

The Polynesian Panthers and Negotiations of Blackness

Between the Civil Rights movement in the United States and the Grenada Revolution, global black radicalism flourished around the globe. A diverse array of actors discussed common concerns and mobilized against their oppressors. Many of these actors were members of the African diaspora who drew on the activism of African Americans in the United States in the 1960s. Yet one of the most intriguing evolutions of the global black radical movements was its influence on other groups: those who many would not consider “black.” These groups included the Dalit Panthers in India, the *HaPanterim HaShhorim* (lit. Black Panthers) in Israel, and the Polynesian Panthers in New Zealand.¹ I focus particularly on the latter example as an entry-point from which to explore broader questions about blackness. To what extent did the Polynesian Panthers understand themselves as participating in a global *black* movement? What work did the symbols and vocabulary of Black Power play? What is the legacy of this movement and its concomitant conception of blackness? What role, if any, do the essential elements of the global black radical movement play in today’s New Zealand?

In this context, I position this paper as an exploration of blackness in New Zealand as prompted by the Polynesian Panthers. I begin with some theoretical considerations and a brief background of the global black radical movement as a whole. I then focus on the example of the Polynesian Panthers in New Zealand, highlighting especially the links between this group and other

¹ These movements and more are documented in Slate, *Black Power beyond Borders*.

movements of the “long 70s.” Finally, I briefly discuss the role of “blackness” in New Zealand today by examining the actions and reception of Nándor Tánzos (a Rastafarian politician) and the role of the New Zealand national rugby team, or “All Blacks.” I argue that the unifying characteristic of negotiations of blackness in New Zealand is (more than a common vocabulary or symbolism) the flexibility and receptiveness to the particular dynamics of the society of New Zealand.

Historical and theoretical context

In 1966, Stokely Carmichael first used the phrase “Black Power” in the context of mass mobilization by African Americans in the United States. Carmichael drew on previous work of the civil rights movement, and particularly that of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, (SNCC) in Lowndes County, Alabama, who were the first to use the symbol of the black panther.² Carmichael’s term sparked a global black radical movement that would take many forms. The most powerful of these were probably the Black Power Movement in Trinidad and Tobago, various anticolonial movements in Africa, and the Grenada Revolution. It is the demise of the latter, in the form of Maurice Bishop’s fall and the subsequent US invasion in 1983, that arguably marks the end of the global black radical movement.³ The period of the “long 1970s” – from 1966 to 1983 – was thus bookended by political movements led by blacks in the Americas with direct US involvement.

Yet within this period many other movements drew on Black Power in incredibly diverse contexts. It is precisely this diversity that complicates historiography of the period. Comparatively little

² For more information on the genesis of Black Power see Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*.

³ For example, see Meeks, “Grenada, Once Again.”

attention has been paid to movements beyond the traditional contexts, including the Polynesian Panthers in New Zealand.⁴ Recent work has attempted to rectify these omissions, especially through comparative work. There are significant historiographical challenges involved in these attempts to enrich the written record. For one, sources on understudied movements are often harder to access and less well-documented. For another, writing about these groups requires sensitivity and a commitment to circumstances that are particular only to the movement being studied. As Robbie Shilliam articulates in his seminal chapter on the Polynesian Panthers:

Attention must also be paid to the particular lived experiences of the protagonists who have in various ways heard and interpreted the call to Black Power. This sensitivity is especially important when accounting for the influence of Black Power on colonized and/or oppressed groups that do not directly share an African heritage.⁵

Part of this sensitivity is an awareness of the theoretical terrain, including scholarship in postcolonial studies and a thorough knowledge of other historiography of the periods and places under study. Another important area to understand is the study of comparative understandings of race and transnational movements and influences. A seminal thinker in this field is Harmannus (Harry) Hoetink, a Dutch scholar with strong links to the Caribbean (he lived in Curaçao for seventeen years and married a Dominican woman).⁶ In his work, Hoetink analyzed the complexities and contradictions of race and culture across contexts. He particularly stressed that “every culture has its own ways of perceiving racial relations,” arguing especially against interpretations that unproblematically transpose the American black-white binary.⁷ In 1985,

⁴ By my count, there are two books, one MA thesis, and one book chapter on the Polynesian Panthers. I have only been able to access one of the books and the chapter by Robbie Shilliam for my paper.

⁵ Shilliam, “The *Polynesian Panthers* and the *Black Power Gang*,” 107.

⁶ Oostindie, “In Memory of Harmannus Hoetink 1931–2005.”

