

## “You Can’t Kill a Revolution” By Matthew Garrett

### Black against Empire:

The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party

By Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr.  
Berkeley: University of California Press,  
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JOSHUA BLOOM AND Waldo Martin, Jr. have written a remarkable partisan history of the Black Panther Party, concerned, above all, to provide an account of the Panthers’ political program, insurgent practice, and conditions of possibility. It is also an openly political history: the authors have avoided retrospective accounts of the party and its history, drawing instead primarily on Party publications (especially the *Black Panther* newspaper) and contemporary accounts of events.

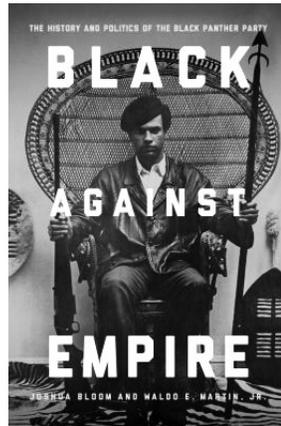
The archival collection that stands behind the book is itself a massive achievement: Bloom and Martin have assembled an almost complete edition of the *Black Panther*, and helped to secure a place in Berkeley’s Bancroft Library for H. K. Yuen’s extraordinary collection of materials related to social movements in the Bay Area during the 1960s and 1970s.

The research is meticulous, focused on the explicit program and activities of the party rather than on personal relationships (and antagonisms) among members. As a result, *Black against Empire* will be the first reference for anyone interested in the history of the Black Panther Party.

The book is also — and perhaps equally importantly — an analysis of the political prospects for similar revolutionary efforts today. Although those prospects are dim, Bloom and Martin dedicate their book to “the young revolutionaries everywhere.” Of course, the authors know that the inscription is a little vague and more than a little wishful. Responding to that wish is one goal of the book: to reestablish some

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continuity between radicals today and their energetic forebears in that most maligned and distorted of recent historical periods, “The ‘60s.”

How should this effort be evaluated, both as history and as revolutionary call to consciousness? Bloom and Martin invite analysis in Gramscian terms

at the close of the book: “No revolutionary movement of political significance will gain a foothold in the United States again until a group of revolutionaries develops insurgent practices that seize the political imagination of a large segment of the people and successively draw support from other constituencies, creating a broad insurgent alliance that is difficult to repress or appease. This has not happened in the United States since the heyday of the Black Panther Party and may not happen again for a very long time” (401; page numbers from hardback edition).

We could do worse than to consider both the Panthers and *Black against Empire* using the keywords in that paragraph: in terms of the Party’s practice of insurgency, its ability to capture the imagination of a broad public, and that public’s resistance to appeasement and repression.

### Art of the Image

From the start, the Panthers were masters of the spectacular gesture. Deftly manipulating images is, after all, part of what insurgent practice meant in the heyday of the Party. The name and black-panther icon came out of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), formed by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to organize Black voters in Alabama. The icon was put into circulation most forcefully beyond Lowndes County by Stokely Carmichael, who, by late 1966, was organizing branches of the new “Black Panther Party.”

Carmichael brought the icon and its ethos to Berkeley for the October 1966

conference on Black Power, where Huey Newton and Bobby Seale were inspired to start a branch — and just as crucially, to take up the tactic of “self-defense” by “policing the police.”

The strength of the Party in its first phase lay in the charismatic leadership of Newton and Seale, whom Bloom and Martin celebrate throughout *Black against Empire*.

The panegyrics wear thin after a while — not because Newton and Seale were not heroic, but because the Party’s organization around such larger-than-life figures is both a melancholy reminder of one of its organizational weaknesses and (more melancholic still) an indication that effective political thinking on the Left remains in thrall to the enchantments of the charismatic (and as will be noted below, typically the male) personality.

In any case, the Panthers established themselves as artful inventors of spectacular acts, of practices that could be easily — and eagerly — taken up within the spectacle: armed self-defense, policing the police, and myriad styles of image work, including Huey Newton on the wicker throne, uniformed Panthers with guns, celebrity associations, and finally, in 1971, an official visit to China, just ahead of Nixon himself.

That last example reveals much about the revolutionary politics of the image in the period: like Elvis before him, Mao (or, for the Panthers, Zhou Enlai) was somebody to be seen *with*. The anti-imperialist revolution for which the Panthers fought appears, in the sad light of the visit to China, as merely the obverse of the state’s (whether the USA’s or the PRC’s) assault on colonized peoples at home and abroad.

### Organizing for Transformation

So much for the image work. The Panthers also — and more powerfully, though with far less media or popular attention — built up and consolidated a real community of cadres and activists, workers and sympathizers. Through their legal defense work, medical care, and the extraordinary breakfast and education programs, the Panthers established themselves organically within Black neighborhoods.

This on-the-ground activity secured a party membership and began to make rev-

olutionary transformation a part of everyday life: the practice of insurgency was the practice of everyday life. As a member of the Philadelphia Panther branch put it, recalling life in the Party:

*The offices were like buzzing beehives of Black resistance... People came to us with every problem imaginable, and because our sworn duty was to serve the people, we took our commitment seriously... In short, whatever our people's problems were, they became our problems. We didn't preach to the people, we worked with them. (180)*

Deeper than the Panthers' public image, deeper than the Party's contribution to the revolutionary atmosphere of the '60s — deeper than all of this was its significance within Black communities across the United States.

