Political Art of the Black Panther Party: Cultural Contrasts in the Nineteen Sixties Countermovement

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The origins of the Black Power Movement can be traced back to the civil rights movement's sit-ins and freedom rides of the late nineteen fifties which conveyed a new racial consciousness within the black community. The initial forms of popular protest led by Martin Luther King Jr. were generally non-violent. However, by the mid-1960s many blacks were becoming increasingly frustrated with the slow pace and limited extent of progressive change. In this climate of frustration, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, which advocated violent self defense, and began "picking up the guns" and patrolling the police in 1965.[1] Through the pages of the Party's weekly newspaper the *Black Panther*, resident artist Emory Douglas displayed this built up rage in his drawings while promoting action and vengeance. Douglas argued that "the real benefit at this time would be for all progressive artists to take up their paints and brushes in one hand and their gun in the other, attacking the foul depraved U.S. Government."[2] The purpose of my research is to examine the works of Douglas in two ways: first, by making a comparison between Douglas's work and Andy Warhol's "Race Riots Series" and secondly, by contrasting Douglas's depictions of the party, which emphasized female empowerment, with that of the mass media, which emphasized overt masculinity within the Party.

As the Black Panther Party became more popular within the black community, the Party's newspaper circulation reached more than four hundred thousand copies at its

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[1] Carolyn Calloway, "Group Cohesiveness in the Black Panther Party.*" Journal of Black Studies* 8 (1977): 55.
[2] Heath, *The Black Panther Leaders Speak*, 31-32.

weekly peak.[3] Douglas's body of work grew to consist of hundreds of pieces, all revealing the common theme of a corrupt authority versus an oppressed people. Conversely, Douglas's themes of brutality, power, and self-reliance differed greatly from those seen in 1960s mass culture, specifically those of the Pop artists.

Warhol and Lichtenstein (Fig. 1) worked within a visual vocabulary tied to printmaking and graphic styles, using textural patterns, outlines and, in Lichtenstein's case, text. It is important here to note that the Pop artists were utilizing this graphic style as a way to comment on popular culture. While Douglas's work (Fig. 2) also was dependent on outlining, patterns and text, his use of this graphic style can be attributed to practicality, budget and demand, as these pieces were needed on a weekly basis for publication in the *Black Panther*. To fulfill this need, Douglas used "inexpensive printing technologies such as Photostats and materials like press-down type and adhesive textures."[4] By using bold outlines and block colors, Douglas was able to produce works quickly and efficiently. While the bold outlining is purposeful in conveying an apparent aesthetic effect in the work, it was also practical in minimizing the margin for error during the printing process and thus speeding up the procedure. Despite these stylistic similarities, Douglas's work differed dramatically from the Pop artists.

However, Douglas and Warhol become increasingly comparable when Warhol began his Death and Dying Series, which confronted morbid imagery of death and suicide. One of Warhol's works, Race Riots, depicted the brutality of police during the riots at Birmingham in 1963 (Fig.3). The subject matter of Warhol and Douglas became similar, both dealing with violence and race relations. However, Warhol used the brutal

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[3] Bobby Seale, "Foreword" in *Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas*, 14.
[4] Collette Gaiter, "What Revolution Looks Like: The Work of Black Panther Artist Emory Douglas" in *Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas*, 96.

white reaction, taken directly from daily newspapers, to draw attention to the struggle and point out the faults of humanity. His print of the non-violent rioters being attacked by police dogs and water hoses is an image that recognized the black struggle, but highlighted the weakness and passivity of the protesters. He did not place blame, nor did he depict the protesters as a threat. In contrast, Douglas's rage was deliberately directed at government officials, presidents, and police, while portraying the protestor as powerful and armed (Fig. 4). This difference caused viewers to read Warhol's rioters as victims, while Douglas's were seen as threats. Women and men fought beside one another in Douglas's prints; however, images outside of the *Black Panther* newspaper emphasized overt masculinity.

Images of the men of the Party, in their official uniform which consisted of a black leather jacket, black sunglasses and a black beret, covered the pages of popular newspapers such as *Newsweek* and *New York Times*. (Fig. 5) A media interest in masculinity as well as in violence and action is evident. In contrast to the images emitted by the mass media, the *Black Panther* newspaper conveyed a different sort of imagery. While consistently relying on masculine imagery to assume a threatening posture and create fear, the pages of the *Black Panther* also included many images of women. However, these images were rarely photographs of actual events; instead, they were the artwork and thus imagined events of Emory Douglas. The lack of female imagery in the mass media is alarming: according to a survey conducted by Bobby Seale in 1969, two-thirds of the Party members were women.[5]

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[5] Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas, *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 125.

Douglas had control over the Party's representation of women and was likely influenced by the visual needs of the Party, including the importance of creating an image of authority and equality. Thus, women were represented with masculine and feminine qualities, in order to represent power. (Fig. 6, 7) Identifiably feminine with their large hoop earrings but often with the muscles of a man, these images were used to exemplify the anger of Party women but also displayed their feminine roles through dress and accessory.

It is important here to note the original role of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, an all-male organization upon its establishment. Male leaders of the Party published a "gender vision of the Party's potential composition"[6]: It proclaimed,

> "The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense really has something going. These brothers are the cream of Black manhood. They are there for the protection and defense of our Black community…Black men! It is our duty to your women and children, to your mothers and sisters, to investigate the program of the Party."[7]

This original vision is one of masculine dominance, which remained even as women joined the Party.