⁷ Baud, “Harry Hoetink, 1931–2005,” 5.

Hoetink described these problems in the context of receptions of Black Power in the Caribbean:

The original Black Power ideology – based on the North American twofold division between black and white – met with resistance from those in the Caribbean who perceived themselves as colored and could in some cases accept the term only by redefining *black* as anyone, anywhere, who was being exploited by metropolitan or imperial policies and attitudes. ... Such “translations” may serve legitimate, perhaps even laudable, purposes, but in the process much of the original meaning of the term, and its validity in the context in which it operates, is lost.⁸

What relevance does this have to discussion of the Polynesian Panthers? Like the Caribbean, New Zealand is yet another context in which Black Power had an influence. New Zealand is also a culture in which the American black-white binary has even less relevance than in the Caribbean. The total number of Africans present today is under 10 000, or around 0.2% of the population, and this represents a substantial increase over previous years.⁹ New Zealand therefore had no reason to develop a vocabulary of race relations built on the presence or absence of African heritage.¹⁰ The redefinition of “black” in this context, I venture, would resemble that which occurred in the Caribbean, only amplified. Instead of taking issue with the terminology – “colored” as opposed to “black” – I would expect the movements inspired by Black Power to ignore the racial implications of the term in favor of a focus on exploitation or oppression by the metropole, broadly defined. Hoetink’s point – just as valid in the case of New Zealand as it is for the Caribbean – is that this kind of transposition erases much of the movement’s original meaning. Indeed, it is hard to argue

⁸ Hoetink, “*Race and Color in the Caribbean*”, 28.

⁹ See the data from the 2013 census, available at <https://www.stats.govt.nz/>.

¹⁰ Of the African population that *is* present, most is from South Africa; it is likely (but uncertain) that they are mostly white. It is difficult to find any one variable that represents the presence of “blacks” in New Zealand. Language, country of origin, and self-reported ethnicity all present their own obstacles.

that Black Power in New Zealand can mean what it did in Lowndes County, Alabama, which was 80% black.¹¹ More significantly, Hoetink also argues that the validity of the term “black” is lost in the translation from its original context. He elaborates on this point elsewhere in the same publication: “Might not the scales of racial labeling that we find in the Caribbean today be disadvantageous to the blacks because leaving the line between *black* and *colored* ambiguous makes it more difficult for blacks to organize politically along color lines, as happens in the United States?”¹² In other words, Hoetink questions whether a term that inevitably loses so much of its original meaning can still be a powerful political tool. Does Black Power really have any import in contexts like New Zealand?

Polynesian Panthers

As I demonstrate, Hoetink’s concerns are precisely those treated by the Polynesian Panthers. I concentrate on the historical evolution of the movement, focusing especially on the influence of other black radical movements. I also consider their use of symbols like the black panther and their treatment of words like “black.” I begin with some historical background necessary to understand the movement, before treating some primary sources to begin to answer my questions.

When the first Europeans reached New Zealand, they found a significant, well-organized Māori population. Over the next few centuries, Aotearoa (as the country is known in Māori) came under the influence of the British Empire. Perhaps the most visible legacy of British imperialism is the colonization of the country by large numbers of Europeans. The non-Māori population ballooned from under a thousand in 1830 to 250 000 in 1870. This immigration, which continued through the

¹¹ On the demographics of Lowndes County see Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 3.

¹² Hoetink, “*Race*” and *Color in the Caribbean*, 5.

twentieth century, was mostly the result of British imperialism and colonialism, undergirded by racism. Until the 1970s, immigration to New Zealand favored Europeans, with specific restrictions to prevent Asian immigration. The society in which the Polynesian Panthers emerged, then, was split primarily between the Pākehā (European) majority and the Māori minority. There was also a growing Tagata Pasifika (Pacific Islander) population, who are Polynesian but not Māori. Another significant demographic trend related to the rise of the Polynesian Panthers was the dramatic increase in the urban Māori population: from 26% in 1945 to 62% in 1966 and 80% in 1986.¹³

Comparisons with other states founded in the New World, particularly with other British colonies, are interesting and fairly common. Unlike in most colonies in the Americas, slaves were never imported to New Zealand, and there was very little involvement in the systems that upheld slavery (such as the triangular trade). Furthermore, the indigenous population of New Zealand was relatively successful in ensuring cultural continuity and remained demographically significant through to the present day. Here, a comparison with Australia is particularly illuminating: Aboriginal Australians are only 2.7% of the population, reflecting the decimation wrought by “the impact of new diseases, repressive and often brutal treatment, dispossession, and social and cultural disruption and disintegration.”¹⁴ Unlike in the United States, Canada, or Australia, then, the indigenous population of New Zealand has long figured prominently in the politics of New Zealand. In the words of Stephen Cornell, the “combination of historical and demographic patterns means that the rights of indigenes play a larger role in New Zealand's intergroup relations than they do in the other three countries, where distributive politics among freely immigrating or once-

¹³ Meredith, “Urban Māori.” See also Morrow, “Tradition and Modernity in Discourses of Maori Urbanisation.”

