reach and impact. Hampton once said "We're going to fight racism not with racism, but we're going to fight with solidarity. We say we're not going to fight capitalism with black capitalism, but we're going to fight it with socialism."⁴² He actively worked towards creating alliances with other marginalized groups, including the Young Lords and the Young Patriots, to form the Rainbow Coalition. This alliance aimed to bridge the gaps between marginalized communities, fighting against common oppressors and promoting solidarity. The Rainbow Coalition provided crucial support and resources to communities in need, emphasizing the importance of community self-determination. Hampton's dedication to uniting various communities in their fight against systemic oppression made him a powerful and respected leader.

⁴² Hampton, Fred. "We Have to Protect Our Leaders!, By Fred Hampton." *Marxists Internet Archive*, 19 May 1969, www.marxists.org/archive/hampton/1969/05/19.htm.

“If you ever think about me, and if you ain’t gonna do no revolutionary act, forget about me. I don’t want myself on your mind, if you’re not gonna work for the people. Like we always said, if you’re asked to make a commitment at the age of twenty and you say I don’t want to make that commitment only because of the simple reason that I’m too young to die, I wanna live a little bit longer—what you did is, you’re dead already.”⁴³

Hampton's growing influence and unifying message drew the attention of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and its controversial Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO). The FBI considered Hampton and the BPP a threat to national security and actively worked to disrupt their activities. FBI informant William O'Neal infiltrated the Chicago BPP chapter and provided crucial information leading to the targeting of Hampton. In the early morning hours of December 4, 1969, Chicago Police Department and the FBI conducted a raid on Hampton's apartment. In a hail of gunfire, Hampton and another BPP member, Mark Clark, were killed. Hampton was just 21 years old at the time of his death. The circumstances surrounding Hampton's death raised significant questions and fueled accusations of government involvement and assassination. Investigations revealed that law enforcement fired more than 90 shots, while the Panthers only fired one in response. The raid was criticized as excessive and indicative of a broader effort to suppress Black activism and disrupt the Black Panther Party.

⁴³ Hampton, Fred. “Untitled (Why Don’t You Die for the People?), By Fred Hampton.” *Marxists Internet Archive*, www.marxists.org/archive/hampton/misc/why-dont-you-die-for-the-people.htm.



Figure 9 Elaine Brown article, *The Black Panther Newspaper*, May 1972

Elaine Brown played a significant role in the BPP as well. She became the first female chairperson of the party in 1974, succeeding Bobby Seale. Her election marked a significant milestone as the first woman to lead a male-dominated organization. Under her leadership, the party focused on furthering community organizing, social programs, and political education. Brown was instrumental in advancing the BPP's community service programs, particularly the free breakfast program for children. Thanks to Brown, the program expanded and provided thousands of meals to hungry children nationwide. As a leader, Brown emphasized the importance of women's rights and gender equality within the BPP. She advocated for the recognition and inclusion of women's voices and contributions, challenging gender hierarchies within the organization. Brown's leadership played a crucial role in raising awareness about the unique struggles faced by Black women and the need for intersectional activism.

“A woman in the Black Power movement was considered, at best, irrelevant. A woman asserting herself was a pariah. A woman attempting the role of leadership was, to my proud black Brothers, making an alliance with the ‘counter-revolutionary, man-hating, lesbian, feminist white bitches.’ It was a violation of some Black Power principle that was left undefined. If a black woman assumed a role of leadership, she was said to be eroding black manhood, to e hindering the progress of the black race. She was an enemy of black people.”⁴⁴

Beyond her activism, Elaine Brown is also an accomplished singer and songwriter. Her album, "Seize the Time," released in 1969, showcased her musical talent and served as a platform to convey powerful messages of social and political change. Her music combined elements of soul, jazz, and funk, reflecting her commitment to artistic expression and social justice. After her tenure as Chairwoman of the BPP, Brown remained active in social and political activism. She continued to fight for the rights of incarcerated individuals, particularly focusing on issues related to the criminal justice system and prison reform. She has written several books, including her memoir "A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story," which provides insights into her experiences within the BPP and her journey as an activist. Brown's commitment to community empowerment and her role as a female leader within a predominantly male organization made her an influential figure in the BPP.

⁴⁴ Brown, E, (2008). *New Age Racism*. In *Race, Society and Politics*. Los Angeles , April, 2008. UCLA: UCLA Law School. 12.



Figure 10 Emory Douglas with his hands in the air while being confronted with the police

Emory Douglas is a renowned artist and graphic designer who gained prominence as the Minister of Culture for the BPP during the 1960s and 1970s. Douglas joined the BPP in the early 1960s and quickly became the party's primary artist, responsible for illustrating the BPP's newspaper, "The Black Panther."⁴⁵ Douglas, in his interview with The Criterion Collection, elaborated on his position and functionality within the party.

⁴⁵ Alexander, Julian. "Revolutionary Artist: Emory Douglas on the Black Panthers and Melvin Van Peebles." *The Criterion Collection*, www.criterion.com/current/posts/7555-revolutionary-artist-emory-douglas-on-the-black-panthers-and-melvin-van-peeles.

“The Ministry of Culture came about when we began to develop different ministries—the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, what have you—because of the influx of people who wanted to contribute or volunteer or join the Black Panther Party. That’s when I became the minister of culture, dealing with all the production aspects of art, promoting entertainment, culture. Because this was a movement of culture, everything was about culture—it was how we dressed, all that. We were creating the culture, revolutionary culture.”

His distinctive artistic style, characterized by bold imagery, strong symbolism, and vibrant colors, effectively conveyed the message of Black empowerment, social justice, and resistance against systemic oppression. Douglas's artwork captured the essence of the Black Power movement and addressed issues such as police brutality, racial inequality, and the plight of the urban poor. His illustrations often depicted powerful and defiant Black figures, armed and ready to protect their communities from injustice. His art reflected the party's philosophy of self-defense and community empowerment. Through his illustrations, Douglas not only raised awareness about the struggles faced by African Americans but also provided a visual narrative that inspired and mobilized the Black community. His artwork was widely distributed and became an integral part of the movement's visual identity. Douglas's art also played a crucial role in challenging the mainstream narrative of Black people perpetuated by the media. His illustrations provided an alternative depiction celebrating Black strength, resilience, and unity.

