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Author(s): Robert Sandarg

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# JEAN GENET AND THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY

ROBERT SANDARG

*University of North Carolina at Charlotte*

**During the second week** of March 1970, the renowned novelist and playwright Jean Genet entered the United States clandestinely. For the next two months this white Frenchman traversed the nation, speaking on behalf of the Black Panther Party at City College of New York, MIT, Yale, Columbia, UCLA, and Stanford. On these campuses, as well as in downtown Los Angeles, New Haven, and Stonybrook, Long Island, Genet implored young whites to support the Panthers, whom he considered the victims of unwarranted official repression and the vanguard of a Marxist revolution that would soon bring down a corrupt America.

At the time of Genet's arrival, the Black Panther Party's leadership was decimated and its funds severely depleted. Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, who had founded the party in 1966, were both in prison. Newton had been incarcerated following the October 1967 shootout in which he was wounded and an Oakland patrolman killed. Seale, charged in August 1969 with murdering a New Haven Panther suspected of being a police informant, faced electrocution if convicted. Panther Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver had fled to Cuba, then to Algeria, rather than stand trial for a gun battle with Oakland

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authorities. During 1969 alone, 348 Panthers across America had been arrested for serious crimes, and by early 1970 the party had spent over five million dollars on bail (Heath, 1976b: 133).

Although the Panthers' domestic situation was desperate, the party fared better abroad. In Algiers, Cleaver had established the Black Panther International Section, a propaganda arm that had fostered sympathy for the Panthers throughout North Africa and Europe by a steady dissemination of statements and press releases. It was Cleaver's International Section that brought Genet and the Panthers together.

In early March 1970, Connie Matthews, Black Panther International Coordinator, approached Genet in Paris and requested his aid. For several reasons, Genet readily agreed to help. He empathized with oppressed peoples and had written two plays dealing with French colonialism: *The Blacks* (1959) and *The Screens* (1966), set in Africa. Genet had subsequently abandoned literature and turned directly to radical politics. While reporting the 1968 Democratic National Convention for *Esquire* magazine, he had developed a virulent hatred for the United States and a boundless admiration for the Panthers he had met in Chicago. Moreover, Genet affirmed that for the past thirty years he could recognize himself "only in the oppressed of the colored races, the oppressed who revolted against the whites. I am a black whose skin happens to be white, but I am definitely a black" (Fichte, 1977: 12).

Finally, Genet and the Black Panther Party were bound by Marxism. The Panthers had never denied their leftist political orientation and always claimed to be leading a class struggle. Bobby Seale wrote that "the ideology of the party is the whole experience of black people in America . . . translated through Marxism-Leninism" (Heath, 1976a: 61). Eldridge Cleaver light-heartedly termed this doctrine Yankee Doodle Dandy Socialism. As I have pointed out, Genet undramatically but undeniably espoused Marxism (Sandarg, 1982).

Genet did not militate for the Panthers in France, as Matthews had requested; instead, he boldly left for America—the center of their struggle—the very next day. Previously

denied a visa because of his criminal past, he flew to Montreal. There, Black Panther Deputy of Information for New York State, Zayd Malik Shakur, met Genet and escorted him to New York. The Panthers accepted Genet quickly and without reservation, then drove him to New Haven, where Seale was confined. Genet was aghast at the state of siege under which the New Haven Panthers lived.

There were beds for four or five people in a room, and next to the windows were rifles. The Panthers are obliged to live under the protection of arms, their own arms; not against the people, of course, against the police. . . . And the doors and windows are barricaded, really barred, with locks and iron bars. . . . In the same room, there were women and children. That's the reality of the situation [Feinstein, 1970: 3].

Genet knew little English, so he and the Panthers hammered out a strategy using translators, gestures, and pencil and paper. Because the Panthers required money and a power base broader than the urban ghettos, Genet would embark on a nationwide speaking tour of college campuses. Through interpreters, he would win middle-class white students to the Panthers' side. The resulting coalition would demand the release of Newton, Seale, and the Panther 21 (a group accused of conspiring to dynamite New York police stations, department stores, and railroad tracks). Simultaneously, the Panthers and their allies would strive to destroy America's economic, political, and social structures and replace them with a Marxist system.

Genet returned to New York on March 11. With his illegal status, he would of necessity lead a shadowy existence, emerging from Panther sanctuaries to address audiences, then disappearing again into the central city.

