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Party Artist: Emory Douglas and the Black Panther Party

EMORY DOUGLAS, MINISTER OF CULTURE and revolutionary artist for the Black Panther Party (BPP), was not one to make subtle images. Rather, his art was designed to rip the heart out of those oppressing the black community. Douglas's July 4, 1970, poster image for the *Black Panther Community News Service* illustrates this point. In the foreground is a defiant African American woman staring angrily ahead, holding three weapons, including a butcher knife. On her shirt is a button that reads DEATH TO THE FASCIST PIGS. Behind her is a man without a weapon, foregrounding the woman as the primary defender of the household, and by extension the community. The text above the figures reads ALL THE WEAPONS WE USED TO USE AGAINST EACH OTHER WE NOW USE AGAINST THE OPPRESSOR. The text below paraphrases Malcolm X: BY ALL MEANS AVAILABLE.

Behind Douglas's veneer of violence is the ideology of the BPP's Ten-Point Program and Platform—the manifesto that launched the BPP and a revolutionary movement out of Oakland, California. Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, founders of the BPP, had coauthored the program and on October 15, 1966, printed more than thousand copies and distributed them throughout inner-city Oakland.¹ Each of the ten points, framed by the phrases “What We Want” and “What We Believe,” began with a concrete demand followed by how each demand would be realized. Point seven read:

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.²



Emory Douglas, poster from *The Black Panther*, July 4, 1970 (copyright 2013 Emory Douglas/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; image courtesy of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics)

Starting in 1966, BPP members began shadowing Oakland Police Department squad cars as they patrolled the inner city. When a police officer would pull over a black motorist or stop to question a pedestrian, the Black Panthers would also pull over. Panther members would then step out of their car armed with law books, cameras, tape recorders, and loaded shotguns to make sure that the police were not violating the rights of a community member. In each case, their guns would be in plain view and pointed upward—all of which was legal under California law. If the person being questioned was arrested, the Panthers would bail him or her out of jail.

This community service was born out of necessity. The civil rights movement brought about progressive legislation (the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, among others), but it did not end poverty, unemployment, substandard housing, and social programs. Neither did it end the climate of despair and anger in poor black communities across the United States. This created a tinderbox waiting to explode—riots or, better stated, rebellions—erupted in numerous cities, including Watts (1965), Newark (1967), and Detroit

(1967), among others. The spark that ignited the fuse was often police harassment, police brutality, or the death of a resident at the hands of the police. In Oakland, the police force was notoriously racist; it contained nineteen African American officers out of a total of six hundred.³ Local white retailers all but refused to hire African Americans, and the city's paper of record, *The Oakland Tribune*, avoided addressing issues and concerns relevant to the inner-city population.

Newton and Seale's response was to form the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense—a revolutionary party based on Marxist-Leninist principles. It called for community control of all institutions—including the police—a complete redistribution of wealth, and solidarity with all oppressed peoples and nations fighting U.S.-led capitalism and imperialism. Central to the formation of the party was the gun. Panther members holding a loaded shotgun, dressed in a black leather jacket, black pants, black beret, and a blue shirt sent a powerful visual message. To those outside the inner city it pronounced: *We will protect ourselves and stand up to racism and police brutality with force*—a message intended to make police officers think twice before brutalizing the black community. To those inside the community, the gun and the uniform served as a recruitment tool and said: *Join us*. One of the earliest BPP recruits was a twenty-two-year-old artist from San Francisco, Emory Douglas.

Revolutionary Artist

"I was drawn to it [the Black Panther Party] because of its dedication to self-defense. The Civil Rights Movement headed by Dr. King turned me off at that time, for in those days non-violent protest had no appeal to me. And although the rebellions in Watts, Detroit, and Newark were not well organized they did appeal to my nature. I could identify with them."