Beyond his artwork, Emory Douglas was instrumental in creating a visual language that shaped the ideology and identity of the BPP. His graphic designs, which included party logos, posters, and flyers, helped to establish a cohesive visual brand for the movement. His imagery resonated with activists and supporters worldwide and became an iconic representation of the

struggle for Black liberation. After the decline of the BPP in the late 1970s, Douglas continued his work as an artist and remained dedicated to social activism across the globe. He has used his talents to advocate for numerous causes, including human rights, anti-apartheid movements, and community development nationwide. Douglas's artistic contributions inspire and influence artists, activists, and social movements today. His powerful visual language, combined with his unwavering commitment to social justice, has left a lasting impact on the art world and the ongoing fight against racial inequality. Through his artwork, he has provided a visual legacy that documents the history and aspirations of the Black Power movement, reminding us of the power of art to inspire, educate, and incite positive change.

These key figures and leaders within the BPP brought unique skills, perspectives, and contributions to the organization. Their leadership, dedication, and activism helped shape the BPP's mission, core ethos, strategies, and impact. Through their efforts, they inspired and mobilized communities, challenged systemic oppression, and left a legacy in the fight for racial equality and social justice. Their contributions continue to resonate and influence justice movements today.

III. The Role of Art in Activism

A. Understanding the power of art as a form of expression and communication.

Art has long been recognized as a powerful form of expression and communication, capable of transcending language barriers and connecting individuals on a deep emotional level. Whether through visual arts, literature, music, or performance, art has the remarkable ability to convey complex ideas, evoke strong emotions, and provoke thought-provoking discussions. Understanding the power of art as a form of expression and communication requires an exploration of its various dimensions and the impact it can have on both creators and audiences.

Art serves as a means for individuals to express their innermost thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Conversely, African American author and poet, Haki Madhubuti argued,

“Black art, like African art is perishable. This too is why it is functional. For example, a black poem is written not to be read and put aside, but to actually become a part of the giver and receiver. It must perform some function: move the emotions, become a part of the dance, or simply make one act. Whereas the work itself is perishable, the style and spirit of the creation is maintained and is used and reused to produce new works.”⁴⁶

Artists often use their creative endeavors as a channel to communicate ideas and emotions that might be difficult to articulate through conventional means. Art allows for exploring the human condition, addressing universal themes such as love, loss, joy, and despair. It provides a space for self-reflection and self-expression, enabling artists to share their unique perspectives.

Moreover, art acts as a catalyst for social and cultural commentary. Throughout history, artists have used their work to challenge societal norms, question authority, and advocate for change. Art can illuminate injustices, provoke dialogue, and inspire social movements. It serves as a mirror that reflects the hopes, fears, and aspirations of a society, often giving voice to marginalized communities and amplifying their stories. By engaging with art, individuals are exposed to diverse perspectives, fostering empathy and understanding. Art also can transcend

⁴⁶ Fenderson, Jonathan. “James Smethurst, The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s.” *The Journal of African American History*, vol. 92, no. 1, 2007, pp. 139–141, <https://doi.org/10.1086/jaahv92n1p139>.

language barriers and connect people across cultures and generations. Visual arts, such as paintings and sculptures, have the potential to communicate complex ideas and emotions without the need for words. Music, with its universal language, can evoke emotions and memories in a way that is universally understood. Literature, through its vivid storytelling, allows readers to immerse themselves in different worlds and gain insights into the human experience. Regardless of the medium, art can bridge gaps, foster cross-cultural understanding, and create a sense of unity among diverse groups.

In addition to being a form of expression, art serves as a mode of communication between the artist and the audience. When individuals engage with art, they dialogue with the creator, interpreting the work based on their perspectives, experiences, and emotions. Art can evoke visceral responses and generate discussions, inspiring contemplation, and critical thinking. It encourages viewers or listeners to reflect on their lives and the world around them, fostering a deeper connection and understanding of the human condition. Understanding the power of art as a form of expression and communication requires recognizing its ability to transcend boundaries, provoke emotions, challenge conventions, and foster understanding. By engaging with art, whether as creators or audience members, we tap into a realm of limitless possibilities, where imagination, emotions, and ideas converge. Art reminds us of our shared humanity, encourages empathy, and invites us to explore our societal impacts.

B. Examples of artists' involvement in other social movements

The 1960s and 1970s were drastic changes in the United States, marked by significant social and political movements. During this time, artists across various mediums actively participated in and contributed to these movements, using their creativity to challenge the status quo, express dissent, and advocate for social change. One of the many notable examples of

artists' involvement in social movements during the 1960s and 1970s includes the Anti-War Movement. The Anti-War movement first came to light due to the growing American fatigue, concern, and disapproval of the Vietnam War, which occurred from Nov 1, 1955, to Apr 30, 1975.⁴⁷ Countless artists were crucial in expressing opposition to the war and raising awareness about its devastating impact. Musicians like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez wrote protest songs that became anthems for the anti-war movement. Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" and Baez's "Where Have All the Flowers Gone" resonated with audiences, capturing the frustrations, desires, and call for peace.

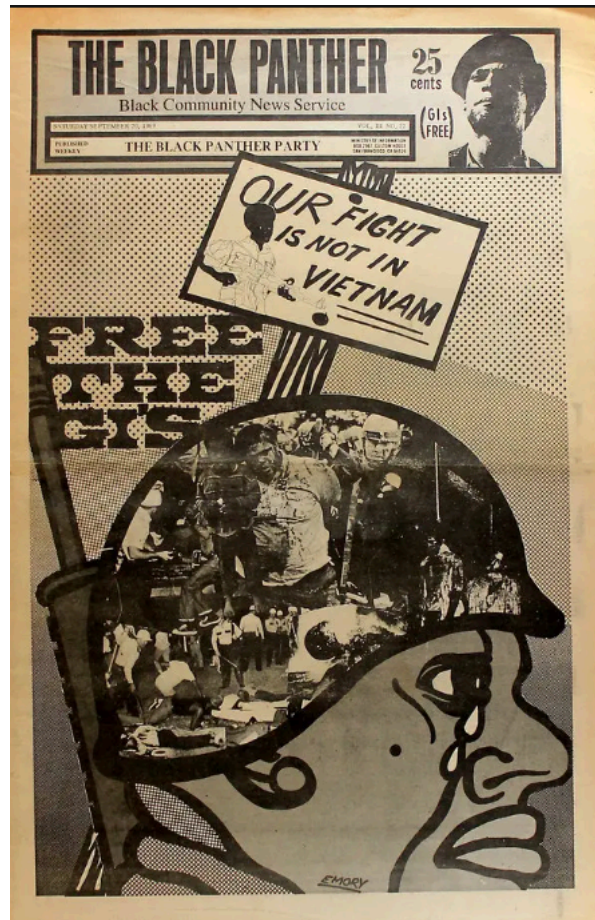


Figure 11 Political Cartoon on The Vietnam War, The Black Panther Newspaper, September 20th, 1969

⁴⁷ See NYU "Vietnamese National Liberation Front"

There was also the Civil Rights Movement, which occurred from 1954 to 1968, and its primary goal was the desire for equality and freedom for African Americans and other people of color.⁴⁸ Artists such as Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, and Faith Ringgold created powerful visual artworks that depicted the experiences of African Americans, highlighting the struggle for equality. Their art served as a form of activism, challenging prevailing narratives and fostering dialogue. Through the Civil Rights Movement came the Chicano Movement, which was for advocating for the rights and empowerment of Mexican Americans.⁴⁹ Artists like Judith F. Baca and Carlos Almaraz utilized murals to reclaim public spaces and express the cultural pride and political aspirations of the Chicano community. These vibrant and impactful murals served as visual representations of Mexican identity, heritage, and resistance.