¹⁴ Pink, *2008 Year Book Australia*, 196. Estimates of pre-contact indigenous populations are notoriously unreliable; for discussion see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, “Statistics on the Indigenous Peoples of Australia.”

enslaved populations long since has captured the political spotlight.”¹⁵

By the 1970s, there was a large Polynesian (Māori and Pasifika) minority in urban New Zealand. The American civil rights movement and subsequent rise of Black Power was widely disseminated in New Zealand. So too were comparisons of the “Polynesian Problem” with the “Negro Problem” of the United States. In Shilliam’s analysis, such analogies were employed both by antiracist movements as “a strategy to impel the government to consider radical changes to its de facto assimilationist policies” and by racist movements “to incite moral panic over the invasion of white citadels by brown natives, from home and abroad.”¹⁶ To return to Hoetink’s theoretical concerns, I argue that the “translation” of Black Power to New Zealand clearly had relevance and power even in unexpected ways. The American vocabulary was being borrowed and reshaped by a variety of actors, in contexts that Stokely Carmichael and SNCC might not have expected.

It is important here to acknowledge not only representations in popular media but also the direct engagement of Polynesian youth with Black Power. An important role was played by university students, including some who studied in the United States. A good example is Syd Jackson, who was inspired directly by works of Eldridge Cleaver and Stokely Carmichael.¹⁷ Jackson was also a member of a member of Ngā Tamatoa (“the warriors”), one of the earliest and most influential Māori activist groups.¹⁸ Another population that engaged with Black Power were the young Polynesians that Robbie Shilliam, following Cleaver (and Marx), terms the “lumpen”: as one manifesto put it, the “landless brown proletariat with no dignity, no mana [authority], and no stake in society [,] like the blacks in America, [who] will stand outside society and aggress against it.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Cornell, “Review of *Recalling Aotearoa*,” 617.

¹⁶ Shilliam, “The *Polynesian Panthers* and the *Black Power Gang*,” 109.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁸ For discussion see Stevens and Paterson, “Ngā Tamatoa and the Rhetoric of Brown Power.”

¹⁹ Cited in Shilliam, “The *Polynesian Panthers* and the *Black Power Gang*,” 110.

For the organizers of the Polynesian Panthers, this was their natural constituency.

In 1971, the Polynesian Panther Movement (PPM) was founded by a group of Pacific Islanders and Māori in Auckland. The first members were working-class Pacific youth who were incensed by white supremacy in New Zealand and inspired by the work of the American Black Panthers. The new movement set up its headquarters in Ponsonby, a suburb of Auckland, and began to implement its program through community organizing and direct action. An indicative example is its “first act as a group: helping out with cooking and ticket collecting at the NZ University Students’ Association Arts Council Rock Festival.”²⁰ To understand the relationship of the new movement with the Black Panthers and with “blackness” more broadly, it is useful to examine the recollections of Wayne Toleafoa, the twenty-ninth member of the group:

[I] was attracted by what the movement stood for. In my 17-year-old mind, the Black Panthers in the USA stood for many things, including militantly opposing racism (in its personal and institutional forms), addressing injustices against oppressed groups, and particularly opposing right wing racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. ... New Zealand in the 1970s was certainly not the USA, but ... me and many other Pacific Islanders [felt] a sense of vulnerability and aloneness. Economically, numerically and in almost every statistic Pacific islanders were also shown as the most vulnerable group in New Zealand society. ... To many young Polynesians like myself, the only way forward for us as a migrant people was “self help.”²¹

Similar sentiments were also expressed by Will ‘Ilohia, the first chairman of the Polynesian Panthers:

²⁰ Anae, *Polynesian Panthers*, 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

Initially it was the literature of the Black Panther Party in America that we got attracted to – the work they were doing in America, and when we read the books deeper we found out that the problems they were complaining about were the exact problems that we were seeing in New Zealand, so we decided to do something constructive and formed the Polynesian Panther Party.²²

There was clearly much conscious borrowing from the Black Panthers. In their symbols, vocabulary, and actions, the Polynesian Panthers greatly resembled the Black Panthers. *Contra* Hoetink, the PPM believed not only in the value of translating ideas from African Americans to the Polynesian context but also saw great power and validity in this transposition. The *effectiveness* of this move, on the other hand, is less certain.

