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A new feeling of unity: decolonial Black Power in the Dutch Atlantic (1968-1973)

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Chapter 1:
““Black Panther Types on the Streets and Byways”:
The Black Panthers of Curaçao, *Vitó*, and the Making of an Anticolonial Movement

On 30 November 1968, radical Curaçaoan journal *Vitó* released the latest issue of its bi-weekly publication. As always, the journal was filled with critical articles, containing among other things an analysis of the upcoming elections in neighboring Venezuela, an anticolonial critique of the approaching Sinterklaas holiday, a promotional piece for the local Union of Domestic Workers, and an advertisement for an erotic film screening at the Airport Cinema in the island's capital city of Willemstad. Though this was nothing out of the ordinary for *Vitó*, there was one article unlike anything it had published before, titled “Black Panthers na Korsow” (“Black Panthers in Curaçao”).[106] In typical *Vitó* style, the column was separated from the rest of the page by a thick black frame and headed with a boldfaced title. What made it truly stand out, however, were the eye-catching illustrations placed right above and underneath the column: two black panthers, one leaping forward with its tail curled up, its spiky claws extended while gazing straight ahead, the other sleek-figured, prowling sidewards with its tail and ears down while preparing to attack. They were images that many around the world would have recognized: they were symbols of the Black Panther Party (BPP), one of the most notorious organizations in the Black Power movement.[107]

In the column, *Vitó* announced that on 26 November 1968 a new organization had been founded on the island: the Black Panthers of Curaçao (BPC).[108] Modeled “after the example of the Black Panther movement in America,” the organization was – according to the author – the initiative of a group of local teenagers frustrated with

[106] “Black Panthers na Korsow,” *Vitó*, November 30, 1968, 3. All editions of *Vitó* referred to in this dissertation were accessed through the Mongui Maduro Library in Willemstad, Curaçao.

[107] The Black Panther symbol had first been introduced by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) for the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) – also known as the ‘original Black Panther Party’ – in Alabama in 1965, after which it spread around the United States and was adopted by Black Panther parties (plural) elsewhere, including the one by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale. For more information, see Donna Murch, “When the Panther Travels: Race and the Southern Diaspora in the History of the BPP, 1964-1972,” in *Black Power Beyond Borders,* ed. Nico Slate (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 57-78.

[108] The name of the organization is not translated to English for the purpose of this dissertation: the organization itself adopted an English name.

recent displays of police brutality on Curaçao and neighboring Bonaire.[109] The immediate cause had been an incident two weeks earlier where a Dutch policeman's dog had bitten two Curaçaoan children. Infuriated, the teenagers had decided to take matters into their own hands. They believed it was time to set up a collective system of self-defense against the "continuing abuse" of island's authorities and set up a program of surveillance and responsive action to protect their communities, making it their mission "to monitor the actions of the police in Curaçao (…) and to take measures when necessary."[110] And when it came to the use of violence, the author added, they were "willing to go just as far as the government is."[111]

In reality, the BPC was not established by a group of teenagers but by *Vitó*'s own editor-in-chief Stanley C. Brown, who also worked as a teacher in Willemstad. For several years, Brown had been using the journal to criticize the many systems of oppression that existed on the island, for which he drew inspiration from a number of foreign revolutionary thinkers and movements. As the name, symbolism, and mission of his new organization suggested, Brown felt especially inspired by the African American Black Panther Party, founded by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California, in 1966. Though the BPP had started as a community-based group for armed self-defense, its bold actions and media strategies had enabled it to grow from a local initiative into a massive organization with chapters in sixty-eight American cities and a network that spread its paper, *The Black Panther*, to nearly every corner of the United States.[112] Though the BPP was part of the broader Black Power movement, with its central principles of self-determination, self-defense, and self-respect, the Panthers developed a particular ideology of revolutionary nationalism, which combined Black nationalism with Marxism and Third Worldism.[113] With these

[109] "Black Panthers na Korsow," November 30, 3.

[110] "Black Panthers na Korsow," November 30, 3.

[111] "Black Panthers na Korsow," November 30, 3.

[112] For a detailed overview of the Black Panther Party's history and activities, see Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

[113] Huey P. Newton, *To Die for the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton* (New York: Random House, 1972), 20; Sean L. Malloy, *Out of Oakland: Black Panther Party Internationalism During the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2017), 6; Bloom and Martin, 12; Pinkney, 5.

ideas, the party was considered such a threat that the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) J. Edgar Hoover would eventually identify the Black Panthers as "without question, the greatest threat to the internal security of the country."[114]

Brown was not the only activist outside the United States to take inspiration from the Black Panther Party. Over the late 1960s and early 1970s, Panther-inspired groups began to spring up all over the world, ranging from the Black Panther Movement in England to the Black Panthers of Israel, the Dalit Panthers in India, and the Polynesian Panther Party in New Zealand.[115] According to Michael L. Clemons and Charles E. Jones, who first navigated the international networks of the BPP, these "global emulators mirrored the goals, ideological orientation, and tactics of the party," often adjusting them to suit local circumstances in the process.[116] While this was thus not uncommon, it does seem like Brown was one of the first to establish such a group. Preceded only by the British Black Panther Movement, founded in 1967, the Black Panthers of Curaçao appears to have been the first of its kind outside the Anglophone world and the first in the Caribbean, predating even the much better-known Black Beret Cadre in Bermuda, established in the following year.[117] Yet, Brown's group has never been included in the historical narrative.

In line with the overarching research questions of this dissertation, this chapter examines why the Black Panthers of Curaçao was founded and how its members used the model of the Black Panther Party to address local grievances. It shows that the BPC never grew into a self-contained organization, but became a subdivision of the broader *Vitó* movement. Based on an analysis of the ideas, activities, and impact of the group, it argues that Brown and others associated with the Black Panthers because this enabled them to position the anticolonial struggle of their tiny Caribbean island into a

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[114] Bloom and Martin, 2-3; Malloy, 109.

[115] Clemons and Jones, 181-186; 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; Frankel, 81-106; Shilliam, 107-126; Slate, 127-143.

[116] Clemons and Jones, 183.

[117] For an overview of these organizations with the years founded, see Clemons and Jones, 182. For more information on the Black Beret Cadre, see Swan, *Black Power in Bermuda.* Just as the Curaçaoan organization has never been acknowledged before, however, it is possible there were other, perhaps even earlier, Black Panther organizations that have not yet received any attention. This statement here is based only on the information that is available at the time this dissertation is written.

more global revolutionary framework, which they then used to encourage Curaçaoans to fight for their independence. While BPC leader Brown did not wish for the original Black Panthers to become involved in the local revolution, he did believe it was important for Curaçaoans to become part of their transnational network and collaborate with other Black communities that faced similar issues to strengthen their cause.

This chapter furthermore argues that *Vitó* appropriated the recognizable and popular Black Panther 'brand' because it allowed its editors to create a new space for racial discourse in Curaçao, using the revolutionary nationalism of the African American organization to understand the role of race in the broader colonial system. This hit the nail right on the head for many of the Black Curaçaoan workers who read the journal, and was quite novel to them as taboos around racism had long prevented Curaçaoans from engaging with such theories, even though racism was so deeply rooted in their society. By inspiring these workers to think more critically about the intersections between racism, capitalism, and colonialism, then, the Black Panthers of Curaçao would come to play an indirect role in Trinta di Mei, the largest uprising in the history of the Netherlands Antilles, albeit small.