—Emory Douglas⁴

Douglas was a California transplant. When he was eight, he and his mother moved to San Francisco from Grand Rapids, Michigan. In 1955, at age twelve, he landed a nine-month sentence for truancy and fighting and was sent to the Log Cabin Ranch, a juvenile correctional facility north of the city. Later, Douglas was sentenced to fifteen months at the Youth Training School in Ontario, California. Both provided work experience for his future role in the BPP. At the Log Cabin Ranch, Douglas's job was to take care of the pigs on the farm. At the Youth Training School, he worked in the print shop and learned the basics of commercial printing.

His interest in the printing trade led him to enroll at the City College of San Francisco, where he studied graphic design. He also joined the Black Students' Association and designed theater sets for LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), who was a visiting professor at San Francisco State University and one of the leading voices in the black arts movement.

Douglas also frequented the Black House in the Lower Haight neighborhood of San Francisco—a space established by author Eldridge Cleaver, playwright Ed Bullins, and Willie Dale in early 1967.⁵ Douglas happened to stop by when Newton and Seale were visiting with Cleaver, and when Seale was laying out the first issue of the *Black Panther Community News Service*—a crudely produced mimeographed paper with a print run of 1,000. Douglas took interest and told Seale that he "could help improve the quality of what was being done."⁶ Douglas's talents quickly gained Newton and Seale's confidence. He was asked to join the Party and become the "Revolutionary Artist" and minister of culture,

responsible for creating the images, graphics, posters, and visual iconography for the BPP, along with the layout, design, and overall production for the weekly newspaper.⁷ By May 1967, he was at work redesigning the *Black Panther*. He shifted production for the third issue to web press, which allowed for two-color printing and a more polished, professional-looking newspaper where photographs and graphics could flourish.⁸ He also redesigned the masthead and included an image of Huey P. Newton in the far right corner. Most significantly, Douglas reserved the back cover and much of the front cover for full-size reproductions of his drawings and collages that visualized the campaigns and the ideology of the BPP. In this space, he created the iconography of the party: Panther warriors, community members battling the police, the bootlickers gallery, and most notably, the image of the pig.

Creating a Revolutionary Consciousness

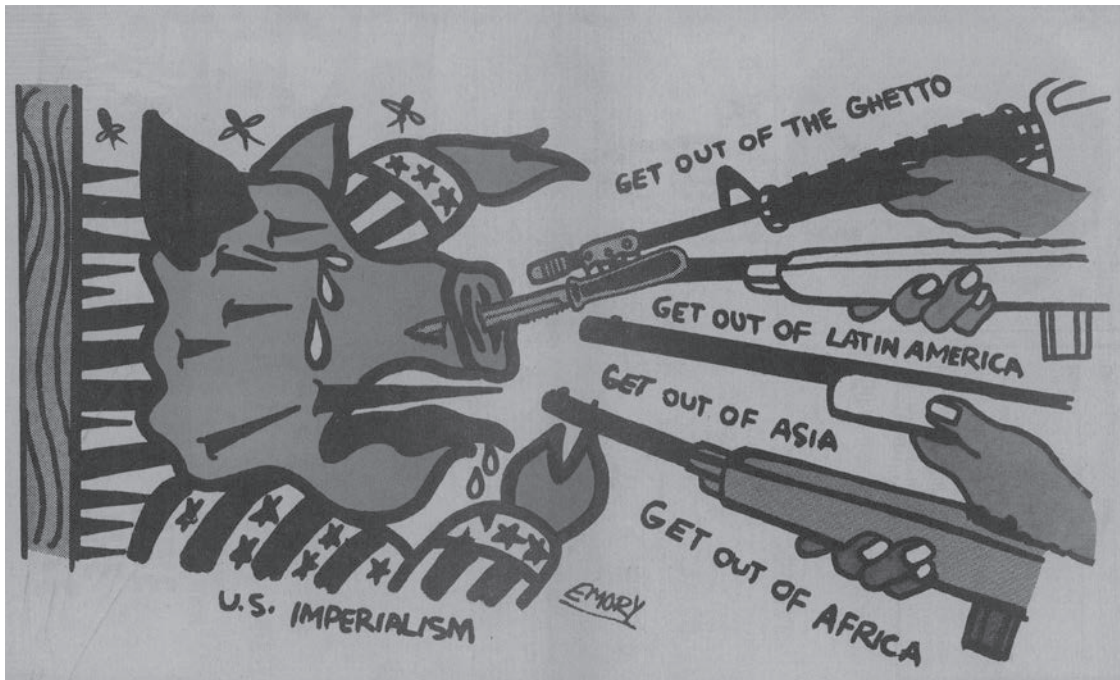
Newton and Seale wanted the black community to view the police as occupying the ghetto in ways similar to how the U.S. military was occupying South Vietnam. At first they labeled the police “fascists” and “swine,” but these terms did not catch on in the community. So Newton and Seale settled on “pig” and asked Douglas to visualize it. Douglas recalls:

We were going to put the badge number on this pig each week, who was harassing people in the community. So after that, doing that pig, I had in my mind, how can I improve it? And it just came to me that I could just stand the pig up on his hoofs, and dress him up like a cop, but still have the character of a pig.⁹

This image appeared in the second issue of the *Black Panther* (May 1967) and was accompanied by the definition “A low natured beast that has no regard for law, justice, or the rights of people . . . a foul, depraved traducer, usually found masquerading as a victim of an unprovoked attack.”¹⁰

Soon thereafter, the verbal definition would not be needed. Douglas routinely filled the *Black Panther* with images of the police, politicians, and the U.S. military as pigs. Many images were nothing short of brutal: a pig covered in flies, hanged from a tree by a noose and riddled by bullets.

Behind the hyperviolent representation lay Panther politics. Douglas’s images illustrated numerous aspects of the Ten-Point Program, including community control of the police, self-determination, decent housing and social services, and the end of imperialist wars. For instance, Douglas’s January 3, 1970, illustration for the *Black Panther* features a pig labeled “U.S. imperialism” and dressed in a stars-and-stripes shirt. Four assault rifles point at its head, one stabbing his snout with a bayonet. In the background is a board of spikes that also pierce his head. The text interwoven with the weapons are messages to the United States: “Get Out of the Ghetto,” “Get Out of Latin America,” “Get Out of Asia,” and “Get Out of Africa.”



Emory Douglas, poster from *The Black Panther*, January 3, 1970 (copyright 2013 Emory Douglas/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York; image courtesy of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics)

Here, Douglas aligns the black ghetto and the BPP with Third World liberation struggles, and the revolutionary anticapitalist movements in the 1950s and 1960s—the Chinese Revolution (1949), the Algerian anticolonial movement (1954), Kenya Mau Mau rebellions (1955), Ghanaian independence (1957), the Cuban Revolution (1959), and the protracted independence struggle of the Vietnamese against the French and then the United States.¹¹

However, an organized armed revolution in the United States was not seen as possible at the time, and Newton and Seale sought to change this. They aimed to create a black revolutionary consciousness, starting in Oakland. Seale wrote

Huey understood that you answer the momentary desires and needs of the people, that you try to instruct them and politically educate them, that these are their basic political desires and needs, and from the people themselves will rage a revolution to make sure that they have these basic desires and needs fulfilled.¹²

But there was a problem: the majority of the black community was not nearly as radical as the Panthers. Many likely shared similar grievances against the police and against social inequalities, but this did not lead to a large percentage turning toward socialism or taking up arms against the state and its agents of control—the police, the courts, and the military.

Because of this, the BPP viewed the cultural front—creating images and authoring essays, poetry, and music that would help foster a revolutionary consciousness within the black urban working class—as a key component of their mission. Eldridge Cleaver notes, “Huey was always conscious of the fact that he was creating a vanguard organization, and that he was moving at a speed so far beyond where the rest of Afro-America was at, that his primary concern was to find ways of rapidly communicating what he saw and knew to the rest of the people.”¹³

The mainstream media almost always vilified the BPP, making the *Black Panther*'s role critical to the organization's objective. It was the only print medium that was completely under the party's control, and it allowed them to lambaste their enemies, shape their own image, and represent their own programs in a positive light.¹⁴