From the early 1960s to the 1980s came the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM). The feminist movement sought to free women from oppression and male supremacy.⁵⁰ The movement consisted of women's liberation groups, advocacy, protests, consciousness-raising, feminist theory, and various diverse individual and group actions for women and their freedom. The movement gained significant momentum during the 1960s and 1970s, and artists played a crucial role in challenging gender norms and advocating for women's rights. Artists such as Judy Chicago and the collective known as the Guerilla Girls used various mediums to highlight the

⁴⁸ "Rights and Representation." *US House of Representatives: History, Art & Archives*, history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/BAIC/Historical-Essays/Keeping-the-Faith/Civil-Rights-Movement/.

⁴⁹ "Brown Beret Chapters 1969-1972." *Brown Berets Chapters Map - Mapping American Social Movements*, depts.washington.edu/moves/brown_beret_map.shtml. Accessed 26 June 2023.

⁵⁰ Burkett, Elinor. "women's rights movement". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 20 Jun. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/event/womens-movement>.

struggles faced by women and call for gender equality. One of the BPP's founders, Huey P. Newton, once gave a speech about the WLM and the LGBTQ+ rights movement, stating that they needed the BPP's help fighting for societal equality for all oppressed people. "Whatever your personal opinions and your insecurities about homosexuality and the various liberation movements among homosexuals and women (and I speak of the homosexuals and women as oppressed groups), we should try to unite with them in a revolutionary fashion,"⁵¹ Newton stated. The Stonewall Riots of 1969 marked a turning point for the LGBTQ+ rights movement⁵², and artists contributed to the visibility and acceptance of the community. Artists like Keith Haring and Robert Mapplethorpe used their art to explore queer identities and challenge societal norms. Haring's iconic graffiti-inspired artworks, often featuring joyful figures, became symbols of LGBTQ+ pride and activism.

Native American artists also made significant contributions during this period, addressing the historical and ongoing struggles faced by Indigenous communities by creating the Native American Rights Movement, also known as American Indian Rights movement (AIM).⁵³ Artists like Fritz Scholder and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith incorporated traditional elements into their contemporary artworks, providing a voice for Native Americans and challenging stereotypes. Their art shed light on issues such as land rights, cultural preservation, and self-determination.

⁵¹ "(1970) Huey P. Newton, 'The Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements' •." *BlackPast.Org*, 17 Apr. 2018, www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/huey-p-newton-women-s-liberation-and-gay-liberation-movements/.

⁵² Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Stonewall riots". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 25 Jun. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Stonewall-riots>.

⁵³ Luebering, J.E.. "American Indian Movement". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 28 Apr. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/American-Indian-Movement>.

Their fight for their land and to be recognized as a legitimate group of people in the eyes of the law coincided with the Environmental Movement.⁵⁴ The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the birth of the modern environmental movement, and artists contributed to raising awareness about ecological issues. Artists like Robert Smithson and Ana Mendieta created land art and site-specific installations that engaged with the natural world and highlighted the environment's fragility. Their works prompted breakthrough conversations about sustainability and the human impact on the planet.

These examples illustrate the significant role that artists played in various social movements during the 1960s and 1970s. Their creative expressions challenged societal norms, raised awareness about pressing issues, and empowered marginalized communities. Artists have long played a pivotal role in shaping, participating in, and harnessing the power of their creative expressions to inspire change, challenge the status quo, and amplify the voices of the marginalized. From musicians composing anthems of resistance to visual artists capturing the essence of struggle and triumph, these artistic interventions have catalyzed conversations, fostered empathy, and galvanized communities. Whether in the civil rights movement, environmental activism, or countless other causes, artists have repeatedly proven that their talent and passion can transcend boundaries, ignite passion, and forge a path toward a more inclusive and just society. Their unwavering dedication to social progress serves as a testament to the transformative potential of art, reminding us that artistic expression can catalyze profound and

⁵⁴ “History of the Environmental Movement.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/topic/environmentalism/History-of-the-environmental-movement.

lasting change. Through their art, these artists helped shape the cultural and political landscape of the United States, leaving a lasting impact that continues to resonate today.

V. Artists' Contributions to the Black Panther Party

A. Statements and writings about BPP leaders regarding artists and their impact

The Black Panther Party (BPP) had a specific blueprint about how they would reach and mobilize the masses to take part in their revolutionary rhetoric. Newton and Seale knew that articles, essays, and editorials addressing the issues of racial inequality, police brutality, economic disparities, and social justice wouldn't be enough to reach an amass of people within the Black community. They knew they would need to rely on the arts to get their messaging out there, especially since the government was failing the Black community around that time educationally and economically. By directly addressing the concerns and aspirations of the Black community, the newspaper captured their attention and encouraged them to engage with the information it contained. Douglas touches upon that a little bit in his interview with the Criterion Collection.

“I was invited to a meeting where they were planning to bring Malcolm X’s widow [Betty Shabazz] to the Bay Area to honor her, and they wanted me to do the poster for that event. So I went, and I agreed to do the poster, and they said some brothers is coming over next week, and they would agree if they’re going to do security. When they came over, that was Huey Newton and Bobby Seale and some of the other first Panthers. And after that meeting, I knew that’s what I wanted to be a part of, so I asked them how I could join.” Douglas said. “And then he’d show me around the neighborhood, introduce me to folks, we would go by Bobby Seale’s house. So that was my mission, transitioning

into the Black Panther Party—late January, early February of 1967—about three and a half months after its inception.”⁵⁵

Huey Newton recognized the power of information and the importance of education within the Black community. He and the other BPP members decided to become intentional and create deliberate efforts to make their newspaper easily accessible. They understood that providing visible knowledge was crucial for empowering and mobilizing the community. Douglas further explains the process they all came up with his interview.