To support these arguments, this chapter is divided into five sections. The first introduces the sociopolitical milieu of Curaçao leading up to the late 1960s and discusses the anticolonial movement that arose to tackle some of its most pertinent issues. The second section introduces *Vitó* and its editor-in-chief, Stanley Brown, who played an important role in providing the ideological backbone for this movement. The third section positions the rise of the Black Panthers of Curaçao into the *Vitó* movement, explaining how Brown established the organization and how it developed over time. The fourth section discusses the ideas of the Black Panthers of Curaçao, demonstrating how Brown and his colleagues used the Black Panther 'brand' to address racial inequality on the island in new ways. The final section explores how these ideas echoed in Trinta di Mei some months after, ultimately telling the story of a seemingly failed Black Power initiative with an unexpectedly lasting influence.

Curaçao in Crisis

To understand the rise of Black Panther activism in Curaçao, it is necessary to start this chapter with some information on the position of the island in the

Netherlands Antilles and the broader Dutch Atlantic. As explained in the introduction to this dissertation, the island of Curaçao was part of the Netherlands Antilles, established as a country in 1948 and as a constituent within the broader order of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1954. The country consisted of six islands in the Caribbean Sea, grouping together Aruba, Curaçao, Bonaire, St. Martin, St. Eustatius, and Saba. The first three, known colloquially as the 'ABC islands', are located just off the Venezuelan coast in the Leeward Antilles. First settled by the Spanish and later conquered by the Dutch, the ABC islands used to hold a key position in the transatlantic slave trade, though their arid climate prevented them from developing into profitable plantation colonies.[118] Instead, their economies revolved around trade and commerce, complemented by salt mining, fishing, and some agriculture. In the early twentieth century, both Aruba and Curaçao became key sites for oil refining, conducted by US-owned Lago (Standard Oil) and Dutch-owned Shell respectively. While the ABC islands' official language was Dutch, the most commonly spoken language was Papiamentu, a creole language based primarily on Spanish and Portuguese.

The other three islands, often referred to as the SSS islands, are located in the Windward Islands, a few hundred miles east of Puerto Rico and in close proximity to the (former) British colonies of Anguilla and St. Kitts and Nevis. With their more humid climates, colonialism on these islands involved more plantation slavery, complimented by salt production, fishing, and trade.[119] Despite St. Martin's division into a Dutch and French part, the islands' proximity to the British West Indies and the historical presence of an Anglophone community led to English being the formal language there.[120] Though grouped together as one, the islands within the Netherlands Antilles thus had their own unique histories and cultures, and even within the 'ABC' and 'SSS' divisions were by no means homogenous. Or, as Römer has argued, the Netherlands Antilles was "a legal construction, with no foundation in the social reality."[121]

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[118] Dalhuisen, 80.

[119] Dalhuisen, 80.

[120] Oostindie, *Paradise Overseas*, 62.

[121] Römer, "Het "Wij" van de Curacaoenaar," 49.

Ever since the seventeenth century, Curaçao had lain at the center of the Antillean colonies. With a surface area of 444 square kilometers, or 171 square miles, and an estimated population of 150,000 (1970), Curaçao was not only the largest but also the most populous of the islands. Due to its strategic position between North and South America, located only 65 kilometers, or 40 miles, off the Venezuelan coast, Europeans saw it as an ideal basis for international trade, military defense, and colonial administration. The island was in fact so central to Dutch efforts in the region that all Antillean islands were collectively referred to as 'Curaçao and Dependencies' until well into the twentieth century. And even after the colonies were transformed into a Kingdom constituent, Curaçao kept its central position, with its only city, Willemstad, becoming the capital of the Netherlands Antilles and the home to its government, which took seat at Fort Amsterdam, the former headquarters of the Dutch West India Company.

Although the establishment of the Netherlands Antilles as a Kingdom constituent had come with universal suffrage, the government of the islands, as well as the individual island councils, continued to be dominated by White, light-skinned, and Jewish elites. By far the most influential actor in this political landscape was the Democratic Party (Democratische Partij, DP), which had been established by a group of White Protestants in 1944. In the first two decades, the DP was led by Efraïn Jonckheer, who also served as prime minister of the Netherlands Antilles until 1968. When he transferred to The Hague to take up the prominent position of Minister Plenipotentiary, representing the country at the level of the Kingdom, his position was taken up by another politician from the same party, Ciro D. Kroon. Though the power of the DP was relatively stable throughout the mid-twentieth century, it was continuously challenged by the National People's Party (Partido Nashonal di Pueblo, PNP), founded by Dr. Moises Da Costa Gomez in 1948 and, after his passing in 1966, led by Juancho Evertsz. While the Catholic PNP was more popular among the Afro-Antillean population than the Protestant DP, politics were generally seen as an elitist affair on the islands, creating a large gap between the electorate and its representatives.[122]

[122] Dalhuisen, 96-97; 133; Dew, "The Dutch Caribbean," 385-386; Anderson and Dynes, 50-52.

Economic power had historically been in the hands of these same elites, though the rapid upsurge of the local oil industry in the early twentieth century had impacted their position. When oil was found in Venezuela in the 1910s, American and Dutch oil companies Standard Oil and Shell started using the harbors of Aruba and Curaçao to transport newly found Venezuelan oil abroad. When fears arose about the political stability of Venezuela, the companies decided to relocate to the islands and built significant refineries in San Nicolas (the Lago refinery and the Eagle refinery) and Willemstad (the Isla refinery), both of which grew even further when the demand for oil rose exponentially during World War II. These economic shifts transformed the islands completely. The oil industry brought much wealth to both Aruba and Curaçao, making them some of the wealthiest places in the region. This prosperity renewed Dutch interest in the Antilles, too, which had diminished since the abolition of slavery several decades earlier. Politically, the oil boom required new infrastructures, both physical and administrative. It also led to a massive wave of migration, both from the Netherlands and from different areas in the Western Hemisphere. Dutch and American workers moved to the islands to take up managerial and technical positions at the companies. Many of the lower-paying jobs were taken up by Black workers from around the Caribbean, including Suriname. To the dissatisfaction of the Afro-Curaçaoan population, these migrants received preferential treatment over the local workforce. They themselves got little of the prosperity the oil industry brought to their islands.[123]

In the 1960s, Afro-Curaçaoans workers' increasing frustrations with the continuing political power of the local elites, the persisting involvement of the Dutch, and the unequal distribution of wealth led to an upsurge of protest. It became clear that the promises of upward social mobility made by the 1954 Charter and the oil industry did not benefit them – even though they constituted 90 percent of the island's total population. When they were also the first to lose their jobs *en masse* once the oil industry stagnated, leading to some 20 percent unemployment by the mid-1960s, many started to criticize the way their island was governed. Realizing that there was a historical connection between enslavement, poverty, and racial exclusion at different

[123] Sharpe, 120-121; Oostindie, "Black Power," 242; Dalhuisen, 81-84; Broek, *De Kleur van Mijn Eiland,* 192-193; Anderson and Dynes, 33-38.

levels of society, more and more Curaçaoans began to call for a complete decolonization of their island.[124]

The rise of this anticolonial movement coincided with growing discussions about national identity and belonging, which had emerged after the Netherlands Antilles had become autonomous but had also been stimulated by the growing presence of migrants on the island. To distinguish those who had arrived during the oil boom from those who were 'native' to the island – that is, those whose ancestors had lived there for several generations – Curaçaoans came to refer to themselves as *Yunan di Korsow* or 'Children of Curaçao'.[125] This term was, by itself, not uncontested. While the descendants of Dutch Protestant and Jewish settlers considered themselves to be included in this category, as they had lived on the island for hundreds of years, the descendants of enslaved Africans argued that only they were the true heirs of the island, referring to themselves as "nos *bon* yu di Korsoù" or "we the *real* children of Curaçao."[126] Race, in this context, became deeply intertwined with discourse on authenticity, as did language and religion, with Catholicism being the faith of the Black masses and Protestantism seen as a Dutch religion. Though these discussions took part largely in the cultural sphere, as Aart G. Broek has demonstrated in *The Colour of My Island* (2009), they also trickled down into political debates, raising questions of political representation and political interests.[127]

Over the course of the 1960s, such Afrocentric nationalist rhetoric could mostly be found among two groups. The first consisted of a range of labor unions that campaigned for better working conditions and equal treatment across the Curaçaoan workforce, including those at the refinery, the docks, and the government. Black workers had first become organized in the 1930s, when a number of radical unionizers

[124] Oostindie, "Black Power," 242-244; Oostindie, *Het Paradijs Overzee,* 161; Broek, *De Kleur van Mijn Eiland,* 193.