The *Black Panther* also served another key function: fund-raising. At its circulation peak, upward of 50,000 copies of the paper were published each week. The BPP received five cents for every twenty-five-cent paper sold. This provided much needed funds that went to pay rent on offices, bills, and other expenses.¹⁵ Rank-and-file members would sell papers, as would neighborhood kids on bikes who kept ten cents for every copy sold. The rest went to printing costs.¹⁶

Nearly one-third of all papers sold were in the Bay Area; the rest were shipped around the United States and the world via commercial airlines. Bundles of papers were sent out on jets leaving the Bay Area to BPP chapters in Chicago, Detroit, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, DC, Los Angeles, and New Orleans, along with shipments to locales in Canada, the UK, France, Sweden, and China.¹⁷ However, this shipping method came with a risk. The airlines, working in concert with local authorities and the FBI, would at times hold up bundles for weeks, making issues outdated and difficult to sell. Seale also noted in 1970 that “thousands of issues were received soaking wet.”¹⁸ The remedy to this problem was to ship the papers out COD (cash on delivery). This allowed the BPP to collect insurance from the airlines, and not surprisingly, damaged papers and late shipments came to a near halt.

Communication also came from the posters, postcards, and event flyers that Douglas designed. Runs of 10,000 to 20,000 copies of his posters were printed, and he and other BPP members would wheat-paste them as well as the back-cover posters of the *Black Panther* throughout inner-city Oakland.

These images served key functions. They recruited new members, spread Panther news and ideas, and broadcast the notion that the party had mass support in the black community. In 1970, Douglas wrote:

The People are the backbone to the Artist and not the Artist to the People . . . the Revolutionary Artist must constantly be agitating the people, but before one agitates the people, as the struggle progresses, one must make strong roots among the masses of the people.¹⁹

The question becomes: Did Douglas and the BPP synthesize and articulate the ideas of the community? Or were they attempting to reeducate the community and shift black working-class individuals toward a more revolutionary ideology? The answer is both.

Though Douglas took inspiration from the local community, he and the Panther leadership shared a broader, more radical ideology, heavily informed by the work of Malcolm X, Mao Zedong, Che Guevara, and Frantz Fanon. In 1964, Malcolm X stated, “We must launch a cultural revolution to un-brainwash an entire people.”²⁰ Four years later, Newton would say virtually the same thing: “The sleeping masses must be bombarded with the correct approach to struggle through the activities of the vanguard party . . . The party must use all means available to get this information across to the masses.”²¹

Art became a critical mode of outreach and propaganda, and Douglas drew upon a wide range of graphic sources from Third World liberation struggles—most notably the poster art coming out of Cuba, Vietnam, and Palestine.

Specifically, inspiration came from the Cuba-based group OSPAAAL (the Organization of Solidarity of the People of Asia, Africa, and Latin America), who produced solidarity posters with text in Spanish, English, French, and Arabic that were folded up and included copies inside of their publication, *Tricontinental*, which was mailed to subscribers all over the world, including the Black Panther office in Oakland. These images and these revolutionary movements fueled Douglas, and he and the BPP promoted these struggles with the hope that the black inner-city community would launch their own uprising.



Rafad Morante Boyenzo, *Power to the People. George*, OSPAAAL poster, 1971—image depicts the murder of George Jackson in the San Quentin prison (Interference Archive)

Violent Images, Era, and Outcome

"To draw about revolutionary things, we must shoot and/or be ready to shoot when the time comes. In order to draw about the people who are shooting, we must capture the true revolution in a pictorial fashion. We must feel what the people feel who throw rocks and bottles at the oppressor so that when we draw about it—we can raise their level of consciousness to hand grenades and dynamite to launch at the oppressor."