Genet spoke for the first time on the afternoon of March 12 before 1500 students gathered at CCNY in solidarity with the Panther 21. He shared the podium with a formidable array of radicals: Young Lords gang leader Felipe Luciano; Yippie chieftain Jerry Rubin; and Ms. Afeni Shakur, a member of the

Panther 21 currently free on \$100,000 bail. After Luciano's address, Rubin discussed his own trial as one of the Chicago 8, then introduced Genet as a man sympathetic to the American New Left. There was sustained applause.

Genet began by reminding his audience of the privileges whites naturally enjoy. He recalled moments during the Democratic Convention when rampaging police had pursued him through the streets of Chicago. "Despite all the maneuvers of the police, I was sure that I risked absolutely nothing because I have white skin. . . . But if I had been black I am sure that the police would have shot at me" (*CCNY Observation Post*, 1970: 3). He went on to defend the Panther 21, alleging that "the real crime of the black man in this country is not to commit a crime but to be black." After frequent halts, Genet concluded by asking his listeners "to do everything possible to obtain liberation of Bobby Seale and prevent the brutal genocide of the Black Panthers and of black people" (*CCNY Observation Post*, 1970). Following an impassioned harangue by Afeni Shakur the meeting ended and Genet was driven directly to Boston.

At 9 p.m. that evening, with several Panthers and two veterans of the pro-Castro Venceremos Brigade recently returned from Cuba, Genet addressed 500 students at MIT (Baker, 1970: 1). Much of the audience understood French and persistently cheered Genet in mid-delivery, drowning out his voice and that of his interpreter. Forced to repeat himself constantly, Genet slowly outlined the genesis of his trip to the United States, described his border crossing, and explained the Panthers' role in reshaping American society. He then recounted an anecdote. Having been asked to speak on U.S. radio, he was begged by the station manager to refrain from obscenity. But true obscenity, fulminated Genet, is not an occasional curse; true obscenity is the FBI's underhanded efforts to wipe out the Black Panthers. Reaffirming his personal vow to aid the Panthers, Genet solicited contributions to the Bobby Seale Legal Defense Fund and urged MIT students to campaign for the Panthers in the white community.

Genet spent the morning of March 13 on the road back to New York. That afternoon at Columbia University, he partici-

pated in a demonstration attended by over a thousand supporters of the Panther 21 (Montgomery, 1970: 40). Flanked by Afeni Shakur, Abbie Hoffman, and Zayd Malik Shakur, Genet enumerated the pressures brought against minority political organizations that dare to defy the establishment. Again depicting the barricaded Panther enclaves in New Haven, he vilified America as a fascist, imperialistic nation.

After the rally, while several hundred students marched across campus chanting “Free the Panther 21” and then occupied the School of Business, Genet probed America’s racial turmoil in the course of a lengthy interview. He characterized black Americans as no less than a colonized people, obliged to struggle against their adversaries without recourse to a territory where they could take refuge. Nevertheless, Genet considered blacks more politically astute than white Americans and found black politics highly charged with poetry. “The discoveries blacks have made about how to struggle politically lean curiously on a poetic sentiment about the world” (Feinstein, 1970: 1). And for Genet, politics and poetry are one.

I think political reflection is integral to poetic comprehension and vice-versa. . . . I wonder if President Mao Tse-Tung would have successfully completed his Long March, the revolution, and then the cultural revolution if he hadn’t been a great poet. I wonder if it isn’t because the black people are a Poet that they have been able to work so well toward finding a road to liberation in almost the same way that President Mao found that road [Feinstein, 1970: 3].

In Genet’s estimation, the Black Panthers constituted the forefront of a poetic struggle against internal colonialism in the United States. He predicted that the Panthers would prevail, whereas a degenerate America, on the point of coming apart, would crumble.

On Sunday, March 15, Genet and his Panther escorts drove to Stonybrook, Long Island. The State University of New York at Stonybrook, where a weekend teach-in was being held on behalf of the Panther 21, was a hotbed of radicalism. When Seale was extradited from San Francisco to Connecticut, the



university had immediately created a defense committee, then offered Seale a professorship. In the village of Stonybrook, Genet attended a fund-raising cocktail party at which he reiterated his respect for the Panthers and asked his audience to defend Seale in particular and the Panthers in general.

After this week of febrile activity, Genet vanished; he reappeared in Los Angeles on Friday, March 20. Accompanied by Panther Minister of Education Masai Hewitt, Genet held a press conference at the office of the Panthers' attorney and dealt with Europe's reaction to the party's plight. He stated that even the "least coherent" European was concerned by the perils facing the Black Panthers, and added that many regarded Seale as marked for extermination. Genet announced with satisfaction that demonstrations against Seale's extradition had erupted in ten European nations.