[125] Native, in this sense, is not synonymous with indigeneity, but based on the (false) assumption made in the early movement in assuming that African slaves formed the first communities in the countries.

[126] Römer, "Het "Wij" van de Curacaoenaar," 53; Oostindie, *Paradise Overseas,* 59-60, 127; Sharpe, 119; Broek, *De Kleur van Mijn Eiland,* 210-213; Dew, "The Dutch Caribbean," 385-386; Anderson and Dynes, 48. Römer explains that 'bon' in this context translates not to 'good' in a moral sense, but as meaning "for the full 100%," 53.

[127] Broek, *The Colour of my Island.* See also Broek, *De Kleur van Mijn Eiland*, for the more detailed Dutch version of this book.

had introduced new structures for protest on the island.[128] Though most of this leadership had come from migrant workers, many of whom came from the Anglophone Caribbean or Suriname, Curaçaoan involvement in the unions increased rapidly in the 1960s, raising membership from 48 percent in 1957 to 85 percent by 1970.[129] Over this period, scholars William A. Anderson and Russell R. Dynes have argued, unionism became a central platform for political participation among the island's Black workers, used to address those issues that political representatives failed to pay sufficient attention to.[130] Some unions played a larger role in this than others, including the General Dock Workers Union (Algemene Havenunie, AHU) and the Christian trade union, led by the priest Amado Römer, who had begun to preach a 'theology of revolution'.[131] By the mid-1960s, these unions organized strikes on an almost weekly basis, with hundreds to thousands of workers calling for better working conditions and equal opportunities.

The second group among whom revolutionary ideas were on the rise consisted of young Curaçaoans who had recently returned to the island after studying in the Netherlands. Shortly after the new Kingdom structure had come into place, the Antillean government and island councils had decided to set up new scholarship programs to send talented students to schools and universities in the metropole. The idea of this program was that young Antilleans from different backgrounds, not just the elite, could learn new skills in the Netherlands, which they could use for the benefit of their home country once they returned. Though this led to a higher percentage of educated Curaçaoans, it also had some notable side effects for the government itself. While in the Netherlands, many Antillean students had become involved in the radical student movements that swept over Europe at the time. These student movements, as part of the larger New Left, encouraged students to challenge authority and familiarized them with revolutionary ideologies, not least of which were Marxism and Third Worldism. Despite living at the heart of the empire, Antillean students learned

[128] Groenewoud, 104; Dew, "The Dutch Caribbean," 386.

[129] Dew, 386; Anderson and Dynes, 36-37.

[130] Anderson and Dynes, 52-53.

[131] Anderson and Dynes, 60-61.

to use these ideologies to make sense of many problems they had faced in their own Caribbean societies. And when they returned to their islands, they were eager to start acting upon them.[132]

The Rise of an Anticolonial Movement

One of the products of these ideological exchanges was journal *Vitó*, introduced at the beginning of this chapter. Translating to 'plantation overseer' in Papiamentu, the journal was first published in 1964 by a group of recent college graduates who wanted to create an independent space where they could criticize the position of the Netherlands Antilles in the Kingdom and provide political commentary on recent affairs and developments in the country. Its intellectual baseline was comparable to that of many groups in the New Left, consisting of a combination of anticolonialism, anticapitalism, and a general opposition to the oppression of marginalized groups, including women, sex workers, and gay men. In challenging these different systems, the journal's authors were not afraid to point fingers at prominent members of the Curaçaoan community, including businessmen, artists, and prominent policemen. Most heavily criticized of all was Prime Minister Jonckheer of the DP, who was seen as the personification of everything that was wrong on the island. As Anderson and Dynes have described it, *Vitó* "took to task those forces in Curacao identified responsible for the political and economic exploitation of the masses," as well as anyone else they considered to be "allied with Dutch neo-colonial interests."[133] The latter included the United States, too, whose growing power in the Caribbean *Vitó* saw as a threat to the autonomy of the Netherlands Antilles.

Initially, the journal was published by a group of students who had already published a similar journal in the Netherlands, named *Kambio.* This journal, as Chelsea Schields has argued, was known as an "excessively ideological paper" whose "romantic Marxism" had been criticized even by others on the left.[134] Under the leadership of lawyer Erich Zielinski, the first editions of *Vitó* largely followed in those same

[132] Anderson and Dynes, 62; Römer, 21; Broek, *De Kleur van Mijn Eiland*, 193; Oostindie, "Black Power," 248; Schields, 100; Groenewoud, 108-109; Dalhuisen, 135-136.

[133] Anderson and Dynes, 63.

[134] Schields, 100.

footsteps, presenting highly intellectual concepts and complicated analytical frameworks to bring its revolutionary message across. Although this helped the young authors gain a small audience with the educated middle and upper classes of the island, it created much distance between the journal and the people it so passionately defended. It also did not help that the journal was published in Dutch, while the majority of Curaçaoans had trouble understanding the language. This changed when Zielinski resigned in 1967 and handed over his position to Stanley C. Brown, who would bring *Vitó* to the forefront of the Antillean anticolonial movement.

Brown was born in Willemstad, Curaçao, on 6 October 1938 to a White mother from St. Martin and a Black father from St. Lucia, though he was raised in part by his paternal grandmother, who had been born in St. Eustatius and was a committed Garveyite.[135] The eldest of four brothers, Brown grew up in a Black working class neighborhood near the Shell refinery, where his father worked as a security guard.[136] After finishing school in the mid-1950s, he received a scholarship from the island council to study in the Netherlands. He left for Dongen, a village in the province of Brabant, where he pursued a degree in education at a small Catholic college.[137] During his time in the Netherlands, Brown developed a strong interest in both Marxism and Third Worldism, "reading Confucius, Lenin and all of those other books that were forbidden by the college."[138] When he returned to Curaçao in 1961 to take up a position at the Peter Stuyvesant College in Willemstad, he took many of these ideas with him into the classroom, hoping to inspire a new generation of Caribbeans to fight against the system.[139] "I wanted to make the equality I had gotten to know in Europe a reality

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[135] Stanley Brown, interview by Gert Oostindie, 12 March 1998, Collectie 30 Mei 1969 (KITLV), UBL474, Microdisc 50, Special Collections, Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands.

[136] Stanley C. Brown, "Stanley Brown's Think Tank," webpage accessed via *The Way Back Machine*, https://web.archive.org/web/20120630220319/http://www.stanleybrownthinkank.org:80/; Brown, interview by Oostindie.

[137] "De Weg van een Verontwaardigd Christen," *Amigoe*, May 31, 1986, 8.

[138] Elizabeth de Montsouris, "Activist Stanley Brown Kiest voor Optie C," *Amigoe*, November 16, 1993, 13; American Consul Curaçao, *Collection of Biographic Information on Potential Leaders*, June 14, 1968, page 1, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967-69, Box 2364, Pol 6 NETH ANT, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD, United States.