“Well, we’ve about finished with this, but you seem to be committed because you’ve been coming around and hanging around. We’re gonna start the paper, and we want you to be the revolutionary artist for the paper’ . . . They said they had a vision about having lots of photographs and artwork in the paper, so people could get to see the artwork who were not going to read the long, drawn-out articles. They could look at the captions and the headlines and the photographs, and they could get the gist of what the story was, what it was about. They said most Black people then were learning through observation and participation. There was a whole segment that wasn’t just reading the news per se. So that’s how they had the vision of the paper. I worked starting on the second paper, which was when we began to do a tabloid-sized paper.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ See Alexander, Julian. “Revolutionary Artist: Emory Douglas on the Black Panthers and Melvin Van Peebles.”

⁵⁶ See Alexander, Julian. “Revolutionary Artist: Emory Douglas on the Black Panthers and Melvin Van Peebles.”



Figure 12 The Black Panther Newspaper, April 14th, 1973

Another instance where the BPP sought assistance from artists was in 1974 when Newton reached out to a big production team during the “new Hollywood era” to help him and his family escape to Cuba. This was all to avoid prosecution charges in the U.S. for assault and murder in Oakland. Bert Schneider, Bob Rafelson, and Steve Blauner, also known as BBS Productions, smuggled Newton and his family to Mexico and convinced a Colombian smuggler to take them into Cuban waters. Schneider remained loyal and generous to Newton. "Bert absolutely loved Huey. [He] told me once, 'Huey's the smartest man I ever met,'" American political activist Daniel Ellsberg told writer Kate Coleman.⁵⁷ While there are stories of people in Hollywood

⁵⁷ See Coleman, Kate. “True Hollywood Story: The Producer and the Black Panther.” *Salon*

supporting the BPP's radical movement to the very end, there are also anecdotes about Hollywood celebrities doing the exact opposite—and paying severe consequences from the BPP.

B. Discussion of artists' collaborations with the BPP and their contributions to the cause

The Black Panther Party (BPP) emerged in the 1960s as a powerful political and social movement advocating for civil rights, self-defense, and empowerment within Black communities. Alongside their political activism, the BPP recognized the significance of art and culture as powerful tools for social change. This led to collaborations between the party and artists who used their creative platforms to amplify the BPP's message and contribute to their cause. In this section, we will explore the contributions of specific artists who collaborated with the Black Panther Party.

One of the Black Panther Party's most significant contributions to the arts was the production of its newspaper, *The Black Panther*. Emory Douglas, the Minister of Culture for the BPP, played a pivotal role in shaping the party's visual identity via the newspaper. His powerful illustrations and graphic design skills assisted in transforming the party's newspaper, *The Black Panther*, into a vibrant and provocative publication. Douglas's artwork depicted the struggles faced by Black communities and presented a vision of revolution and resistance. His iconic images not only captured the essence of the party's message but also became symbols of the Black Power movement. *The Black Panther*, which was circulated nationwide, was a powerful tool for communicating the party's political ideas, as well as showcasing the talents of African American artists, writers, and poets. The newspaper included essays, poems, and feature articles that highlighted the struggles of Black Americans and the party's efforts to bring about change. Douglas's artwork appeared not only in *The Black Panther* newspaper but also on posters, flyers,

and pamphlets. His bold and provocative imagery depicted police brutality, poverty, and the resilience of Black communities. Through his collaboration with the BPP, Douglas helped create a visual language that effectively communicated the party's ideals and inspired a sense of pride and resistance among its members and the Black community.

Before joining and becoming the leader of the BPP, Elaine Brown was a classical musician trained in performance singing, and songwriting. She traveled to Los Angeles, California to get discovered as an entertainer. While Brown was trying to balance getting a foothold in the scene and going to school, she was working at the “Pink Pussycat Club⁵⁸.” During her studies, Brown was exposed to Black revolutionary thought and became a student leader, which connected her to the LA BPP. David Hilliard, the Chief of Staff of the BPP at the time, heard the emotional pull of Brown's music and announced she needed to record an album of Black Panther music⁵⁹. She worked with an accomplished jazz composer called Horace Tapscott and arraigned her musical pieces in an emotionally intense way, creating revolutionary ballads. Brown, with the help of Hilliard, created a song in 1969 called “Seize the Time⁶⁰” which was sold at Black Panther events and advertised in the BPP newspaper. This was known as the music of the BPP because it spoke to their ideology, touched upon their heroism, and her lyricism provided imagery of what the party was striving to do and provide for their communities.

⁵⁸ Peters, Cathy, et al. “Black and Proud: The Music of the Black Panther Party.” *ABC Radio National*, 12 Dec. 2018, www.abc.net.au/radionational/archived/intothemusic/the-music-of-the-black-panther-party/5905480.

⁵⁹ See Peters, Cathy, et al. “*Black and Proud: The Music of the Black Panther Party*.”

⁶⁰ See Peters, Cathy, et al. “*Black and Proud: The Music of the Black Panther Party*.”

Renowned singer and activist Nina Simone used her music to highlight the struggles and aspirations of Black Americans. Nina Simone's music also developed into anthems for the BPP, providing a powerful and soul-stirring soundtrack for the movement. Her songs, such as "To Be Young, Gifted and Black"⁶¹, "Mississippi Goddam"⁶², and "Four Women"⁶³, conveyed the pain, anger, and resilience of the Black experience. Simone's powerful voice and emotionally charged performances resonated deeply with BPP members and supporters, offering a rallying cry against oppression and a source of inspiration for those fighting for justice. However, Simone's collaboration with the BPP didn't just stop at her music. Through interviews, speeches, and public appearances, Simone fearlessly spoke out against injustices and advocated for social change. Her passion and commitment to the struggle aligned closely with the principles of the BPP, making her an influential figure within the movement. Simone also actively participated in events organized by the party, performing at rallies and fundraisers, and calling attention to systemic racism and police brutality. Through being a powerful musical orator and artistic expression, Simone creatively amplified the BPP's call for justice and equality. Gil Scott-Heron, another prominent Black musician and poet used his spoken word performances and songs to shed light on social issues faced by Black Americans. Scott-Heron's fusion of jazz, soul, and spoken word created a unique sound aligned with the BPP's revolutionary spirit. Songs like "The

⁶¹ See Feldstein, Ruth. "‘I Don’t Trust You Anymore’: Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s." *The Journal of American History*, vol. 91, no. 4, 2005, pp. 1349–79. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3660176>.

⁶² See Feldstein, Ruth. "‘I Don’t Trust You Anymore’: Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s."

⁶³ See Feldstein, Ruth. "‘I Don’t Trust You Anymore’: Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s."