Genet then upheld the Panther's right to armed self-defense. Because he perceived rampant violence in the white American lifestyle and in the very lines of American architecture, he said, "It is fashionable to accuse the Black Panther Party of violence . . . but white Americans have been violent to blacks for over two hundred years. How do you expect the Panthers to react?" (Marshall, 1970: 1). Genet closed by proclaiming again that the United States had reached the eve of her downfall. An insurrection led by the Black Panthers would trigger her collapse. He entreated affluent young Americans to join this people's war of liberation. "Of the great revolutionary leaders of history, Lenin was an aristocrat, Karl Marx was middle class, Castro was a lawyer, and Che Guevara was a doctor. Whites are not hungry, but they *can* change things" (Marshall, 1970: 5).

Although the Los Angeles press conference was sparsely attended, Genet attracted sizable audiences during three appearances that weekend at Stanford University. On the afternoon of Saturday, March 21, 100 guests attended a campus reception honoring Genet and the Panthers. At 8 p.m. that evening, before 700 people in Dienkelspiel Auditorium, Genet discussed the police vendetta against the Panthers, then screened a filmed interview with Bobby Seale. On Sunday afternoon, a cocktail party was held; it was a disaster from the outset.

Genet and the four members of the Panther National Central Committee who were still free—David Hilliard, Don Cox, Emory Douglas, and Masai Hewitt—faced 90 inattentive guests who muffled Genet's oration with their conversation and laughter. When Genet concluded, an infuriated Hilliard began arguing with white radical Tom Hayden. There was scuffling, and Hilliard hurled a wine decanter that ricocheted off a wall and struck a woman's head. He then denounced the audience as racist and stalked out, followed by Genet and his Panther entourage.

The following week, while speaking at the COPS commune in Berkeley, Genet interpreted the Stanford debacle as an explosion of Hilliard's long-smouldering frustration over whites' lack of meaningful actions in the Panthers' interest. Since 1968, when the Panthers had forged alliances with the Yippies, Weathermen, and the Peace and Freedom Party, whites had made financial and verbal commitments; however, few had taken to the streets. Although Genet goaded his audience by echoing Hilliard's accusation of racism, he obviously retained faith in white youth. He exhorted his listeners to act, declaring, "I can only relate to people by their practices and actions . . . not by their words" (Applebaum, 1970: 9).

The March 28 issue of *The Black Panther*, the party newspaper, contained Genet's inflammatory "Bobby Seale, the Black Panthers, and Us White People." In this article Genet alleges that America has entered a repressive period comparable to the McCarthy era. The ruling caste is a bigoted police, determined to massacre the Black Panthers and prepared to crush white intellectuals sympathetic to the Panthers. These same police, in collusion with the Mafia, are distributing drugs throughout the ghettos to destroy blacks physically and morally. In a more controlled tone, Genet warns whites not to channel all their energy into the antiwar movement while injustice exists in America. They must join the Panthers, for whites as well as blacks are menaced by the power elite. "Attorney General John Mitchell, by trying Bobby Seale, is trying all of us. Our liberties are being threatened more and more" (Genet, 1970a: 3).



For the next two weeks Genet remained underground, plotting future tactics. On April 14 he resurfaced in Connecticut and spoke at Yale. The next day Genet, David Hilliard, and Emory Douglas were involved in a courtroom disturbance in New Haven during a pretrial hearing for Seale and other Panthers arraigned in the murder case. Hilliard attempted to communicate with one of the defendants and was seized by bailiffs. When Douglas intervened, both he and Hilliard were wrestled to the floor and handcuffed by deputy sheriffs and state troopers. As the two Panthers were led before the judge, Genet rose and, from his place in the gallery, shouted angrily in French. He was removed from the courtroom; Hilliard and Douglas were sentenced to six months in prison for contempt.

Genet later attributed the outcome of this incident to America's inherent racism, maintaining that his skin color had again protected him. "I was there. I was shouting. Why didn't they arrest me? Because I'm white" (Darnton, 1970: 40).

The following week, Genet returned to California. On Monday, April 27, he addressed 600 students at UCLA. Genet opened by asserting that American racism is in "full expansion" and challenged his listeners to examine their personal motives for apathy toward Seale's predicament. "It is time to decide whether the intellectuals in the U.S. keep quiet because Seale is guilty or because he is black and the chairman of the Black Panthers" (Sward, 1970: 1). Genet then urged the collegians to aid the Panthers boldly:

You must face life and no longer live in the comfortable aquariums of the California universities, like goldfish only capable of making bubbles. Your real life depends on the Black Panther Party. . . . If the Black Panthers ask it of you, desert your university, leave your courses and publicize all over the United States the case of Seale and the existence of the Black Panther Party [Sward, 1970].