[139] Montsouris, 13; "De Weg van een Verontwaardigd Christen," 8; Brown in *Curaçao, 30 Mei 1969*, 13-14.

on Curaçao," he would later reflect.[140] Controversially, the young teacher moved back into his childhood home in Groot Kwartier despite having obtained a college degree and a relatively high-earning job, making him part of the island's small middle class. This was even more controversial because Brown was very light-skinned and generally passed as White, while the neighborhood was – in his words – a "black ghetto."[141] To Brown, however, this was the perfect place to build a revolution.[142]

Together with fellow editors Angel Salsbach, Lies Salsbach, Emmy Henriquez, and Yellie Alkema, a Dutch social worker employed by the Reformed Church on the island, Brown turned *Vitó* into a truly radical platform. To open up the journal to a broader audience and to demonstrate their dedication to decolonization, the new editors began publishing the journal in Papiamentu. They also altered its visual appeal, introducing bold and flashy typefaces, highlighting provocative quotes, and using elicit illustrations to grasp their audience's attention. Perhaps the most significant change they made, however, was to start immersing themselves into the local labor movement, increasingly calling out employers for their unfair policies and speaking out in support of ongoing strikes by the island's many different unions, some of which the members of *Vitó* themselves also began to participate in.[143] Their ties to the workers grew especially strong when Brown befriended Wilson 'Papa' Godett and Amador Nita of the General Dock Workers Union (Algemene Haven Unie, AHU), considered some of the most charismatic leaders of the labor movement.[144]

These strategies proved to be highly effective. By the end of 1968, just over a year after Brown had taken over, *Vitó* had reached an average circulation of 12,000 and was distributed by eighty-five different sellers in the Dutch Caribbean and the Netherlands. To support this distribution, Brown would later reflect, the editors had trained some twenty young Curaçaoan men "ideologically and militarily" to travel around the island on mopeds and spread *Vitó*'s revolutionary message, selling

[140] Brown in *Curaçao, 30 Mei 1969*, 22.

[141] Brown in *Curaçao, 30 Mei 1969*, 13.

[142] Brown in *Curaçao, 30 Mei 1969*, 13-14; Interview with Brown in Diekmann, 32.

[143] Anderson and Dynes, 64-65; Broek, *De Kleur van Mijn Eiland,* 196-197; Oostindie, "Black Power," 244; Schields, 100.

[144] Anderson and Dynes, 65; Oostindie, *Curaçao, 30 Mei 1969*, 15.

thousands of editions along the way, all while "getting paid more than the average worker."[145] In doing so, to use the words of Anderson and Dynes, *Vitó* "became the chief communication link between the radical intellectuals and the labor movement."[146] Its reputation as such even surpassed the borders of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, as Brown sent regular updates and editions of *Vitó* to publishers in Cuba, North America, and throughout Europe, where similar groups were eager to hear about anticolonialism in the Caribbean. In exchange, the Antillean radicals received materials from like-minded activists elsewhere in the world, which were then distributed among the readers of *Vitó*.[147]

Over the late 1960s, *Vitó* became so popular that its editors also began organizing their own political protests, most of which took place at the Gomez Square in Punda, the historical city center of Willemstad.[148] Initially, the main intention of these protests was to demonstrate against the political decisions and, in typical sixties style, aggravate the government. Each week, Brown explained to Gert Oostindie in a 1998 interview, *Vitó* would set up a detailed scheme for their protest. Their strategy was to create a balance between serious political resistance and playful actions that would cause a stir and get the attention of the authorities. He explained:

> One week we would push hard, we would scream revolution, rioting, fire. The following week we would do something fun. We were highly influenced by the Provos.[149] We would come up with pranks for everyone. When members of the DP, all of them machos, showed up to fight us, we would take the homosexual route. We would provoke the DP members by setting up different groups of little boys who would go around squeezing their butts, and they would freak out. Those were the

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145 Brown, interview by Oostindie. A shortened version of this interview can be found in Oostindie, *Curaçao, 30 Mei 1969*, 12-22. See also Peter Verton, *Politieke Dynamiek en Dekolonisatie; De Nederlandse Antillen tussen Autonomie en Onafhankelijkheid* (Alphen aan den Rijn: Samson, 1977), as cited in Broek, *De Kleur van Mijn Eiland,* 196-197; Schields, 100.

146 Anderson and Dynes, 64.

147 Letters to and from Stanley Brown about these exchanges can be found in *Vito-Artikelen, Archief, 1969-1971, N.B. Correspondentie e.a*., Microfilm Collection Stanley C. Brown, Box 3, Section 121, Archivo Nashonal, Willemstad, Curaçao. Brown confirms this in his interview with Oostindie.

148 Gert Oostindie, "Woedend Vuur," in *Dromen en Littekens: Dertig Jaar na de Curaçaose Revolte, 30 Mei 1969*, ed. Gert Oostindie (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 1999), 18; Diekmann, 21-22.

149 The Provos, or Provo Movement, was a Dutch anarchist New Left group famous for their clever yet provocative methods of protest.

> kinds of things we did. That is why there was always great tension around the Gomez Square.[150]

Though their protest was thus by no means violent, the Gomez Square meetings did cause quite the stir on the conservative island. “As innocent as these things may have seemed in West European and North American milieus,” Römer would later write, “they brought the local citizens and authorities, who were not used to as much, into an absolute state of shock.”[151] Each Saturday, these protests drew some two to three thousand Curaçaoans to the square.[152]

As the journal itself became more popular among the local labor movement, however, *Vitó*’s protests also became more serious and substantive. In collaboration with local union leaders, *Vitó* began to work towards more labor-oriented protest, calling for better political representation and workers’ rights, frequently joining the unions in their demonstrations on site.[153] By the end of the decade, these actions helped *Vitó* transform from a mere intellectual platform into a movement in its own right, referred to by its leaders as the Revolutionary Guard Vitó.[154]

The Black Panthers of Curaçao

It was in this same period that Brown began to experiment with new revolutionary theories to strengthen his own work. As mentioned previously, Brown had set up an extensive network connecting *Vitó* and a number of publishers elsewhere, who sent him foreign revolutionary writings in exchange for his own. This was quite tricky to do. As Brown and Henriquez once wrote to fellow Black Panther supporters in the Netherlands, who will be discussed in Chapter 3, the Antillean

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[150] Brown in *Curaçao, 30 Mei 1969*, 14.

[151] *30 Mei 1969: Rapport van de Commissie tot Onderzoek van de Achtergronden en Oorzaken van de Onlusten welke op 30 Mei 1969 op Curaçao Hebben Plaatsgehad* (Oranjestad: Verenigde Antilliaanse Drukkerijen, 1970), 55.

[152] Brown in *Curaçao, 30 Mei 1969*, 15.

[153] Brown in *Curaçao, 30 Mei 1969*, 15.