Revolution Will Not Be Televised⁶⁴," "Whitey on the Moon⁶⁵," and "Winter in America⁶⁶" became anthems for the movement, capturing the frustrations, hopes, and aspirations of Black communities. His music blended artistry with political activism, effectively conveying the BPP's message and inspiring action among its members and supporters. Scott-Heron's collaboration with the party extended to performing at rallies and events as well, where his powerful words resonated with activists and energized the struggle for racial justice.

Activist singer Miriam Makeba also known as Mama Africa was a world-renowned South African singer and songwriter who used her music for social change. Makeba was an ardent opponent of apartheid and used her platform to raise awareness about the injustices faced by Black South Africans. In 1950, Makeba was exiled from South Africa, which she didn't find out about until 1960 when she couldn't return due to her passport being revoked⁶⁷. She was the first Black musician to leave South Africa on account of apartheid, and it wasn't until 1990, when Nelson Mandela was freed from jail and convinced her to come back. Makeba married Stokely Carmichael, also known as Kwame Ture and the "Honorary Prime Minister" of the BPP, in 1968. The union of Ture and Makeba created a powerful partnership that blended their activism and artistic endeavors. They traveled together, performed at rallies and concerts, and

⁶⁴ "A Tribute to Gil Scott Heron and the Black Panther Party - February 13, 2012." *KPFA*, 13 May 2015, kpfa.org/episode/77815/.

⁶⁵ KPFA "A Tribute to Gil Scott Heron and the Black Panther Party - February 13, 2012."

⁶⁶ KPFA "A Tribute to Gil Scott Heron and the Black Panther Party - February 13, 2012."

⁶⁷ Ottaway, David B. "Makeba, out of Exile." *The Washington Post*, 11 June 1990, www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1990/06/11/makeba-out-of-exile/e4a206ec-6ec2-4c28-bd3c-0a7fa5946c14/.

used their combined influence to advocate for civil rights and equality. Their collaboration not only resonated with audiences but also showcased the power of art and music in promoting social justice causes. Sadly, their marriage was short-lived, and they divorced in 1973. Despite their separation, Ture and Makeba continued their individual pursuits as activists and artists. Ture remained committed to the struggle for Black liberation until his passing on November 15, 1998, while Makeba continued to use her voice to fight for human rights until her death on November 9, 2008.⁶⁸

Afeni Shakur, the mother of the influential rapper Tupac Shakur, played a significant role in the Black Panther Party as well. In 1968, Afeni became a member of the Harlem branch, marrying its leader, Lumumba Shakur, and actively participating in various party activities.⁶⁹ In April 1969, Afeni became involved in the Panther 21 trial, a high-profile case against 21 Panthers accused of conspiracy to shoot police officers and bomb police stations, railroad tracks, Manhattan department stores, and the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx.⁷⁰ Shakur and the defendants were acquitted of all 156 counts in May 1971, a month before her son Parish Lesane Crooks, also known as Tupac Amaru Shakur's birth in June 1971. Shakur's activism and involvement with the BPP shaped Tupac's worldview, and his rap music often reflected the heart of the party's ideologies, addressing themes of police brutality, racial inequality, and social injustice.

⁶⁸ See Peters, Cathy, et al. *“Black and Proud: The Music of the Black Panther Party.”*

⁶⁹ Holley, Santi Elijah, et al. “How Afeni Shakur Put Black Women First.” *Time*, 24 May 2023, time.com/6282004/afeni-shakur-black-women-liberation-legacy/#:~:text=Among%20the%20arrested%20Panthers%20was,in%20the%20spring%20of%201968.

⁷⁰ See Holley, Santi Elijah, et al. *“How Afeni Shakur Put Black Women First.”*

The Last Poets, a spoken-word group formed in the late 1960s, collaborated closely with the Black Panther Party. Their powerful performances fused poetry, music, and political consciousness, addressing the experiences of Black people in America. Their influential album "The Last Poets"⁷¹ featured tracks like "When the Revolution Comes,"⁷² which became anthems for the BPP and the broader Black Power movement. The Last Poets' words captured the frustrations, hopes, and aspirations of Black communities, emphasizing the need for revolution and empowerment. Another artistic group was The Lumpen, a revolutionary volunteer art collective associated with the BPP, which used music, performance, and visual art to spread the party's message. Comprised of artists Saturu Ned, William Calhoun, Clark Bailey, and Mark Torrance, The Lumpen produced powerful and thought-provoking works. In 1970, the Lumpen recorded two songs called "No More" and "Free Bobby Now" which were supposed to assist in the fight to free the leader of the BPP, Bobby Seale. They would develop stage skits and shows incorporating original material and versions of other artists' songs with revolutionary lyrics. They organized cultural events and created music that addressed the realities of Black life and the fight against systemic oppression. They even took their messaging on tour with famous acts and entertainers like Curtis Mayfield, Muhammad Ali, and the Grateful Dead, who once opened for them in San Francisco.⁷³ The collective's artistic endeavors helped galvanize support for the BPP's initiatives and fostered a sense of pride and unity within Black communities and others nationwide.

⁷¹ Arnold, Eric. "A Brief History of the Lumpen, the Black Panthers' Revolutionary Funk Band." *KQED*, 25 Feb. 2019, www.kqed.org/arts/13851531/a-brief-history-of-the-lumpen-the-black-panthers-revolutionary-funk-band.

⁷² See Peters, Cathy, et al. *Black and Proud: The Music of the Black Panther Party*.

⁷³ See Peters, Cathy, et al. *Black and Proud: The Music of the Black Panther Party*.

The Black Panther Party was also involved in theater and film, producing several plays and documentaries that addressed the issues faced by Black Americans. One of the party's most significant cinematic achievements was collaborating with the radical collective known as Film Group, to create the 1971 film "The Murder of Fred Hampton."⁷⁴ Directed by Howard Alk, it told the story of the assassination of the party's Chicago chapter leader, Fred Hampton. The film was a powerful indictment of the government's role in the killing of Hampton and sparked widespread outrage and condemnation. The party also established its film unit which produced documentaries exposing police brutality towards Black people such as Eldridge Cleaver's 1968 short film, "Off The Pig."⁷⁵ These films were intended to support their propaganda efforts to create awareness about the party's core ethos, exploitation, and capitalism. The BPP also found ways to repurpose traditional theatre spaces to challenge norms and amplify their message. They organized theatrical productions in mainstream and even street venues, transforming these spaces into platforms for radical art and political discourse. It aimed to raise awareness among the audience, provoke conversations about police violence, and inspire collective action. By performing in these accessible public spaces, the BPP engaged directly with communities, providing a platform for dialogue and mobilization.