Many in the audience, expecting insights concerning French literature, were unreceptive to Genet's polemics and left the Grand Ballroom; nevertheless, Genet optimistically concluded that whites would soon support the Panthers. And he indeed

had cause for hope. Accompanied by Panther Field Lieutenant Tom Jolly and two white members of the Panther Defense Committee, Genet would return the next day to New Haven, where a massive demonstration in support of Bobby Seale was planned for May 1.

Unfortunately, the cross-country trip was marred by hostility even before takeoff from Los Angeles International Airport. As Jolly entered the aircraft, a flight attendant ordered him to open his attache case, which contained only clothing. The travelers were hardly seated when five federal marshals ejected Jolly, ostensibly for refusing to show a boarding pass. Genet and his companions protested bitterly, then deplaned also.

When the group reached New York on a different airline, Genet assailed America in well-worn terms. "It's a brutal, violent country which has the gall, the nerve, to preach nonviolence to blacks. Whites do not have the impression of living in a fascist country, but blacks do. They live it every day" (Darnton, 1970).

Genet then underscored the Panthers' effectiveness. "They are the edge of a knife, and the rest of the country is butter. And the butter is trying to cut the knife." He mellowed somewhat while evaluating his relationship with the Panthers. "They are no longer simply comrades in combat. They have become friends" (Darnton, 1970). By now, Genet had lived among the Panthers for seven weeks, and the gathering in New Haven three days hence would represent the culmination of his efforts in their favor.

May Day in New Haven brought a threat of violence. A crowd of 35,000, including Rubin, Hoffman, Hayden, and the Weathermen, was expected. David Hilliard, released six days after the courtroom altercation, had called for "killing pigs" during a violent rally at Yale on April 21. A New Haven armory had been looted and the Connecticut National Guard mobilized. At bases in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, 4,000 paratroopers and Marines were on alert.

But as 25,000 people assembled on the New Haven green throughout the day, it became apparent that the demonstration would be peaceful. Rock music blared from loudspeakers.

ers, "Free Bobby" banners waved, and the mood was festive. At 4 p.m. Panther Deputy Minister of Information, Big Man (Elbert Howard), introduced Genet and read a translation of his address.

Genet's May Day speech was essentially the same appeal he had made at UCLA, but an addendum that was subsequently published merits scrutiny as a systematic denunciation of American institutions. In this addendum, Genet reviles the police, the church, and labor unions as agents of repression. He accuses the news media of lying and holds them responsible for America's "thundering stupidity." Universities teach "a false culture, in which the only recognized values are quantitative, and prepare students to serve the bosses" (Genet, 1970b: 23).

Genet insists that fear rules American society. "Everyone is afraid of everyone else. The strongest is afraid of the weakest, the least asinine is afraid of the most asinine. What is still called American dynamism is nothing but a big shiver shaking the whole country" (Genet, 1970b: 25). He makes a final prediction of America's demise: "What they call American civilization will disappear. It is already dead, for it is based on contempt . . . contempt of the rich for the poor, of white for black. All civilizations based on contempt must necessarily disappear" (Genet, 1970b: 21).

Genet's activities in America terminated on May Day, for on April 30 the Immigration and Naturalization Service finally ascertained his whereabouts and ordered him to appear at their Hartford office on May 6. After discussing this development with the Panthers, Genet decided to leave the United States rather than respond to the summons. On May 2 he went to Montreal, where he presided as the official of a Black Panther Party headquarters. On May 7, 1970, Genet returned to France.

Following his departure from the United States, Genet continued to support Afro-American revolutionaries associated with the Black Panthers, namely, George Jackson and Angela Davis. In 1960, at age 18, Jackson had received an indeterminate prison sentence of one year to life for robbing a service station of \$70. Still imprisoned a decade later, he was accused of

murdering a prison guard at San Quentin on February 19, 1970, and faced execution.

During his years behind bars Jackson had read voraciously, developed a revolutionary mentality, and proclaimed himself a “Marxist-Leninist-Maoist-Fanonist” enemy of the “neoslavery” engendered by international capitalism. A general in the Panthers’ People’s Revolutionary Army, he had authored two books, *Soledad Brother* and *Blood in My Eye*, which advocated armed insurrection. During the summer of 1970, Genet wrote a lengthy introduction to *Soledad Brother*.