One interesting discussion that can gesture towards an answer is examining how the Polynesian Panthers were viewed by others, especially by white New Zealanders. There was a good deal of support for the new movement; Toleafoa remembers closely cooperating with many white allies, including Helen Clark and David Lange, both of whom later became Prime Minister. Even the mayor of Auckland, Dove-Myer Robinson, gave “a warm reception” to the newly founded Polynesian Panther Movement in August 1971.²³ To Toleafoa, and probably to the white allies as well, “the PPM was only one small political group among many in an era of protest throughout the Western world.”²⁴ Another interesting perspective is provided by Nigel Bhana, an Indian who became an early member of the Polynesian Panthers. What he remembered most clearly was the contrast between the common understanding and the reality of (for lack of a better term) race relations:

²² Pacific Media Watch, “NZ: Polynesian Panthers Documentary Exposes Dawn Raids Era.”

²³ Anae, *Polynesian Panthers*, 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

The perception was that Māori and other Polynesians never got on. And that's the deal as Pākehā ["European" or "white"]. But on the march we were "as one" ... [ellipsis in original] There were so many groups – Ngā Tamatoa, Panthers, People's Union, civil liberties communists, whatever. And everyone was united.²⁵

For some members of the Panthers, then, the group was remarkably united both internally and with other social movements, including those in power. Its effectiveness, the implication seems to be, came just as much from participation in the domination institutions as from resistance to certain aspects thereof.

Others viewed the Polynesian Panthers as a gang. This view was, for example, expressed by the *Auckland Star*, who in August 1971 wrote "Gang bid for Ponsonby HQ gets full cttee [sic] backing."²⁶ As Toleafoa admits, this perception was in some ways justified: older members had indeed been members of gangs and there was a good deal of "Panther pride."²⁷ There was also a strong tradition of Polynesian gangs in New Zealand, including the King Cobras, the Mongrel Mob, and the group known as Black Power.²⁸ While the latter gang had some political leanings, its main businesses were drugs and prostitution. Most members of the Polynesian Panthers denied they were a gang. David Lange, the later Prime Minister and erstwhile legal advisor, was particularly adamant that "the word 'gang' is wrong ... [ellipsis in original] they were bound together in some sort of comradeship or exhuberance [sic] or rebellion but it wasn't that they were professional criminals."²⁹ In sum, then, the Polynesian Panthers coexisted and mutually influenced the Polynesian gangs of the time. More broadly, the various sociopolitical organizations in 1970s

²⁵ Ibid., 71.

²⁶ Ibid., 59.

²⁷ Ibid., 62.

²⁸ van Beynen, "Ponsonby in the 1970s"; Hume, "A Gangster's Life."

²⁹ Anae, *Polynesian Panthers*, 78.

New Zealand – from the PPM to Black Power to the mainstream political parties – existed on a continuum. Robbie Shilliam persuasively argues that all these movements were shaped by the underlying dynamics of white supremacy, immigration, and urbanization. Some responded through formal political parties; some through the formation of gangs; and some, like the Polynesian Panthers, by drawing on global precedents to form alternative community organizations.

What is the import of all of this for negotiations of blackness in New Zealand? Firstly, it is clear that the Polynesian Panthers cared deeply about their community and identity. I also argue that they are invested in the idea of blackness and participation in a kind of global black radicalism. There was no clear intellectual articulation of the transposition of the Black Panthers to New Zealand. Instead, the Polynesian Panthers adopted tactics and structures from a variety of sources and adapted them as needed to suit the particular circumstances of New Zealand.

The “black” in today’s New Zealand

In this section, I will briefly present two examples that illuminate negotiations of blackness in today’s New Zealand. I will particularly tease out the connections with previous movements and the legacy, if any, of the Polynesian Panthers.