—Emory Douglas, "Position Paper No. 1 on Revolutionary Art,"
The Black Panther, January 24, 1970²²

Douglas's violent images and words were not just rhetoric; they reflected the Panthers' position on revolutionary violence and the confrontations that raged between the BPP and the police. Tensions began the first time the Panthers carried their guns in public on community patrols. It escalated when a group of Panthers, including Douglas, arrived at the State Capitol Building in Sacramento on May 2, 1967, armed to the teeth. The Panthers—protesting a vote by the State Assembly on the Mulford Act that would make carrying loaded guns in public illegal—marched into the assembly chamber with their guns visible and pointed upward, all in accordance with the soon-to-be-altered California law. This action caused a flood of media coverage that worked to the Panthers' advantage. In the words of Greg Jung Morozumi, the media image of an organized, armed cadre of black inner-city radicals confronting the power structure was meant to "deter state violence and heal the battered Black psyche."²³ But it also had a countereffect: it escalated the police and FBI violence toward the BPP.

On April 6, 1968, seventeen-year-old BPP member Bobby Hutton was killed during a gun battle with the Oakland police. Three police officers were wounded, and eight Panthers were jailed, including Eldridge Cleaver. In 1969, Bunchy Carter—founder of the Southern California chapter of the BPP—and John Huggins were killed in a shoot-out with the black nationalist group US Organization (or Organization Us) on the UCLA campus. Documents later revealed that the FBI had inflamed tensions between the BPP and US by mailing both groups death threats and humiliating cartoons, as if they were sent from each other. That same year, Fred Hampton, deputy chairman of the Illinois chapter of the BPP, was brutally murdered in his apartment in Chicago, in what has been widely accepted as an assassination by the Chicago Police Department and the FBI. All in all, an estimated twenty-five Panthers would die—killed at the hands of the police, rival groups, and other BPP members.

The police were victims too. On October 28, 1967, Newton engaged in a shoot-out with the Oakland police in the late hours of the morning during a routine traffic stop, just one year after cofounding the BPP. Details of the event remain murky, but when the smoke cleared, one officer lay dead and another officer was wounded. Newton fled the scene with a gunshot wound in his abdomen and was later arrested at the hospital and handcuffed to his bed. He was jailed, convicted in September 1968 for voluntary manslaughter and sentenced to two to fifteen years in prison, but was released in August 1970 after two retrials ended with hung juries.

Douglas's images seen in the context of these events change their meanings. They do not seem so imagined or exaggerated. Instead, they mirror the violent climate that engulfed the Panthers, and by extension the nation and its foreign policy. However, Douglas's graphic images are arresting with their stark depiction of violence against the police and the state. His images set a clear narrative: African Americans as the aggressor and the victor.

His December 19, 1970, *Black Panther* illustration depicts an African American man riddling a police officer with bullets as a young child watches from a window. This image becomes even more harrowing for the victim is drawn as a person, not a caricature of a pig, making the reality of the violence all the more intense.

Equally so his November 21, 1970, image "Shoot to Kill" acts as a how-to manual for killing police officers and depicts various scenes of African Americans killing the police via guns, knives, dynamite, and strangulation. The text reads, "Our Minister of Culture, Emory Douglas Teaches . . . We Have to Begin to Draw Pictures That Will Make People Go Out and Kill Pigs."

Less brutal is his June 27, 1970, image "Warning to America," which depicts a woman standing defiantly with her finger on the trigger of a machine gun. She wears a button that reads SELF-DEFENSE.

At the top of the poster is an unattributed quote: "We are from 25 to 30 million strong, and we are armed. And we are conscious of our situation. And we are determined to change it. And we are unafraid." Here, the viewer is expected to read the quote as com-



Emory Douglas, poster from *The Black Panther*, December 19, 1970 (copyright 2013 Emory Douglas/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York; image courtesy of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics)

ing from the fictionalized warrior. She is not identified, but could represent any woman in the community, or one of the Panther rank-and-file women or party leaders, including Kathleen Cleaver or Elaine Brown. The quote, however, is the most imagined aspect of the image. The entire African American population was estimated to be around 30 million in the early 1970s. BPP membership, meanwhile, fluctuated between 1,500 and 5,000.²⁴ This is far short of the 25 to 30 million armed African American revolutionaries as the image purports. But Douglas was visualizing what he hoped would transpire.