In this preface, Genet denounced the United States as an extension of Victorian England. He found racism diffused through the whole of America, supported by legislative and judicial systems “established in order to protect a capitalist minority and, if forced, the whole of the white population” (Genet, 1970c: 8).

Genet praised *Soledad Brother* as a weapon of liberation and expressed pleasure that this call to rebellion was secular in tone. “From Richard Wright to George Jackson, the blacks are stripping themselves of all the Presbyterian and biblical rags: their voices are rawer, blacker, more accusing, more implacable, tearing away any reference to the cynical cheats of the religious establishment” (Genet, 1970c: 4).

On August 7, 1970, George Jackson’s younger brother, Jonathan, attempted to free three black prisoners on trial at the Marin County Courthouse. Holding five hostages, the group escaped in a rented van; but at the first roadblock young Jackson, two convicts and the presiding judge died in a hail of police bullets. A gun registered to Angela Davis was found in the van, and Davis was charged with conspiracy to commit kidnapping and murder. Lacking confidence in “the bourgeois judicial system which tries to conceal its class and race bias behind meaningless procedures and empty platitudes about democracy” (Davis, 1974: 173), she went into hiding.

Genet knew Angela Davis personally, for she had served as his interpreter in Los Angeles five months earlier, and he promptly lent his pen to her defense. On August 31, 1970, his

article “Angela et ses frères” appeared in *Le Nouvel Observateur* (Genet, 1970d). Genet attacked the American news media as biased and unwilling to reveal pertinent information concerning her case. He asserted that because she was black, a member of the American Communist Party, and a Panther supporter, Davis was targeted for destruction.

Angela Davis was captured on October 13, 1970, and ten days after her arrest Genet discussed the Davis affair in an interview published by *Le Monde* (Genet, 1970e). Asserting that her ownership of firearms was but a pretext, Genet stated that Davis had been arrested for purely political reasons. He expressed fear for her safety in police custody and foresaw the spectre of massive reprisals against Americans of African descent. Genet added that Jean-Paul Sartre had agreed to testify at both George Jackson’s and Angela Davis’s trials.

George Jackson was never tried. On August 21, 1971, he was killed at San Quentin during an “escape attempt” that has never been adequately explained. Genet’s rage promptly exploded in “The Americans Kill Off the Blacks,” published by *The Black Panther* newspaper. In this article, Genet does not deign to call George Jackson an American: He was a countryman of “the youth of all nations . . . and the people of all nations crushed underfoot by America” (Genet, 1971a: 1). Like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, claims Genet, Jackson was eliminated because America feared his intelligence.

On September 11, 1971, *The Black Panther* printed Genet’s “The Black and the Red,” which ironically describes white America’s confusion when confronted by black Marxists. Because they are “blacks for sure but reds as well . . . the optical nerve of the blond American freaks out; it no longer knows what color it must seize” (Genet, 1971b: 14). Reasserting that George Jackson was murdered by design, Genet proclaims that Jackson’s name will have its place alongside those of Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, and Frederick Douglass. This article marks the end of Genet’s active association with the Panthers.

In summary, Genet was a valuable asset to Afro-American militants. He donated a generous portion of his personal

fortune plus the receipts of his fund raising to the Black Panther Party. And although young whites never flocked to the Panther camp, Genet's presence surely helped to sway public opinion in the Panthers' favor.

Genet not only appeared in person before thousands of Americans but was also seen on televised newscasts in New York and San Francisco. Charges of racism and government harrassment by a writer of Genet's international stature doubtlessly touched the American conscience and contributed to favorable trial outcomes for Panther defendants. Huey Newton's conviction for voluntary manslaughter was reversed on August 6, 1970; the Panther 21 were exonerated on May 13, 1971; less than two weeks later Bobby Seale was acquitted; and Angela Davis was found not guilty on all counts on June 4, 1972.

Jean Genet was no momentary militant. Like his Panther comrades, he perceived the struggle against racism and economic exploitation in terms of an ongoing and global socialist revolution. He subsequently aided the PLO in Jordan and demonstrated on behalf of Algerian immigrants in France. By his actions in America, the Middle East, and Europe, Genet proved himself worthy of the Panthers' esteem and trust.

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*Robert Sandarg is Lecturer in French at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He formerly taught at Paine College in Augusta, Georgia, and at Fayetteville State University. His research is currently directed toward African Francophone poetry.*