The collaborations between artists and the Black Panther Party played a crucial role in shaping the movement's cultural landscape and disseminating its message. Emory Douglas's artwork to The Lumpen's artistic endeavors, Nina Simone's music to Gil Scott-Heron's poetry, all

⁷⁴ "The Murder of Fred Hampton (1971)." *Chicago Film Archives*, chicagofilmarchives.org/projects/the-murder-of-fred-hampton-1971.

⁷⁵ "Off the Pigs! - Black Film Archive." *Off the Pigs! - Black Film Archive*, blackfilmarchive.com/Off-the-Pigs.

contributed to the cause of the BPP by inspiring, mobilizing, and empowering Black communities. These artists utilized their creative platforms to challenge systemic oppression, raise awareness about the struggles faced by Black Americans, and promote a vision of liberation and equality. Their contributions remain an enduring testament to the power of art in advancing social change and shaping the collective consciousness of a movement. Through their collaborations, these artists not only amplified the party's message but also forced people pay attention to the systemic injustices faced by Black Americans. Their contributions remain a testament to the enduring power of art and activism in the pursuit of social change.

B. Assessment of the impact of artistic expression on BPP's visibility and influence

Artistic expression catalyzes dialogue and awareness, enabling the Black Panther Party to engage with various audiences and ignite conversations about racial inequality and social justice. The visual arts, music, and literature produced by the party acted as powerful tools to spark discussions and challenge existing narratives, reaching individuals who may have been previously unaware of the depth and extent of systemic oppression faced by Black communities. By utilizing artistic mediums, the Black Panther Party successfully attracted attention from not only their immediate supporters but also individuals who had previously held different perspectives. The provocative imagery and bold artistic statements made by the party captivated the public's attention, inviting people from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds to explore and question the prevailing social order. This exposure to the BPP's artistic expression opened the door for individuals to engage in conversations about racial injustice, police brutality, and the need for systemic change.

Moreover, the inclusive nature of the artistic expressions employed by the Black Panther Party contributed to their growing impact. Recognizing the diversity within their communities,

the party intentionally embraced various artistic styles and cultural influences. This diversity in their artistic expression allowed the BPP's message to resonate with audiences from different cultural backgrounds, breaking down barriers and fostering cross-cultural understanding. The party's commitment to solidarity and unity, as reflected in their art, attracted individuals who felt marginalized or oppressed, irrespective of their cultural or socioeconomic background. Through their artistic endeavors, the Black Panther Party provided a platform for unheard voices to be amplified and empowered. In turn, the growing support and resonance of the Black Panther Party's artistic expression fueled its impact on America. As their reach expanded, so did their ability to influence public opinion and enact change. The party's artistic initiatives served as a rallying point for communities, encouraging collective action and inspiring individuals to join the movement for racial equality and social justice.

Artistic expression served as a bridge between the Black Panther Party and communities that may not have initially aligned with their goals. The powerful symbolism and visual language employed by the party, such as the clenched fist and the black panther, had universal appeal and could be understood by people from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. These visual representations transcended language barriers and conveyed a message of resistance and empowerment that resonated with marginalized communities facing similar struggles.

The music of the Black Panther Party played a crucial role in attracting a diverse range of supporters. Artists like Gil Scott-Heron, with his poignant spoken word performances, and James Brown, with his soulful anthems of empowerment, spoke to the Black experience but also reached audiences beyond racial boundaries. Their music addressed universal themes of injustice, inequality, and the fight for freedom, inspiring individuals from different backgrounds to align themselves with the Black Panther Party's mission. Through music, the BPP's influence

expanded, drawing in supporters who may not have been initially exposed to the party's political ideology. Literature produced by the Black Panther Party, such as books and articles authored by party members, had a profound impact on America as well. These works provided a comprehensive understanding of the party's ideology, but they also presented a nuanced perspective on the experiences of Black Americans. By shedding light on systemic racism, police brutality, and social injustice, the BPP's literature resonated with individuals from all walks of life who were concerned about the state of the nation. These literary works allowed the party to engage in a broader intellectual discourse, influencing public opinion and garnering support from a wide range of readers.

The Black Panther Party's artistic expression also played a significant role in addressing socioeconomic disparities. By organizing events that combined art, music, and political activism, the party created spaces where people from different socioeconomic backgrounds could come together and find common ground. Their emphasis on community organizing and grassroots activism helped to build alliances and empower individuals from disadvantaged communities who were experiencing similar economic hardships. The BPP's programs, such as free breakfast initiatives and healthcare clinics, resonated with working-class Americans, fostering a sense of solidarity and inspiring collective action.

Overall, the Black Panther Party's use of artistic expression significantly expanded its impact on America. By utilizing visual arts, music, literature, and other creative forms, they reached audiences from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, forging connections and building support beyond their immediate communities. Artistic expression provided a platform for dialogue, awareness, and mobilization, allowing the party to challenge mainstream narratives, inspire social change, and foster a more inclusive and united movement. The BPP's

artistic endeavors not only grew their influence but also left a lasting impact on the fight for racial equality and social justice in America. By embracing a range of artistic mediums and incorporating cultural influences, the BPP's artistic expression transcended traditional boundaries, resonating with individuals who were previously unaware or disengaged. This expanded support and resonance propelled the Black Panther Party's influence, amplifying their message and contributing to the broader fight for equality and justice in America.

VI. Critiques and Challenges

A. *Counter Arguments against the BPP's view on artists.*

However, not all Hollywood celebrities supported the BPP's radical movement, and some faced severe consequences from the party for their actions. The BPP appreciated the assistance and support from certain celebrities and artists, but there was skepticism regarding their true commitment to the cause. For instance, famous Black rock-and-roll singers Ike and Tina Turner were hired by the BPP to sing for their community to raise “funds to serve more people through its well-known community survival programs.”⁷⁶ There were already tensions between the artists and the party members because Ike felt he wasn't getting paid enough to perform. This contention blew up and Ike decided to tell the audience full of aggravated Panthers that “he won't sing for them because he hasn't been paid enough.” Ike's blatant disregard for his contract and for helping the BPP fundraise for their community programs caused the alleged brawl between Ike and the BPP members. The founders of the BPP highly contested this, and instead of proving the American media right by fighting back with their fists, they decided to fight back with their words and utilize the court of law.