Common themes emerge in many of his images, including the three discussed. Douglas by and large avoids presenting black people as victims. Instead, he presents a lopsided conflict in which the BPP and the community are able to easily crush their foes. The trouble with this narrative was that it strayed from reality. It presented a false sense of security that gun battles with the police were simple, heroic, and came with few consequences. This narrative may have helped the black psyche, but it did not adequately address the toll that state violence had taken on the Panthers.

Neither did it focus primary attention on the rampant police brutality that afflicted minority communities across the United States. In reality, gun battles with the police had proved to be disastrous for the BPP, forcing Newton to call for an end to these confrontations when he emerged from jail in 1970. Instead, he refocused the BPP on the community survival programs. Yet ending the culture of violence proved to be a difficult, if not impossible, task.

Shift to Survival Programs

"My art was a reflection of the politics of the party, so when the party changed to community action so did my art, from pigs to kids."

—Emory Douglas²⁵

From 1970 on, the BPP redirected its goals toward community survival programs. These included a free breakfast program, liberation schools for children, free health clinics, free sickle-cell testing, free legal aid, a free clothing program, free bags of groceries given away at rallies at DeFremery Park in West Oakland, and a free ambulance program. Oakland once again became the party's focal point. Eldridge Cleaver, whom Huey Newton blamed for isolating the BPP from the immediate community and for extolling a policy of violence toward the police, was expelled from the party, creating divisions between those members loyal to Cleaver and those loyal to Newton.

Douglas's images in the *Black Panther* reflected the shift in BPP policy. By the spring of 1971, guns were close to absent in his images. Instead, his work documented the survival programs: images of community members receiving free food, clothes, and medical services. For example, Douglas's May 27, 1972, hand-drawn image for the *Black Panther* depicts an African American woman who holds groceries from the free food

program and shoes from the free shoe program. She also carries a sign that reads, VOTE FOR SURVIVAL.

The image doubles as a campaign poster; Douglas includes text that promotes two BPP candidates for office (Seale for mayor of Oakland and Elaine Brown for councilwoman). The poster also endorsed BPP allies Ron Dellums for congressman and Shirley Chisholm for president.²⁶

In 1972, when Seale ran unsuccessfully for mayor of Oakland, he received more than 47,000 votes. Douglas asserts that the people were not simply voting for an individual, instead, “Those people were voting for our programs, and our ideals.”²⁷ Also notable in the drawing is Douglas’s new approach toward listing the media that he used to make the image. Listed on the bottom of the image is “Drawing done with black point ink pen plus graphite pencil powder.” Here, Douglas becomes a teacher, instructing the community in his techniques for making art.

Douglas and the BPP viewed their community-based survival programs as part of their revolutionary practice. The state did so as well, and targeted the BPP for elimination. In early 1969, the FBI sent a memo to twenty-seven field offices that called the breakfast programs the “best and most influential activity going for the BPP and as such, is potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities . . . to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for.”²⁸

In the late 1960s, early 1970s, 233 out of the 295 FBI counterintelligence operations aimed at black liberation groups were directed toward the BPP. FBI tactics included surveillance, infiltration, agents provocateurs, false testimonies, harassment, planting stories in the media and coercing journalists, and political assassinations, among others. All of this weakened the BPP.

Newton had predicted this scenario in 1968 when he stated, “The party must exist above ground as long as the dog power structure will allow, and hopefully when the party is forced to go underground the message of the party will already have been put across to the people. The vanguard party’s activities on the surface will be necessarily short lived.”²⁹ This held true. The FBI was able to derail the Panthers through jailing, killing, and forcing their



Emory Douglas, poster from *The Black Panther*, May 27, 1972 (copyright 2013 Emory Douglas/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York; image courtesy of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics)

leadership into exile; but the *culture* of the BPP could not be as easily destroyed. Instead, it was disseminated throughout the world. For thirteen years, Douglas visualized the BPP ideology through the *Black Panther* and other forms of visual media. His work was revolutionary. It was part of a revolutionary struggle against racism, capitalism, and imperialism, and served the needs of the party, or in his words, it served “a purpose that was bigger than yourself.”³⁰