Out of Oakland: Black Panther Party Internationalism During the Cold War

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Writing at the dawn of the new millennium, historian Peniel Joseph lamented the scholarly neglect of Black Power. While studies of the Black liberation movement's 'heroic period' from 1955-1965 abounded, research on Black Power 'languished' due to lack of interest, limited archival sources, and a prevailing declension narrative that cast Black Power as civil rights' 'evil twin'. 'Scholars', Joseph surmised, 'have only begun to scratch the surface of the rich history, insights, and lessons that this era can offer.'⁽¹⁾

In the nearly two decades that have passed since Joseph penned his trailblazing essay, research on Black Power has undergone a revolution, giving rise to a dynamic and interdisciplinary subfield dubbed 'Black Power Studies'. A new generation of scholars is making use of oral history methods, memoirs, autobiographies, and recently established archival collections to construct detailed historical accounts of the era.

No other Black Power organization has received more sustained attention than the Black Panther Party (BPP). The group's spectacular rise from its roots in Oakland, California to international cause célèbre is the subject of numerous eyewitness and scholarly publications. In this 'golden age' of research on the Panthers⁽²⁾, scholars have moved beyond traditional top-down accounts of the organization's national leadership to a focus on the diverse experiences of rank-and-file members in local chapters throughout the United States.⁽³⁾ Much of this recent work reflects broader interpretative turns currently underway in Black Power Studies and as such contributes to a fuller sense of the BPP's antecedents, community programs, gender politics, cultural production, multiracial alliances, decline, and legacy.⁽⁴⁾ A growing number of scholars have also begun to explore the BPP's global reach through studies of the organization's International Section and myriad affiliates and offshoots from Palestine to Polynesia.⁽⁵⁾

In *Out of Oakland*, historian Sean Malloy builds upon this emergent scholarship to perform a systematic, longitudinal study of the BPP's politics in the global arena. While most historical accounts characterize the BPP's internationalism as static and 'unitary', Malloy offers a more complex portrayal of the party's 'evolving and often contested' engagement with developments in the Cold War era (p. 6). Through an analysis of the writings and activities of the BPP's national leadership, Malloy tracks the party's dynamic

attempts to forge connections between US-based Black liberation struggles and radical anti-colonial actors in Europe and the Third World. Malloy contends that the Panthers' global vision and tangible coalition-building efforts set it apart from other movement organizations and were 'a major factor' in the organization's ability 'to survive and even grow' in the face of heightened state repression during the late 1960s and early 1970s (p. 3–4).

Malloy's study is structured chronologically, beginning with the organization's formation by Bay Area activists Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in October 1966 and culminating with its stuttering decline in the 1970s. This broad historical trajectory is punctuated by three 'turning points' in the Panthers' international approach, each spurred by developments both internal and external to the party. As the subsequent review shows, Malloy adeptly synthesizes knowledge about the BPP's domestic operations with insights on the broader geopolitical happenings of the Cold War era.

The opening chapter locates the Panther's particular brand of Black internationalism within a longer tradition dating back to the radical and pan-African movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This internationalist strain in African American politics was reignited following the Second World War as decolonization swept parts of the Global South and successful revolutions were waged in Cuba and Algeria. Against this backdrop, African American radicals moved beyond their reform-minded counterparts in the civil rights movement by forging ties of solidarity with key state actors in the Third World. Malloy spotlights several 'pioneering figures' – including Robert F. Williams, Vicki Garvin, Harold Cruse, Amiri Baraka, and Malcolm X – whose global sojourns and 'ad hoc diplomacy' helped 'pave the way for a new generation of activists', including subsequent leaders of the BPP (pp. 19, 28).

Chapter two connects the rise of the BPP to these important antecedents. Malloy joins historians Donna Murch and Robert Self (6) in grounding the BPP's formation within the distinct urban history and cultural milieu of post-war Oakland, a city characterized by its 'long and relatively continuous history of radical activism' (p. 48). Newton and Seale came-of-age in this cosmopolitan landscape, attending Merritt College in the early 1960s where they encountered a variety of Black political groups that served as 'incubators' for the BPP's subsequent internationalism (p. 55). Most important among them was Oakland's Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) which Newton and Seale joined in 1964. Malloy concurs with Robin Kelley's (7) characterization of RAM as having played an important role in transmitting the revolutionary nationalist discourses of 'Black Power pioneers' such as Cruse and Malcolm X to the next generation of activists (p. 59). Unlike their predecessors, however, Newton and Seale would go on to put these ideas into practice.

By situating Newton and Seale within this genealogy Malloy argues that Black internationalism was central to the BPP's activities from the outset. This contradicts accounts that have portrayed the organization's early politics as more local and nationalist in orientation. For example, the BPP's ten-point-program showed few signs of a global outlook and Newton himself characterized the group's members as 'just plain nationalists' (p. 59). Malloy contends that the domestic focus of the BPP's founding documents represented a strategic move on the part of Newton and Seale to recruit Black community members alienated by the abstract theorizing and global fashionings of groups like RAM. Over time, however, BPP leaders would develop their own more accessible language for transmitting revolutionary nationalist discourses to the grassroots.