So while "self-defense" was the watchword of the Party, self-determination was its fundamental practice. And the most important work of the Party's everyday activity was done by women: "Panther women energized the local branches and played a central role in creating the indigenous culture of struggle that gave the local chapters their resonance and distinctiveness. They kept the community programs alive and did most of the painstaking day-to-day social labor necessary to sustain the chapters." (193)

Yet as Bloom and Martin note, the Panthers were starkly divided along gender lines: Community programs were feminine, the public face masculine. If the guns and thrones attracted many members (and the gaze of the broad public), the labor of women actually made the party work.

That division of labor will make any feminist's blood boil, and revolutionaries of all stripes will recognize here the limitations of a vanguard party failing to align its practices into a coherent reformation of everyday life itself. Again, the practice of insurgency was, in the community programs, the practice of everyday life — but this did not automatically mean that the social-transformational circuit could be completed.

Women's leadership within the community programs must remain the emblem of the Panthers' greatest achievement, and the reminder of their hardest failure. The sympathetic reader of *Black against Empire* might be spurred to ask where, precisely, might we find the revolution: with Eldridge Cleaver, hiding out in "exile," or with the cadres working to feed and educate (and radicalize) their people in U.S. cities?

On this subject, Bloom and Martin quote Frankye Malika Adams to great effect:

*Women ran [the Party] pretty much. I don't know how it came to be a male's party or thought of as being a male's party. Because these things, when you really look at it in*

*terms of society, these things are looked on as being women's things... feeding children, taking care of the sick... We actually ran the [Party's] programs. (194)*



### Repression and Splits

Local programs were also hard to disrupt, though the state did its best. The FBI's ruthless counterrevolutionary attack will be familiar to many readers, but Bloom and Martin manage to convey afresh the brutality and cynicism (and the real reactionary fear) that underwrote it, and to sketch the Panthers' susceptibility to infiltration and manipulation. The account of the killing of John Huggins and Bunchy Carter by members of the nationalist group US, at UCLA in 1969, makes clear that the FBI's "fomenting" of murderous conflict was built on plenty of animosity between the organizations.

Under pressure of violence from the state, the Panthers also felt fractures within: not just the divisions of gender among Black cadres, but also cadres' alienation from allied — and especially moneyed — supporters. In 1969-70, as the membership grew and the Party's coffers swelled with funds, radicalization within was contradicted by moderation without.

Once seen by some as the true vanguard of the New Left, the Panthers began to look too radical to moderate allies who had gathered round the image of Huey Newton's empty throne. Upon Newton's release from prison in 1970, the real split became evident: "The radical Left saw revolutionary progress in winning Huey's freedom, but many moderate allies saw less cause for revolution." (353)

Bloom and Martin carefully pursue these organizational contradictions into the split between aboveground Party cadres and the ultraleft turn to guerilla insurrection in the early 1970s, particularly the formation of the Black Liberation Army.

The authors rightly note that the Panthers' strength against the state lay in their explicitly public and aboveground organizing work; anything more confrontational would have given the state license to smash the Party immediately: "The Party's capacity to sustain an insurgent challenge depended on its ability to stay largely within the law." (386)

That was why the great instruments of the first policing-the-police outings were both the guns and the law books: the key was to force the state to show its racist hand and to organize a broad but sharp-edged movement against that true but easily masked form of domination.

The Panthers' alliance was hard to repress because it was so broad — broadly public and broadly activated by resistance

to the war in Vietnam and the force of the Black struggle for civil rights. It was also hard to appease so long as the state seemed incapable or unwilling to give ground on social and political conflicts.

As the war brutalized Indochina and the excesses of racist capitalism flowered at home, the Panthers looked to be a politically rational organization. Not just virtue, but practical hope might be realistically tied to their activity.

The Panthers were, as Bloom and Martin put it, politically "creative;" their insurgent practices captured the imagination and activated the will. With the end of the Vietnam war and the draft, and with the state's simultaneous concessions to civil-rights demands and vilification of the radical black movement, "the political 'system' had been inoculated against the Panthers' politics." (400, 401)

There are many more aspects to this story, and Bloom and Martin's work will be an orientation point for radicals thinking their way into creative practices to fit our current situation.

At a time when modes of organization remain an intractable problem on the Left, and when the real legacies of "vanguard" practices remain only partially understood (perhaps especially in terms of the relationship between organized activists and the broad and disorganized underclasses), this new treatment of the Panthers will provide occasion for fresh argument and inspiration.

In particular, the Panthers' combination of spectacular gestures and painstaking community organizing give one model for a non-dogmatic revolutionary movement. The Party's fusion of class analysis, anti-imperialist struggle, and "vanguard" educational programs hints at the promise of a revolutionary collectivity that lies beyond the traditional boundaries of the working class.

The language to describe this work was always more slippery than the practice: for example, one ally could speak in an adjacent pair of sentences about the Party's participation in a "world proletarian revolution" and their basic claim that it was "a question of the oppressor against the oppressed regardless of race." (313)

Revolutionary organizing is naturally slippery territory; the history of the Panthers may be most valuable as a set of lessons on finding and losing one's footing — and therefore about ways of keeping it, too.

As the tragically martyred Fred Hampton puts it in one of the epigraphs to part 3 of the book, "You can kill a revolutionary, but you can't kill a revolution." That slogan, pronounced by the most famous victim of the state's assault on the Panthers and their revolution, is the authors' bracing call to prove Hampton right. No doubt *Black against Empire* will help to call up the response. §