# THE POWER OF IMAGES – HOW THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY BECAME ICONIC

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Many political movements of the sixties are better known for the images they produced than the idea they defended. A case in point is the Black Panther Party, whose leaders have become iconic themselves. Throughout the 70s, the portrait of Angela Davis or the image of an army of black men wearing black leather jackets and black berets, demanding the right to bear arms, circulated throughout the world.
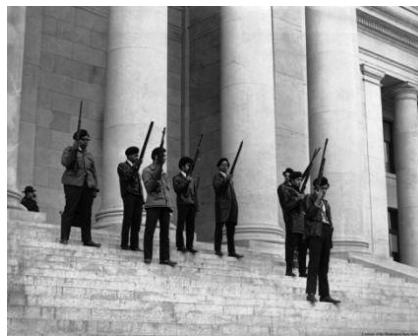


Part of the political message of the Black Panther Party was in fact visual: African Americans were urged to reclaim their image as Blacks and as African. Becoming world famous when incarcerated for political terrorism (1970-71), Angela Davis and her afro became as much of a political statement as the Panther that symbolized the party. The Panther is Black, and African, two characteristics the American people of color were rarely proud of before the radical black movements of the late sixties. Blackness and Africaness became strongly associated with strength and courage, and the threatening policy of self-defense.

The Ten-Point Program of the Black Panther Party was Proletarian, Marxist-Leninisti, demanding (the formulations are shortened here):

1. Power to determine the destiny of our black community
2. Full employment
3. An end to the robbery by the capitalists of our black community
4. Decent housing
5. Education that teaches us our true history
6. Exemption from military service
7. An immediate end to police brutality and murder
8. The release of black prisoners
9. Juries composed of black people
10. Land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace

The Ten-Point Program ends on the first two paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence, calling for revolution and stating human rights for all, so as to make these demands legitimate

within the American democratic heritage. The original Black Panther logo posters always included a "power to the people" injunction.



Yet, the public reduced the political agenda of the party to its violent elements, so strongly conveyed by its provocative images.

Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, the two founders of the Black Panther Party, were very aware of the impact of images at a time when they could be circulated faster, cheaper and better than ever before.



*Huey P. Newton, "Minister of Defense," 1967*

This picture was originally taken to illustrate the second issue of the Black Panther paper, but it was published widely and became the symbol of a revolutionary movement that aspired to a form of cultural syncretism: as seen in the staging of the photograph, the Black Panther Party advocates the embracing of African culture and the use of both American and African weapons to do so. Huey P. Newton is proudly sitting in a wicker chair typical of the American South, set on an African zebra carpet. He is holding an African lance and an American shotgun, flanked by two African shields. He is clearly stating his right to bear arms as an American citizen, wearing a leather jacket and black beret, combining street and military culture.

The picture was displayed in the window of the Black Panther's office in LA and became the symbol of the violence of the movement, to which the authorities replied with violence.

*Black Panthers General Quarters in Los Angeles, September 10, 1968.*
*Photo: Pirkle Jones/Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.*

The power of this picture resides in the symbolic murder of two key figures of the Black Panther Party: Huey P. Newton, one of the original founders, and Eldrige Cleaver, then a presidential candidate for the Peace and Freedom Party (founded in 1967, the Peace and Freedom Party opposed the Vietnam war and has survived to this day, nominating Ralph Nader in the 2008 presidential election). The Peace and Freedom party logo is visible, left of the "Cleaver for President" sign, and is a counter point to the attacking black panther on the right.



Although the picture is undeniably "neutral"–it is only documenting an event that occurred–it begs interpretation. On the one hand, the sheer violence of the scene can be seen as a reflection of the violent propaganda of the Party and violent lives of its leaders. Huey P. Newton and Eldridge Cleaver had both served time in prison (respectively for embezzlement and for rape and assault) and would both be accused of and eventually admit to murder. On the other hand, the violence of the Black Panther party, described at the time by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover as "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country," is pit against such striking evidence of police repression. The cracks and holes in the glass can easily stand for broken and lost lives, justifying the Panthers' philosophy of self-defense. The BPP headquarter window is covered with posters, showing the liveliness of the party's activity, and the crushing force set against it. The effect is chilling, as sharp as broken glass, as contrasted as black and white.

The urban environment of the city of Oakland, where the attack took place, is visible above and right of Cleaver's head with the reflection of a street lamp, as if to add an imaginary halo. Although both still alive and well in 1968, Huey P. Newton and Eldridge Cleaver were perceived as potential martyrs, only a few months after the assassination of Martin Luther King (April 4th, 1968) and Robert F. Kennedy (June 6th, 1968), in the wake of Malcolm X (1965) and John F. Kennedy (1963). While they both survived these tumultuous times, until 1989 (Newton) and

1998 (Cleaver), this picture of their symbolic death consecrates the 1960s as an era when public figures were also public icons.

The circulation of activist images greatly increased, with new technology that made printing (on paper but also, as seen above, buttons, etc.) much easier and cheaper. Activist groups such as the Black Panther Party and other racial minority groups (Latinos, Native Americans), but also anti-war, pacifist movements, environmentalists, feminists, gays and lesbians, students everywhere expressed a wide ranging revolt against the "system," targeting at a young audience receptive to ideology conveyed through powerful iconography.

The abundance of such images during the politically active 60s-70s through the 90s and today, largely contributed to greater freedom of expression (less censorship, non-conformity, breaking from tradition). A highly creative counter-culture opened horizons that would continue to be explored in the following decades.

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[i] See complete "Rules of the Black Panther Party": http://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/black-panthers/unknown-date/party-rules.htm (last accessed, November 15, 2012)