⁷⁶ See *Marxists Internet Archive*, 11 Aug. 1973

"It is the view of the Black Panther Party that Ike and Tina Turner and their review deliberately attempted to destroy the program's aim, which was to provide more funds to benefit the Black and poor of Oakland and elsewhere," per the BPP newspaper. "More than that, however, it is for reasons stated and for the fact that people who had paid hard-earned money have been robbed of the show they came to see, that the Black Panther Party believes that our contract was violated and libelous statements were made against our party and some of its individual members in a continuous effort on the part of some to slow the liberation of all human beings."⁷⁷



Figure 13 Article about Ike and Tina Turner, *The Black Panther Newspaper*, August 11th, 1973

⁷⁷ *Marxists Internet Archive*, 11 Aug. 1973

The libelous statements made by Ike and Tina Turners' teams were only a tidbit of the many accusations the BPP had faced throughout the years from press members, government officials, artists, and notable famous figures. Many people had misconstrued the main ethos of the BPP and what they were fighting for, which could be one of the many factors that contributed to the BPP's hesitancy to embrace those outside of the cause. Those in the BPP were trying to keep it true to its Marxist and revolutionary origins as much as possible and didn't foresee the influence of media impacting them.

B. Constraints and limitations faced by artists working within the BPP.

While the BPP was not primarily focused on artistic endeavors, there were certain constraints and limitations that artists working within the party faced due to the organization's structure, goals, and the socio-political context of the time. It's important to note that artists' experiences within the BPP may have varied, as the party consisted of individuals with diverse backgrounds and talents.

Artists working within the BPP were subject to criticism and control from within the party. The BPP had a hierarchical structure, and party leaders and members had varying opinions on the role and significance of art within the movement.⁷⁸ Artists had to navigate internal debates, critiques, and ideological differences, which could impact the reception and acceptance of their work. The BPP emphasized a collective identity and a unified front against oppression. Artists were encouraged to create artwork that reflected the experiences and struggles of the Black community, rather than focusing solely on individual perspectives. This emphasis on collective identity could restrict the individual artistic voice and expression of artists within the

⁷⁸ See Peters, Cathy, et al. "*Black and Proud: The Music of the Black Panther Party.*"

party. Artists faced the challenge of balancing their artistic integrity with the demands of political activism. They had to find ways to effectively communicate the party's message through their artwork while maintaining their artistic vision and creativity. Striking the right balance between art and activism could be a delicate task. The BPP also operated with limited financial resources, which affected the availability of materials and support for artists.⁷⁹ Artists often had to work with modest resources and make the most of what was available. This constraint could impact the scale, quality, and visibility of their artwork.

The BPP faced significant external repression and surveillance from government agencies, with programs such as COINTELPRO. Artists associated with the party were often targeted by law enforcement and faced the risk of persecution, imprisonment, or harassment. This external pressure and repression created an environment of caution and self-censorship, limiting the freedom of expression for artists.⁸⁰ Due to the controversial nature of the BPP and the surveillance it faced, artists associated with the party often encountered difficulties finding exhibition spaces and galleries willing to showcase their work. Not only did some artists feel hesitant and restricted in supporting the cause, but the BPP also had predominantly male leadership for a period and a focus on issues of racial oppression. This sometimes resulted in the marginalization of women artists and limited opportunities for them to have their voices and perspectives heard within the party's artistic endeavors.⁸¹ Women artists within the BPP had to navigate the tumultuous dynamics within the BPP while pursuing their artistic aspirations.

⁷⁹ See Peters, Cathy, et al. *Black and Proud: The Music of the Black Panther Party.*”

⁸⁰ Davenport, Christian. *Media Bias, Perspective, and State Repression: The Black Panther Party.* Cambridge University Press, 2009.

⁸¹ See Fenderson, Jonathan. *James Smethurst, The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s.*”

Many artists nationwide involved with the BPP in some fashion tried to support the cause, such as James Baldwin, James Brown, Nina Simone, and more. However, some felt they weren't as active in the cause as the hardcore radicals and members. James Baldwin touched upon this in his discussion with Rev. John Eckles and Chairman Bobby Seales, printed in one of the BPP newspapers in May 1968.⁸²

"I'm not sure I'm a good revolutionary, I'm a writer in a revolutionary situation. I do what I do, I know what I have."

Much is to be said about what a "good revolutionary" looks like. One may refer to the infamous quote from Gil-Scott Heron who once said, "The revolution will not be televised." This statement is multi-layered, while analyzing the meaning behind it, the conclusion ended up matching what the Black Panther Party was trying to convey. One will not be able to watch the revolution occur passively from the comfort of their home, spoon-fed information from different media outlets and celebrities. Change and revolution can only come from people actively participating within it by doing community-building, and fighting for the freedom of those who cannot afford to be passive which was what the BPP was striving towards. The issue with that is many artists who were either looking for or falling into fame, would avoid discussing their views on the political climate of that time so they can be seen as "palatable" and less reactionary to mainstream media. In 1968, James Baldwin published an essay on Sidney Poitier that discusses the burden of Black celebrities. He writes "It's only the black artist in this country who have been called upon to fulfill their responsibilities as artists and at the same time i responsibilities as citizens" which was indicative of how many Black artists felt during that time period.⁸³ They had

⁸² Baggins, Brian. "The Black Panther Newspaper." *Black Panther Party Newspaper*, www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/black-panther/index.htm.

⁸³ Baldwin, J. (1968). James Baldwin; Sidney Poitier. Look, 50-58.

to decide between acknowledging the clear political strife and supporting a Black community that is advocating for the freedom and equality of your people during peak civil unrest and racism or protecting their brand and the financial opportunities that come with it. So, the decision to support the BPP was not one that Black celebrities made lightly. Those who chose to do so, like Kurtis Blow, Sidney Poitier, Muhammad Ali and Harry Belafonte almost surely understood the kind of blowback they would likely receive. This blowback can be understood when we look at our previous examples. They were all essentially saying to White America: Yes, I am successful, and I have risen above my station in life. However, I will not forget my roots. I will not forget where I came from. My success is yours as well. Therefore, you need to start valuing Black lives, a proposition that many White Americans were not willing to entertain at the time. Consequently, when we think about how celebrities handled their associations with the BPP, it becomes clear that for some, it was simply too risky.