This language, or 'anticolonial vernacular', is the focus of chapter three and its development, following the passage of the Mulford Act (1967), is situated as the first major 'turning point' in the BPP's internationalist approach (p. 71–2). The California state legislature's controversial decision to repeal a law that had permitted the public display of loaded firearms was unmistakably aimed at the Panthers who conducted regular armed patrols of law enforcement. Subsequently, the BPP was forced to identify new tactics for confronting state power and recruiting members. According to Malloy, newly enlisted Panthers Emory Douglas, Eldridge Cleaver, and Tarika Lewis stepped into this vacuum, using the *Black Panther* newspaper as a vehicle for the propagation of an 'anticolonial vernacular' that connected the struggles of African Americans in the Bay Area to oppressed peoples across the Third World. Through a close reading of the newspaper's striking visuals and rhetoric, Malloy traces the contours of this 'anticolonial vernacular',

spotlighting three constitutive elements: (1) ‘an emphasis on the colonial status of black Americans,’ (2) ‘a rhetorical and symbolic emphasis on the centrality of violence in the process of both colonialism and decolonization,’ and (3) ‘the assertion that white supremacy and capitalism were inextricably linked as historical forces’ (p. 72).

The links this ‘anticolonial vernacular’ forged between Black Americans and the Third World were purely rhetorical. However, in chapter four, Malloy examines the BPP’s first attempts to cultivate more tangible alliances after Huey Newton’s arrest on charges related to the shooting death of officer John Frey in October 1967. Following this second ‘turning point,’ the BPP launched an international ‘Free Huey’ campaign in which leading Panthers descended on the New York headquarters of the United Nations to lobby Third World delegations for their public support. Though ultimately unsuccessful, these efforts did result in a meeting with Tanzanian delegates and established other important diplomatic contacts with state-level actors. The ‘Free Huey’ campaign also witnessed the BPP stage diplomatic visits to Japan, Canada, Scandinavia, and Western Europe. Malloy argues that the latter, paradoxically, provided the BPP with their strongest allies to date in the German SDS.

Despite these early victories, forging diplomatic relations with small and relatively autonomous groups in Western Europe and Scandinavia was a strategy with obvious limitations. As Malloy explains, ‘Without formal borders and armed forces to protect them, transnational groups couldn’t offer lasting sanctuary to the BPP or even a reliable venue for hosting visiting Panthers’ (p. 126). Such challenges were thrown into sharper relief when Eldridge Cleaver fled the country following a failed ambush of local police in April 1968. According to Malloy, Cleaver’s subsequent exile ‘precipitated a major practical and ideological shift in the BPP’s international engagement’, from an approach that focused on developing ‘informal transnational solidarity networks’ to one that sought ‘direct connections’ with state actors in the Third World (p. 131).

In chapter five, Malloy examines Cleaver’s efforts to extend the BPP’s anticolonial vernacular into formal diplomatic relations with the governments of Cuba and Algeria, both of which offered rhetorical and material support to revolutionaries. The Cubans proved willing to grant Cleaver protection from extradition. Yet, their own ‘Cold war calculus’ and dependence on Soviet aid militated against the provision of propaganda tools and paramilitary training (p. 138). Algeria presented similar challenges due to growing American corporate investment in the nation’s oil industry. However, Malloy shows that Cleaver quickly and skillfully leveraged new alliances with state actors in North Korea and Vietnam to secure greater legitimacy with the Algerian government. Leaders of the National Liberation Front (NLF) and the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) of South Vietnam supported Cleaver in meetings with Algerian officials and negotiated the transfer of the NLF’s headquarters in Algiers to the BPP’s newly formed International Section in September 1970. This compelling account of Cleaver’s ‘Asian Strategy’ illustrates the extraordinary scope of the BPP’s internationalism. By the end of 1970, the Panthers claimed a global network of alliances and the mantle of being the first African American political organization to have secured ‘an independent, officially recognized, institutional presence outside the United States’ (p. 169).

Within a few short months, however, the BPP would fracture, leaving Cleaver and the International Section adrift. This third and final ‘turning point’ is the focus of the book’s closing chapters. In chapter six, Malloy explores the sources of the BPP’s split, which he traces to Newton’s embrace of *intercommunalism*. Rejecting visions of revolution as imminent, Newton purged Cleaver and other advocates of guerilla warfare from the party and called for a new approach that centered on local politics and community service programs. In the aftermath, Cleaver and the International Section continued to agitate independently for revolutionary anticolonial violence but faced new challenges when Sino-American rapprochement derailed the ‘Asian Strategy’. As Cleaver’s diplomatic partners in North Korea and Vietnam pivoted, Malloy argues that he became increasingly ‘enamored with the notion of stateless, transnational, anticolonial violence as a new template for resisting the American Empire and its clients’ (p. 201). Chapter seven explores this shift in Cleaver’s politics as well as growing tensions with the Algerian government that resulted in the closure of the International Section in 1973. Back in Oakland, Malloy portrays the BPP under Newton and Elaine

Brown's leadership as having 'largely disengaged from the international and transnational alliances that had marked the party's peak in the late 1960s' (p. 212).