[154] American Consul Curaçao, *Post Riot Threats Against Dutch Residents of the Antilles*, June 22, 1969, page 3, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967-1969, Box 2364, Pol 19 NETH ANT, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD, United States; “Open Brief van de Revolutionaire Garde Vitó aan P. van de Hoeven, H.L. Braam en J. Gomes e.a., 12 Juni 1969,” Collectie 30 Mei 1969 (KITLV), UBL474, identifier 71, Special Collections, Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands.

government regularly intercepted materials coming in from abroad, especially when they were sent by radical organizations.[155] Yet, while setting up his network, Brown had managed to get in touch with the Black Panther Party, which agreed to send him several editions of *The Black Panther*, first published in 1967.[156] The contents of the BPP newspaper matched Brown's own ideas almost flawlessly. Like Brown, the Panthers promoted a combined ideology of anti-imperialism and anticapitalism, referred to by the latter as revolutionary nationalism. Like Brown, the Panthers drew inspiration from prominent Third World revolutionaries such as Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and Mao Zedong.[157]

In the Black Panther Party, Brown saw an opportunity to create a more permanent space for antiracist discourse in *Vitó*. Until that point, discussions of race had been surprisingly absent from the journal. For the most part, criticism of White elites had been framed in terms of nationality, in the case of the Dutch, or religion, in the case of local Whites. Criticism of the Dutch had generally taken place through the journal's writings on the so-called 'Macamba'. Though some argue that Macamba is a neutral Papiamentu term for Dutch people, *Vitó* defined the Macamba only as the kind of Dutch person who came to the island with a colonial attitude. As one anonymous *Vitó* author wrote:

> We have nothing against the Dutchman. We are glad when he comes around to help out, except for the macamba. THE MACAMBA (…) can be recognized by his mentality: vacation, retirement, more money, penny-pinching, discounts, returning to the Netherlands as soon as possible, going DUTCH.[158]

When it came to local White elites, *Vitó* used a different terminology. As was common in Curaçao at the time, these were commonly referred to by their religious affiliation,

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[155] Solidariteitscomité Black Panther Party, *Black Panther Nieuwsbulletin*, April 1970, 3, ZK 72913 (1970), International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

[156] Brown has stated multiple times that he was in direct contact with Eldridge Cleaver, as well as the Black Power movement in Trinidad, but thus far there are no archival records to support either of these claims. See Brown, interview by Oostindie; Montsouris, 13; "De Weg van een Verontwaardigd Christen," 8.

[157] Brown in *Curaçao, 30 Mei 1969*, 16; Schields, 98-100. For references to these thinkers in *Vitó*, see for example: "Mi Bishita na Cuba," *Vitó*, March 22, 1969, 2; ""Che" Guevara," *Vitó*, December 19, 1970, 2; "Un Marxista a Gana Elekshon na Chili," *Vitó*, September 12, 1970, 2.

[158] ""Statuut voor Stilstand": Sta Tuut," *Vitó*, year 1, number 5, n.d., 2. The term 'going Dutch' was written in English here.

with Antilleans of Dutch descent described as Protestants and Jewish Antilleans being referred to as Jews. Though it would have been clear to any reader that these words were used to clarify a person's racial identity, the actual language of race remained absent from *Vitó*'s pages, as the topic was so deeply taboo on the island.

The first time the journal wrote more openly on the topic of race was in 1967, leading up to the Sinterklaas holiday on December 5. During this holiday, Sinterklaas (Saint Nicholas), a stately White bishop with a long silver beard, arrived in Willemstad on a steamboat to hand out presents and treats to children. He did so together with his servant, known as Zwarte Piet (Black Pete). As per Dutch tradition, Zwarte Piet was dressed in a Moorish costume and had on a full head of blackface, complete with bright red lipstick, afro wig, and golden earrings. Zwarte Piet was a jovial character, acting dumb and clumsy, but always happy to serve his master. Brown began to challenge the blackface tradition in his very first edition as *Vitó* editor-in-chief. Depicting Zwarte Piet with chains on his feet, he argued that the caricature was insulting because it was "the personification of all of the poor qualities of the negro."[159] Each of the following years, *Vitó* started publishing more extensive critiques of the colonial tradition, now accompanied by an illustration of Sinterklaas hanging on the gallows. The journal described the holiday as a deeply racist institution designed to teach children that the Black man, "who would not read, write, or speak," was inferior to the White man, who was saintly and caring. As such, the journal urged to either abolish the holiday altogether, or switch things up by making Sinterklaas Black and Zwarte Piet White, which it considered the perfect act of decolonization.[160] But of course the annual discussion of Zwarte Piet did not leave enough space to discuss the important position of race in the colonial system.

This was where the Black Panther model became useful, though Brown had to be incredibly careful if he wanted to publish this kind of criticism. Having first been arrested for his activism in 1967, he was aware that the Curaçaoan security services

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[159] Cover and "De Sint," *Vitó,* year 2, number 7, n.d., 1, 12.

[160] "San'Ni-Cola-As 1968," *Vitó*, November 17, 1968, 3; "San'Ni-Cola-As 1968 no. II," *Vitó*, November 23, 1968, 3; ""San Ni-Kola-As 1968 no. III," *Vitó*, November 30, 1968, 2; "Sinterklaar I Zwarte Piet," *Vitó*, December 6, 1969, 2; "Zwarte Piet, e Homber Pretu Pendew," *Vitó*, October 24, 1970, 2; "Vito y Sanicolas," *Vitó*, December 19, 1970, 2.

read everything he published.[161] In fact, it was not rare for government representatives to approach him to discuss his most recent work.[162] Speaking so openly about racism when this was such a taboo would have surely gotten him into trouble. To avoid this, Brown decided to start writing "Black Panthers na Korsow" completely anonymously, presenting the Black Panthers of Curaçao as an organization separate from *Vitó*. He used a variety of tricks to distance himself from the Panther group. In his first column, as described at the beginning of this chapter, Brown wrote that the BPC had been established by "a group of youths between the ages of fourteen and nineteen."[163] In that same column, he added separate comments by *Vitó* to address some of the issues raised by the 'youths'. After the Black Panther piece called for armed self-defense, the journal pretended to warn the BPC "not to make the mistake that youths in other countries have made by thinking that the police is our enemy: [they] are not our enemy, but the system is."[164] In a later article, Brown would create a similar distance between *Vitó* and the BPC by stating that the journal welcomed their column only because the island did "not have a free press, where minority groups can express themselves."[165] According to Brown, these strategies were successful. "They often approached me to find out who was behind this," he shared later, "but nobody suspected it was me, with my white skin and blue eyes."[166] Brown believed this anonymity enabled *Vitó* to publish its antiracist ideas more freely.[167]

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[161] Brown, interview by Oostindie. This was also confirmed by Wim Statius Muller, head of national security, in his interview with the Trinta di Mei investigation committee. "Statius Muller, Hoofd Veiligheidsdienst N.A.," Collectie 30 Mei 1969 (KITLV), UBL474, identifier 16, Special Collections, Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands.

[162] Brown, interview by Oostindie.

[163] "Black Panthers na Korsow," November 30, 3

[164] "Black Panthers na Korsow," November 30, 3

[165] "Black Panthers na Korsow," *Vitó*, December 7, 1968, 3.

[166] Brown, interview by Oostindie. Worth noting is that references to Brown and the BPC in other sources suggest that many were, in fact, aware of Brown's leadership of the group. See Otto Kuijk, "Rapport van een Razernij," *De Telegraaf*, June 1, 1969, 5; "Proces Tegen Redacteur van "Vito"," *Limburgsch Dagblad,* July 22, 1969, 4; Gerard Habraken, "Voor Black Power Ligt op Curaçao Groot Veld Braak," *Limburgsch Dagblad*, March 12, 1970, 4. The US Consul General was also aware of Brown's leadership over the organization. American Embassy The Hague to Secretary of State, Telegram, *Neth Reaction to Events in Curacao*, 4 June 1969, page 3, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967-1969, Box 2364, Pol 19 NETH ANT, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD, United States.

[167] Brown, interview with Oostindie.

Over the following four months, “Black Panthers na Korsow” became a returning column in *Vitó*. Using the same Black Panther name, symbolism, and rhetoric as before, the column appeared every other week on page three of the journal, making it one of the best recognizable and most popular items in the journal. Content wise, each column focused on a recent event or development in Curaçaoan society and addressed this through a racial lens, highlighting how these event showed patterns of racial discrimination on the island or proposing new models for Black emancipation. The column was published over a period of four months, starting in November 1968 and ending by March 1969. To fully appreciate the significance of the Black Panthers of Curaçao, the next section provides a close reading of the column’s contents.