Even though the BPP worked alongside celebrities and artists to help promote their cause, that trust was not always present on the party's side due to the unclear alliances some of the artists had. Although some celebrities genuinely supported the party and its members, many remained aloof or even hostile toward it. For example, while Tommie Smith and John Carlos famously gave a Black power salute at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, never acknowledged any affiliation with the Black Panther Party in public following criticism from both sides of the political aisle.⁸⁴ In addition to this lack of clarity around certain celebrity affiliations, there were

⁸⁴ Bradley, Adam. "The Timeless Appeal of Tommie Smith, Who Knew a Podium Could Be a Site of Protest." *The New York Times*, 6 Aug. 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/08/06/t-magazine/the-timeless-appeal-of-tommie-smith.html.

also suspicions that other celebrities were exploiting the Black Panthers for their own personal gain. This was particularly true when it came to popular singers using BPP's rhetoric as music samples featuring spoken word clips from their speeches. While these recordings may have helped spread awareness about their message, there was a feeling among some Panthers activists that these musicians were simply using them to sell records without providing any real financial or practical support for the organization. These experiences taught Panthers members an important lesson: while some celebrities might appear sympathetic to their cause on the surface, they could never fully trust those who seemed unwilling (or unable) to commit themselves wholeheartedly to their struggle. As a result, many Panthers activists sought out everyday people—from ordinary citizens to local business owners—willing to give generously of their time and resources to advance social change within their communities. Even though they encountered obstacles along the way, these dedicated individuals kept up hope despite it all—ultimately becoming an integral part of history in the process.

VIII. Legacy and Long-term Impact

A. Influence on subsequent movements and activism

The Black Panther Party recognized the importance of engaging and empowering young people. Through initiatives like the Intercommunal Youth Institute and the Young Lords Party, the BPP provided platforms for youth to develop leadership skills and contribute to community activism. Their emphasis on youth empowerment paved the way for subsequent youth-led movements, such as the student-led March for Our Lives, which advocates for social change and challenge systemic issues. The Black Panther Party's recognition of the link between systemic racism, poverty, and environmental degradation laid the foundation for environmental justice activism. Their advocacy for clean and safe neighborhoods, as well as their promotion of sustainable practices, anticipated the contemporary environmental justice movement. By

highlighting the disproportionate environmental burdens marginalized communities face, the BPP inspired subsequent efforts to address environmental racism and fight for equitable access to clean air, water, and land.

The Black Panther Party's focus on educational programs, such as the Liberation Schools, challenged the inadequate and discriminatory education system in underserved communities. Their initiatives aimed to empower individuals through education and inspire critical thinking. Today, organizations like The Black Panther Party Cubs, which provides educational support and mentorship, draw inspiration from the BPP's commitment to education as a tool for liberation. The Black Panther Party's activism against police brutality and its establishment of community-based patrols to monitor law enforcement practices set a precedent for contemporary movements like Black Lives Matter. The BPP's efforts to expose systemic racism within the criminal justice system and advocate for reform have had a lasting impact on the current push for police accountability, criminal justice reform, and the dismantling of mass incarceration.

The Black Panther Party's advocacy for workers' rights and their critique of exploitative labor practices aligned with their broader fight against systemic oppression. Their understanding of the interconnectedness of racial and economic injustice resonated with subsequent labor movements, influencing campaigns for fair wages, worker protections, and the fight against exploitative practices such as wage theft and unsafe working conditions. The Black Panther Party's focus on economic empowerment and community self-sufficiency played a significant role in inspiring subsequent cooperative movements. The BPP's initiatives, such as the Free Breakfast for Children and the Free Food Program, showcased their commitment to addressing food insecurity and poverty. Their advocacy for economic self-determination and cooperative economics

influenced later movements that promote alternative economic systems, such as worker cooperatives, community land trusts, and mutual aid networks.

The Black Panther Party's healthcare initiatives, such as their Free Health Clinics, demonstrated their commitment to addressing healthcare disparities in underserved communities. Their emphasis on community-based healthcare and the provision of free medical services influenced the development of community health centers and grassroots healthcare organizations. The BPP's approach to healthcare equity continues to inspire movements advocating for accessible and affordable healthcare for all, particularly in marginalized communities.

B. Final thoughts on the artistic and cultural legacy of the BPP, broader implications, and relevance today

The artistic and cultural legacy of the BPP remains deeply relevant in contemporary society, as racial inequality and systemic injustices persist. The continued marginalization of Black communities and the urgent need for transformative change demonstrate the ongoing significance of the BPP's message. The BPP is still relevant today because there are still many issues facing Black communities across America (and across the world). These include police brutality against Black people; unfair treatment by law enforcement officials; mass incarceration rates for young Black men; lack of access to education for children living in poverty; lack of access to healthcare for those living below the poverty line; high rates of poverty among women of color; racial prejudice among white Americans towards people of color; etc. The BPP's cultural work, which emphasized Black pride, self-determination, and community organizing, has inspired several social justice movements that continue to fight against racial injustice and inequality today. For example, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which emerged in response to the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012, has been heavily influenced by the BPP's

legacy. The movement's focus on community organizing, direct action, and cultural work, including music, poetry, and visual art, is a direct reflection of the BPP's approach to social justice activism.

Today, artists and activists draw inspiration from the BPP's cultural contributions to fuel contemporary movements like BLM. Emulating the party's use of art, music, and poetry as tools for resistance, they challenge dominant narratives, demand justice, and amplify the voices of marginalized communities. Through visual art, artists provide a platform to question prevailing power structures, highlight the lived experiences of Black individuals, and provoke social dialogue. Musicians, poets, and spoken word artists follow in the footsteps of Elaine Brown and Gil Scott-Heron, using their craft to express collective outrage, inspire unity, and effect change.

The artistic and cultural legacy of the Black Panther Party continues to have a profound impact on contemporary society. Their revolutionary art, cultural contributions, and community programs challenged dominant narratives, redefined the aesthetics of Black identity, and inspired grassroots movements. The BPP's emphasis on Black pride and self-determination helped to inspire a generation of Black musicians who continue to use their music to address these same issues. For example, Public Enemy's 1989 album "Fear of a Black Planet" was heavily influenced by the BPP's cultural work, and featured songs like "Fight the Power" that addressed issues of racism and police brutality. Similarly, Kendrick Lamar's 2015 album "To Pimp a Butterfly" was inspired by the BPP's legacy and featured songs like "Alright" that also addressed issues of police brutality and racism. The party's iconic imagery, including the Black Panther logo, has become a symbol of black resistance and empowerment and has been appropriated by other social justice movements, including the BLM movement. Also, the Black Lives Matter movement has organized programs like the BPP's cultural work, like free food and clothing

drives and free health clinics, to address the material needs of Black communities and to build community solidarity.

The party's approach to art as a means of consciousness-raising and mobilization became a template for marginalized communities seeking to challenge oppressive systems, amplifying their voices and asserting their agency. By examining the BPP's artistic and cultural legacy, we gain insights into its enduring relevance and the lessons they offer to contemporary artists, activists, and society. Engaging with their legacy empowers us to dismantle systemic oppression, cultivate cultural pride, and work towards a more equitable and just future.

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