Out of Oakland is a well-researched and engaging study that successfully conveys the significance of internationalism to the BPP's evolution. In Malloy's persuasive account, Third World internationalism emerges as a vital force in the Panthers growth and ability to weather state repression at key junctures in the organization's history. Malloy also convincingly demonstrates the transformative effect international alliances had upon specific BPP leaders, affording them new political frameworks and approaches for interpreting American racism and capitalism. However, the shifting and tentative nature of the BPP's diplomatic efforts also led to internal conflicts that contributed to the organization's decline. Future studies might employ oral history methods to assess whether rank-and-file members and diverse local chapters were similarly impacted by these transformations in the BPP's international approach.

Forging transnational alliances is, of course, no easy feat. Accordingly, one of Malloy's key contributions is to recover the types of rhetorical and diplomatic labor essential to the realization of international solidarities. Malloy's account focuses on the BPP's national leadership, which is predominantly male. However, we do get some tantalizing glimpses into the contributions women such as Tarika Lewis, Elaine Brown, Kathleen Cleaver, Connie Matthews, and 'Queen Mother' Audley Moore might have made to Panther internationalism. Future studies should follow-up on these threads and provide a closer assessment of the role such women played in the development of the party's 'anticolonial vernacular' and formal diplomatic relations. This research is particularly important when we consider that Panther women often gained authority and formal leadership positions during the party's twilight years, a period Malloy characterizes as less internationalist in orientation.

Notes

1. Peniel E. Joseph, 'Black liberation without apology: reconceptualizing the Black Power Movement', *The Black Scholar*, 31, 3/4 (Fall/Winter 2001), 2–19, 2. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Quote from Joe Street, 'The historiography of the Black Panther Party', *Journal of American Studies*, 44, 2 (May 2010), 351–75, 351. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For studies of local Black Panther Party chapters, see Yohuru Williams, *Black Politics/White Power: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Black Panthers in New Haven* (St. James, NY, 2000); *Liberated Territory: Untold Local Perspectives on the Black Panther Party*, ed. Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams (Durham, NC, 2008); *On the Ground: The Black Panther Party in Communities across America*, ed. Judson L. Jeffries (Jackson, MS, 2010); Donna Jean Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010); Jakobi Williams, *From the Bullet to the Ballot: The Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party and Racial Coalition Politics in Chicago* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2013). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Two excellent edited collections on the BPP that address these themes, include *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* (Baltimore, MD, 1998); *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary*, ed. Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams (Durham, NC, 2006). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. For example, see Anne-Marie Angelo, 'The Black Panthers in London, 1967–1972: a diasporic struggle navigates the Black Atlantic', *Radical History Review*, 103 (Winter 2009), 17–35; Kathleen Neal Cleaver, 'Back to Africa: the evolution of the International Section of the Black Panther Party (1969–1972)', in *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore, MD, 1998), pp. 211–56; Michael L. Clemons and Charles E. Jones, 'Global solidarity: the Black Panther Party in the international arena', in *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and Their Legacy*, ed. Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas (New York, NY, 2001), pp. 20–39; Kathy Lothian, 'Seizing the time: Australian Aborigines and the influence of the Black Panther Party, 1969–1972', *Journal of Black Studies*, 35 (2005), 179–200; John T. McCartney, 'The influences of the Black Panther Party (USA) on the Vanguard Party of the Bahamas, 1972–1987', in *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and Their Legacy*, ed. by Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas (New York, NY, 2001), pp.

156–63; Oz Frankel, ‘The Black Panthers of Israel and the politics of the radical analogy’, in *Black Power Beyond Borders: The Global Dimensions of the Black Power Movement*, ed. Nico Slate (New York, NY, 2012); Ruth Reitan, ‘Cuba, the Black Panther Party, and the U.S. Black Movement in the 1960s: issues of security’, in *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and Their Legacy*, ed. Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas (New York, NY, 2001), pp. 164–74; Robbie Shilliam, ‘The Polynesian Panthers and the Black Power Gang: surviving racism and colonialism in Aotearoa New Zealand’, in *Black Power Beyond Borders: The Global Dimensions of the Black Power Movement*, ed. Nico Slate (New York, NY, 2012), pp. 107–26; Nico Slate, ‘The Dalit Panthers: race, caste, and Black Power in India’, in *Black Power Beyond Borders: The Global Dimensions of the Black Power Movement*, ed. Nico Slate (New York, NY, 2012), pp. 127–43; Jennifer B. Smith, *An International History of the Black Panther Party* (New York, NY, 1999).[Back to \(5\)](#)

6. Murch, *Living for the City*; Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ, 2005).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Robin D. G. Kelley, ‘Stormy weather: reconstructing black (inter)nationalism in the Cold War era’, in *Is It Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism*, ed., Eddie S. Glaude Jr., (Chicago, IL, 2001), 67–90.[Back to \(7\)](#)

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