Women held multiple positions in the Party, most notably active in "behind-the-scene" roles such as newspaper editors, secretaries, and organizers. This may account for the lack of female imagery in the popular press, as women were not often on the front lines during protest, but rather were involved in unseen aspects of the fight. So, why then did Douglas represent women as armed and aggressive? My argument is that the images produced by the Party were, in some respects, a fabrication of the liberation of black

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[6] Charles Jones, *The Black Panther Party: Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 278.
[7] Ibid.

women. Writings by female members of the Black Panther Party suggest that women within the Party were often discriminated against or denied certain positions of authority.

Regina Jenning joined the Black Panther Party in 1968. She recalls her experience with the Party: "I respected and admired their bold image. However, after being in the Party, I experienced and recognized the existence of a double standard of women. Some brothers in the leadership positions were sexist. This was a problem that was left unchecked and weakened the foundation of the Black Panther Party."[8] Her writings exemplify gender inequality, which leading members of the Party may not have wanted published. The male leaders of the Party took a number of precautions to derail this idea of intra-group inequality and instead promoted an image of gender equality.

One example of this attempt to promote equality within the Party occurred in early 1968, when the Party decided to drop "for Self-Defense" from their official title, thus making them simply The Black Panther Party. In this way, they encouraged equality and membership to those who were not physically involved in acts of self-defense or paramilitary activities.[9]

In conclusion, Warhol's death and destruction series seems to run parallel to Douglas's imagery. Although both artists focused on violence and race relations, their depictions of the oppressed differed. Warhol portrayed the oppressed as victims, while Douglas drew them as active agents – a powerful force, armed with guns and grenades. Warhol's prints tried to earn white sympathy for black protesters whereas Douglas promoted Black Power. This empowering tactic was praised in ghettos, but broader

[8] Ibid., 257.
[9] Ibid., 277.

audiences and the majority of the 1960s art scene were unimpressed or rather simply uninterested.

Moreover, the work of Emory Douglas reveals an underlying tendency to portray women as powerful, when in reality gender inequality existed within the Party. Although the *Black Panther* acted as a counterpoint to widespread popular images propagated by the press during the nineteen sixties, these images of powerful women were an idealization and did not reflect the actual relations within the Party.

Although the successes of the civil rights movement are often attributed to the non-violent tactics of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the art of Emory Douglas within the Black Panther Party was equally important to the movement, however, in different ways and for different purposes. While King preached assimilation to the black middle class, the Black Panther Party encouraged self-empowerment to the often forgotten, black lower class. As they are just beginning to command scholarly attention, these revolutionary drawings are sure to be studied further and will eventually be understood as having aided in the attempt to free a subjugated people from oppression.

Fig. 1
M-Maybe, 1965
Roy Lichtenstein
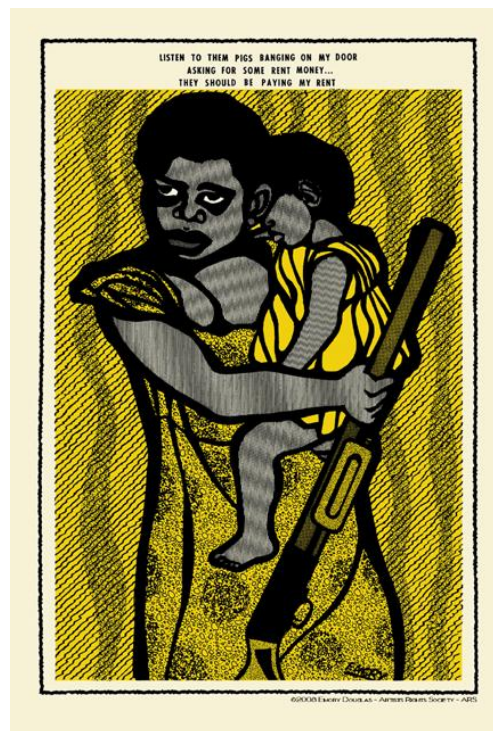
❖ Fig. 2
Black Panther, February 27, 1971
Emory Douglas

Fig. 3
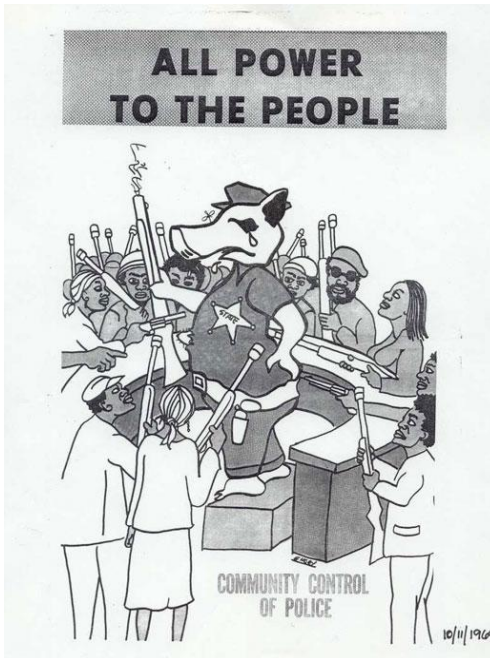*Race Riot (detail)*, 1963
Andy Warhol

Fig. 4
Black Panther, October 11, 1969
Emory Douglas

Fig. 5
Free Huey rally in front of the Alameda County Courthouse
Oakland, September 1968
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Fig. 6
Black Panther, 1969
Emory Douglas

Fig. 7
Black Panther, June 22, 1970
Emory Douglas