Behind the scenes, the Black Panthers of Curaçao also began to grow as a group. Besides Brown, fellow *Vitó* editors Henriquez and Salsbach decided to join the BPC, helping Brown in doing the research and developing the ideas for the column.[168] Perhaps even more importantly, the BPC gained a small but notable following among those already involved in the ‘Revolutionary Guard’. Wearing costumes inspired by the African American party, including berets and leather jackets, an unknown number of Black teenagers started participating in the weekly Gomez Square protests under the Black Panther banner, engaging fellow *Vitó* readers and spectators alike in advanced discussions about racial inequality.[169] Though they may not have been involved in the BPC from the start, as *Vitó* had claimed, they certainly began to give a face to the group on the streets. Though Brown continued to write the column, the on-the-ground coordination of the group was taken up by different members of the BPC, though unfortunately it seems there is no record of who any of these young Black Panther supporters were. What does become clear is that they came to form a notable part of the *Vitó* movement, forming a recognizable subsection within its larger structure.[170]

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[168] Solidariteitscomité Black Panther Party, April 1970, 3; Brown, interview with Oostindie.

[169] American Consul Curaçao, *Report of Commission to Investigate Causes of May 30th, 1969 Riots on Curaçao*, October 6, 1970, 3-4, Political & Defense, 1970-1973s, Box 2499, Pol 19 NETH ANT, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD, United States. A similar suggestion is made by Anderson and Dynes, 11.

[170] Diekmann, 23; “Statius Muller, hoofd Veiligheidsdienst N.A.”; American Consul Curaçao, *Report of Commission to Investigate Causes of May 30th,* 3-4.

Under the ideological leadership of Brown, they brought the ideas of the Panthers to the heart of Afro-Curaçaoan resistance.

A New Racial Discourse

To understand what drew these young men and women to the BPC, it is necessary to dive deeper into the column Brown and his colleagues wrote in *Vitó.* Important to note up front is that the BPC never seems to have shared a clear statement on its ideological conviction. Instead, the organization wrote a bi-weekly column that discussed recent affairs on the island and showed the importance of race in Curaçaoan society and beyond. A close reading of these columns helps to explain not only how the Curaçaoan Panthers interpreted the revolutionary nationalism of the BPP, but also how they legitimized the Black Panther model in the context of their island. For the most part, the column revolved around race.

The main form of racial discrimination highlighted in "Black Panthers na Korsow" was the legacy of slavery on the island. This was visible, Brown argued, in two main areas: labor conditions and policing. To illustrate how these fit into the longer history of Black exploitation on the island, he wrote a critical article on the port office at the heart of Willemstad, where dock workers, shipping businesses, and government officials worked together in maritime transport and maintenance. "We all know the office at the Ruyterkade," the BPC foreman wrote, "yet none of us know the bitter story[:] the colonial abuse, the discrimination, the slave system that reigns over the port office now in 1968."[171] Describing recent events where a Black man from Bonaire had gone missing and the authorities only agreed to start searching after their employees had gone on strike, the BPC leader argued that the situation at the office was inhumane and no different from the way Curaçaoan workers were treated during slavery or prior to the introduction of the Charter. Even the kinds of jobs that were available for Black employees at the port office had not changed since abolition, he argued. The descendants of slaves were still "serving and cleaning and sweeping" as well as "going up and down the high seas day and night (…) in small dangerous flatboats," allowing 'mener macamba' – the Dutch master – to continue exploiting and

[171] "Havenkantoor," *Vitó*, December 14, 1968, 2.

abusing Black workers, just as the 'polis macamba' – the Dutch police – continued to assault them in the streets.[172]

To free themselves from these legacies, Brown argued further, Afro-Curaçaoans had to overthrow not only the Antillean and Dutch elites that so clearly disregarded them, but also had to liberate themselves from the colonial gaze that continued to dominate mainstream perspectives on Curaçaoan identity. Focusing especially on literature, arts, and cultural heritage, "Black Panthers na Korsow" proposed two models for cultural decolonization. One of these was discussed in the report the BPC published on a literary roundtable discussion organized by the Cultural Center of Curaçao (CCC) at the Hilton Hotel on 25 January 1969.[173] While Brown criticized many different aspects of the event, his main concern was with the fact that all authors who were present spoke Dutch to accommodate the large number of Dutch guests in their midst, including those who normally wrote in Papiamentu. One of these was author and poet Guillermo Rosario who, in the Curaçaoan Panther's opinion "should have proposed as an Antillean author, who writes in Papiamentu, to speak in Papiamentu (…) instead of playing 'Zwarte Piet' with his broken and ridiculous Dutch next to the 'White Sinterklaas' that dominated the conversation completely."[174] In Brown's opinion, this was an act of colonial submission, nourished by the common idea that Papiamentu was inferior to Dutch and therefore less respectable (a remarkable accusation considering Rosario is generally acknowledged for his early dedication to Papiamentu authorship).[175]

To break away from this "inferiority complex," the BPC foreman continued, Afro-Curaçaoans had to distance themselves from the culture of the colonizer. To achieve this, he spoke about leaving behind the mentality of the 'old negro' in exchange

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[172] "Havenkantoor," 2; "Black Panthers na Korsow," November 30, 3.

[173] "Black Panthers na Korsow," *Vitó*, February 1, 1969, 2. For details on the latter event itself, see also "Eerste "Teach-In" op Curacao voor Herhaling Vatbaar," *Amigoe di Curaçao,* January 27, 1969, 3.

[174] "Black Panthers na Korsow," February 1, 2. In this context, the Panthers used 'Black Pete' as a kind of synonym for 'Uncle Tom' in the US, which African American radicals often used to accuse others of being too subservient or obedient to Whites. Other articles in *Vitó* show that the American term 'Uncle Tom' was also regularly used by Curaçaoan radicals. See "Vota Demokraat," *Vitó,* year 3, number 2, n.d., 4; "Problemanan den Partido Demokraat," *Vitó*, January 25, 1969, 1; "Partido Democratico, *Vitó*, May 31, 1969, 3 ; "Paula y Su Identidad," *Vitó*, December 6, 1969, 1; "Konose Bo Enemigu," *Vitó*, December 20, 1969, 3.

[175] In *De Kleur van Mijn Eiland*, Broek positions Rosario in the broader *di-nos-e-ta* movement, arguing that his *Mi Nigrita-Papyamentu* (1971) was "one of the earliest manifestations of the *di-nos-e-ta* ideal," 211.

for that of the 'new negro', in line with the ideas of African American scholar Alain Locke.[176] Interestingly, the difference between these had been discussed by the Black Panther Party in its newspaper only two months prior, shortly before the Black Panthers of Curaçao were established, making it likely that Brown had read about it in *The Black Panther*.[177] Putting this model into practice, Brown argued that Rosario's behavior at the CCC event was exemplary of "the mentality of [the] old negro."[178] In line with Locke's argument that the 'old negro' lived in the shadows of slavery, Brown argued that such a person could be recognized by his continuous submission to the wishes of the White man ("saying "yes sir, no sir""), his continuous need for White support ("asking "white man help me""), and by his "blaming the whites for his misery, while staying in the same place without working or fighting for his rights."[179] Instead, the Black Panthers of Curaçao pushed readers to embrace the mindset of the 'new negro', writing:

> Black Panther believes that:
> - The new negro will fight for his rights. (…)
> - The new negro does not accept white charity.
> - The new negro does not ask to get pity from them either.
> - The new negro does not make an effort to get accepted by white people the way Rosario has, while looking ridiculous because his Dutch is bad.[180]

The first step towards this new mentality, Brown argued, was to start accepting that "black is beautiful" (using the phrase in English) and to stop accepting colonial discrimination in their own society.[181]

In another edition of the "Black Panthers na Korsow" column, Brown published an interview with Guinean dancer Italo Zambo of *Les Ballets Africains*, which

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[176] For the original anthology, see Alain Locke, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York : A. and C. Boni, 1925).