Earlier on, I alluded to the recent immigration of Africans to New Zealand, and the particular difficulty of determining whether they are “black” (see footnote 10). Nándor Tánzos, a Member of Parliament for the Green Party, is a living embodiment of this ambiguity. Tánzos was born in England to a Hungarian father who fled the 1956 revolution and a mother of mixed ancestry from South Africa who fled Apartheid. In most understandings of race, his father is white; his mother is Cape Coloured, a South African community of mixed African, Asian, and European background

that is the majority in the Western Cape province.³⁰ He has referred to himself as “Pākehā,” the Māori word for (roughly) European New Zealanders.³¹ Tánčzos became a Rastafarian in university and is known for his use of cannabis and advocacy of hemp cultivation; before joining the Greens, he was a member of the Aotearoa Legalise Cannabis Party. Tánčzos has not explicitly commented on Black Power or the Polynesian Panthers, but his ancestry and particularly his identity as Rastafari emphasize links to blackness, broadly defined. The connections between Tánčzos and the global black radicalism of the long 1970s are tenuous at best, but I venture that his identity and beliefs (because of his visibility to the public) come close to representing the role of blackness in today’s New Zealand.

One last figuration of blackness in today’s New Zealand should not be neglected. Perhaps the greatest source of national pride is the national rugby team, commonly known as the All Blacks. This name probably arose because the original uniforms were (as they are today) all black. I do not suggest that the name itself carries particularly racial connotations, but it is undeniable that the national team has had a complex history of interaction with the non-Pākehā population of New Zealand.³² The most notable example is the traditional haka with which the All Blacks begin every match. This Māori dance has been a feature of New Zealand rugby since at least 1889, when a mostly Māori team known as the Natives toured England.³³ Since then, Māori players have generally been part of the All Blacks. There were notable controversies, though, particularly with South Africa under apartheid. When South Africa first played New Zealand in 1921, a South African journalist wrote that the team was “‘disgusted’ not only to have to play a team of natives

³⁰ Michie, “To Thine Own Self Be True.”

³¹ For example, Tánčzos said “we Pākehā people” in his valedictory speech to parliament (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtkB_BqYm38, 11:30).

³² On this subject see particularly Grainger, “The Browning of the All Blacks.”

³³ Derby, “Māori–Pākehā Relations.”

but also watch as thousands of Europeans cheered them on.”³⁴ In 1970, Polynesian players were allowed into South Africa only as “honorary whites.” Most controversial were the tours of South Africa in 1976 and 1981, both of which sparked enormous protests. In particular, 25 African countries boycotted the Olympics in response to the 1976 tour, with the Kenyan foreign minister arguing that New Zealand’s actions gave “comfort and respectability to the South African racist regime and encourage[d] it to continue to defy world opinion.”³⁵ I do not hold that the All Blacks are particularly racist nor that they have especially strong connections with the global black radical movement of the 1970s. Yet like Nándor Tánzos, and like the Polynesian Panthers themselves, the New Zealand rugby team exists within a hegemonic system of white supremacy and colonialism. Whether we interpret certain actions as acts of resistance – such as the preservation of the haka – or of acquiescence – like the tours of apartheid-era South Africa – they must all be seen against this background.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to gesture at various negotiations of blackness in New Zealand, a country with a negligible population of African descent. I have framed the examples I presented by considering the theoretical approaches offered by Harry Hoetink, who focused particularly on “translations” of racial frameworks and movements. I have demonstrated that the Polynesian Panthers understood their role in this translation, consciously transposing the symbols, vocabulary, and actions of the Black Panthers. At the same time, I have shown that reactions in New Zealand were very different than in the United States. In the 1970s, like today, New Zealand was

³⁴ Brown, “Rugby: Once Was Hatred.”

³⁵ BBC News, “1976: African Countries Boycott Olympics.”

characterized by a unique ethnic divide with a particularly interesting relationship to the Māori minority. Furthermore, New Zealand is popularly represented (and in some ways, *is*) a tolerant, multicultural society in ways that the United States is not.³⁶ The Polynesian Panthers, like the All Blacks and (most recently) Nándor Tánzos, were only one of the many responses to the particular dynamics that characterize New Zealand. The Polynesian Panthers were effective in their own way, but they did not achieve their successes by borrowing wholesale from the Black Panthers; for instance, they had a far more amicable relationship with authority and different connections with many other groups of the period. It is this adaptability and unique dynamics shaped by the circumstances of New Zealand – more than their symbols, vocabulary, or indeed their connections with global black radicalism – that have been the Polynesian Panthers' legacy to later generations in New Zealand.

³⁶ The evidence I have presented above seems to corroborate this representation, but I do not have a broad enough understanding of New Zealand to make a conclusive assessment.

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