[177] "The New Negro T.V. Stereotype," *The Black Panther,* October 26, 1968, 5.

[178] "Black Panthers na Korsow," February 1, 2.

[179] "Black Panthers na Korsow," February 1, 2.

[180] "Black Panthers na Korsow," February 1, 2.

[181] "Black Panthers na Korsow," February 1, 2.

performed on the island that winter.[182] Here, the BPC offered a second model for thinking about race. This model was based entirely off of Pan-Africanism, which was gaining popularity at rapid speed within the Black Power movement at the time. In his interview, Zambo argued that the difference was not between the old and new negro but rather between the 'negro' and the 'African'. Observing that the deepfelt legacies of slavery in Curaçao positioned locals in the former category, the artist explained that "a negro is a black person who does not know the value of his 'blackness'. On the contrary, he is ashamed of his color (…) and acts like someone with chains around [his] neck."[183] This was a stark contrast to what Zambo described as the African. "We Africans, always will stay a free people. We are proud of our black color, because we know its value," he explained.[184] Africans, in this context, did not refer to a nationality, but to an attitude, which could be embraced by anyone in the African diaspora, giving the example of Black Power activists in the United States as proof that the 'negro' mentality could be abandoned. If Curaçaoans wanted to follow the same path, the column suggested, they had to learn to appreciate their value "because the whole world is changing and is seeing that black is better."[185]

Though both of these models for Black consciousness revolved around different terminologies, their core message was the same: if Afro-Curaçaoans wanted to free themselves from Dutch colonialism, they had to embrace a new racial mindset. And in both cases, this mindset was deeply rooted in the already existing framework of the African diaspora. In support of the term 'new negro', the Black Panther group argued that the term 'negro' provided Black Curaçaoans with an ethnic identity that they shared with millions of others around the world.[186] The term 'African' in the Pan-African model served the same purpose. "Do not forget that you and I are each other's family," Zambo reminded the readers of the Black Panther column. He continued:

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[182] "Black Panthers na Korsow," *Vitó,* December 21, 1968, 3; "Arthur Mitchell's Wrong Step or 'Pas des Blancs'," *RUKU: Algemeen Cultureel Maandblad voor de Nederlandse Antillen* 2.2 (May 1970), 33-34.

[183] "Black Panthers na Korsow," December 21, 3. In the original text, the term 'blackness' is written in English.

[184] "Black Panthers na Korsow," December 21, 3.

[185] "Black Panthers na Korsow," December 21, 3.

[186] "Black Panthers na Korsow," February 1, 2.

> We are cousins, almost brothers. Your people were exported from Africa. My birthland. We are brothers because together we have suffered the same abuse and exploitation of white people. Now it is time to change our behavior and our actions, which is how we will confront the whites. But we will no longer kneel. The time has come for us to end it once and for all.[187]

The realization that Curaçaoans shared their fate with other Black peoples in the world was of utmost importance to the BPC, which saw transnational Black solidarity as a fundamental step towards decolonization.

To illustrate the need for such solidarity, the Curaçaoan Panthers repeatedly positioned the Afro-Curaçaoan struggle against colonialism within a much broader framework of Black resistance, placing themselves in close proximity to the Black Power movement in Jamaica, the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, the long tradition of Black radicalism in the United States, and the anticolonial struggle on the African continent. "Globally we have seen that the black race has led bloody revolts against the abuse of the white race and their ancestors," Brown wrote in one of the final Black Panther columns. "But here on Curaçao, despite all of the discrimination and exploitation of the white bosses of Curaçao (the Jonckheer, Winkel, Isa families) black people have still not used armed force, fire etc. against the propaganda of the white man."[188] The only way to change this was to look outward and take inspiration from the other Black revolutions of the world. "All white countries have united and protected each other," the Black Panther column stated in reference to both colonialism and apartheid. "It is time for us to also unite and defend each other."[189]

It thus becomes clear that the BPC very intentionally used the model of the Black Panther Party to address the specific manifestations of racism in its direct environment. Brown, and possibly other authors, legitimized the need for Decolonial Black Power on the island by showing how colonialism, racism, and capitalism intersected on a daily basis, whether this was through the legacies of slavery (in the case of the dock workers), the general disregard for the Black population's heritage (in the case of the CCC roundtable), or the colonial mentality of even the most prominent

[187] "Black Panthers na Korsow," December 21, 3.

[188] "Black Panthers na Korsow," 25 January, 3.

[189] "Black Panthers na Korsow," December 21, 3.

Afro-Curaçaoans in the community (in discussions on the 'old negro' and 'new negro', or the 'negro' and the 'African'). By explaining how these same forms of oppression existed elsewhere in the world too, even inviting foreign activists like Zambo to speak directly to its readers, the BPC suggested that Curaçaoans had to catch up with the rest of the Black world if they wanted to uplift themselves and their people from the deep-rooted oppression on the island.

However, while the "Black Panthers na Korsow" column became one of the most popular in the journal, the final article of the BPC was already published in the spring of 1969. It is not clear why this was the case. According to Brown, the column was such a success that he wanted to start publishing a completely separate Black Panther paper, which would allow him to develop these ideas and grow his organization even further.[190] Instead, it seems like he decided to incorporate the ideas of the Black Panther group into the general content of *Vitó*, making race a more common theme in other parts of the journal. If anything, this was a sign that "Black Panthers na Korsow" had been popular enough to convince Brown and the other editors that issues relating to race could be addressed freely without hiding behind an anonymous column. What happened to the BPC after the removal of the column remains somewhat unclear. Brown continued to draw inspiration from the Black Panther Party for his writings in *Vitó*. Likewise, the group of Black Panther supporters that had emerged within the movement still gathered at the Gomez Square meetings on Saturdays, which they continued to do until at least 1970. Both will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter. Even more so, the ideas of the Curaçaoan Panthers lived on in the minds of the thousands of *Vitó* readers who had read the column religiously. The impact of this would become clear when many of these readers joined the largest protest in the history of the Netherlands Antilles only a few weeks later.

Impact on Trinta di Mei

Much has been written on the uprising that took place in Curaçao on 30 May 1969, popularly referred to as Trinta di Mei. As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, the 1960s had seen the rise of increasing resistance against the persistent power of Dutch and White Antillean elites on the island. With the labor movement

[190] Brown, interview with Oostindie.

increasingly gaining traction, conflicts over workers rights were becoming more frequent, supported in part by the solidarity of the *Vitó* movement. As time went by, it became clear to the workers that the newly autonomous government of the Netherlands Antilles was not prepared to stand up for them against the powerful Dutch companies that carried much of the responsibility for these problems.[191] After years of organizing through legal channels, with little to no results, the situation escalated when a strike at the Isla Refinery triggered thousands of laborers to rise up against their employers and, ultimately, everything they believed to be wrong with Curaçaoan society.

That morning, two large protests were being held at different sites in Willemstad: one at the refinery, organized by the Curaçao Federation of Labor (CFW) for construction workers at Wescar, a subcontractor for Shell, and another in the harbor, organized by previously mentioned dock workers' unionists Godett and Nita. Together with Brown and other members of *Vitó*, the dock workers decided to make their way to the refinery to express their solidarity with the construction workers. Here, Godett proposed to march all the way to Fort Amsterdam in the center of Willemstad to confront the government, which he held accountable for failing to support the Black workers of the island. The group grew along the way, picking up hundreds of other laborers, unemployed men, teenagers, and other supporters who marched toward the center. As frustration turned into rage, the crowd started attacking vehicles, breaking windows, starting fires, and stealing from the stores on the high street. The more people (and alcohol) became involved, the more Godett, Nita, and Brown lost control of the crowd, while the police became ever more aggressive towards them. Before they were able to reach the Fort, Godett was shot and carried off to hospital by the other leaders. Several others were left wounded or even killed. When the police proved to be incapable of stopping the masses, hundreds of Dutch marines were tasked with ending the uprising.[192] By the end of the day, the city was in ruins, and one thing was clear: these people no longer wanted to wait for slow-but-steady improvement. They wanted a revolution.

[191] Oostindie, "Black Power," 245.

[192] An overview of these events was published in *30 Mei 1969: Rapport van de Commissie*, and reproduced and expanded in Wessels, 41-78. An English version can be found in Anderson and Dynes, 69-78.

As many studies of the uprising have pointed out, strong anticolonial and racial sentiments on Trinta di Mei. Though the uprising had started as a labor conflict, at least a section of the crowd used the opportunity to protest against the Macamba and White elites of the island. Initially, the crowd moved between businesses to confront the Dutch and other White managers they held responsible for the discriminatory practices of the companies.[193] As the crowd made its way downtown, they also began assaulting White passers-by, sometimes even destroying their vehicles and demanding them to get out to attack them.[194] Some have suggested that local Whites who could prove their Antillean identity were spared, but Brown himself denied that this was the case, stating that any White person was seen as the enemy that day.[195] When the protesters began robbing and destroying buildings in the city center, they targeted only those they knew to be Dutch or White-owned.[196] While this happened, the phrase "Mata e macambanan!" ("Death to the macambas!") was shouted many times over.[197]

As soon as the uprising was over, many began to wonder if there was any connection between Trinta di Mei and the Black Power movement. Severely underestimating the impact of *Vitó*'s own writings, Antillean authorities, foreign diplomats, and (inter)national security services assumed that the anti-White sentiments of the protesters had been forced upon them by some outside force.[198] Rumors even suggested that the protest had been directly instigated by "communist-inspired black power organizations in the United States," likely referring to the Black

[193] Anderson and Dynes, 131.

[194] Anderson and Dynes, 74, 132.

[195] Anderson and Dynes, 131-132; Brown, interview by Oostindie.

[196] Anderson and Dynes, 78.

[197] "Rapporten van W.C.A. van Kappel, Commissaris van Politie, Uitgebracht op 2 en 11 Juni aan de Minister van Justitie, Curaçao, over de Gebeurtenissen op 30 mei," Collectie 30 Mei 1969 (KITLV), UBL474, identifier 51, Special Collections, Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands; *30 Mei 1969: Rapport van de Commissie*, 74.

[198] Anderson and Dynes, 125-126. In his interview with Oostindie, Prime Minister Kroon specifically mentioned that his biggest regret was underestimating the treat of *Vitó* and the Gomez Square meetings during his time in office. Kroon, interview by Gert Oostindie, 14 October 1998, Collectie 30 Mei 1969 (KITLV), UBL474, Microdisc 57, Special Collections, Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands

Panther Party.[199] They were well aware of the movement's growing popularity in the Caribbean and saw similarities between Trinta di Mei and the many Black Power uprisings that had taken place in the region in previous years.[200] Besides, since racism was such a taboo topic, it was easier to accuse African American radicals of instigating an antiracist protest in Curaçao than it was to acknowledge that similar problems existed in their own country and, therefore, may have been criticized by their own citizens. The government-appointed 30 May Investigation Committee would eventually conclude that it "could not find any indication (…) that the occurrences on May 30 were instigated by foreign interferences or by the Black Power organizations" and that "in spite of the racial problems which are clearly evident in the Caribbean area, the racial element did not play a predominant role on May 30."[201]

Not everyone agreed, even after the committee had shared its conclusions. According to one Dutch journalist, White Curaçaoans especially had seen the conflict as a racial attack.[202] American Consul General Harry M. Lofton, too, shared that several White Antilleans had confided in him with these kinds of statements. After the Committee released its report, Lofton composed a detailed note for his superiors in which he accused the local government of 'whitewashing' the facts. In explaining the dissatisfaction with the Committee conclusions about Black Power, he reported:

> This statement appears to give a blanket rebuttal to facts which have been evident since the riots and reportedly were evident during and before the riots. Responsible merchants, prominent businessmen and

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[199] Quote from American Consul Curaçao, *Report of Commission to Investigate Causes of May 30th, 1969 Riots on Curaçao*, 6 October 1970, page 4, Political & Defense, 1970-1973s, Box 2499, Pol 19 NETH ANT, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD, United States. Other sources referring to potential interference by the Black Panthers are American Consulate Curaçao to Secretary of State, Telegram, 5 September 1969, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967-1969, Box 2364, Pol 19 NETH ANT, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD, United States; Thomas L. Hughes to Secretary of State, Intelligence Note, *Netherlands Antilles: Riots Lead to Dissolution of Parliament and Call for New Elections*, 4 June 1969, page 3, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967-1969, Box 2364, Pol 19 NETH ANT, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD, United States; Rosemarijn Hoefte, "Internationale Reacties op de Revolte en het Nederlandse Ingrijpen," in *Dromen & Littekens*, 151.

[200] "Statius Muller, Hoofd Veiligheidsdienst N.A."; Anderson and Dynes, 139; *30 Mei 1969: Rapport van de Commissie*, 174.

[201] *30 Mei 1969: Rapport van de Commissie*, 174. Translation from American Consul Curaçao, *Report of Commission to Investigate Causes of May 30th*, 7.

[202] M.L. Snijders, "Wonden van Dertig Mei Zijn Nog Niet Geheeld," *Leeuwarder Courant*, 20 April 1970, 5.

> other private citizens [both white and black], have expressly stated to me that the Commission either (1) did not summon knowledgeable persons as witnesses to its hearings, or (2) in arriving at its conclusions avoided or ignored certain testimony because of local political sensitivity and expediency.[203]

According to the diplomat, some Curaçaoans were even blaming his country for the riot, as it had allowed extremists to travel abroad and indoctrinate young Antilleans, noting that his acquaintances "are concerned that recently there have been more American hippie and Black Panther types on the streets and byways and circulating among the youth."[204] In the end, however, the committee seemed to be right: no proof was ever found to confirm the claims that American Black Power activists had been directly involved in Trinta di Mei.

This does not have to mean, of course, that the Black Power movement did not influence the uprising at all. As this chapter has shown, *Vitó* editor-in-chief Stanley Brown – who is still seen as the ideological leader of Trinta di Mei to this day – was deeply inspired by the movement and familiarized thousands of his followers, whether through *Vitó* or through the Gomez Square meet-ups, with the ideas of its most notorious organization, the Black Panther Party. Knowing that the majority of protesters involved in Trinta di Mei were somehow connected to *Vitó*, it would not be presumptuous to assume that these ideas had left a mark on their understanding of racial inequality, which could have had some impact on their protest. To say that the movement had no influence at all on the uprising only because rumors of direct interference were refuted, as suggested by those scholars cited in the introduction, may, therefore, be too constrained. Maybe these "Black Panther types on the streets and byways" were not imported but, indeed, home-grown.

Realistically, it is difficult to determine what role the Black Panther model truly played in the events of that day. But that was also not the purpose of this chapter. The history of the Black Panthers of Curaçao is significant for more reasons than Trinta di Mei alone. Rather than focusing on the uprising itself, which has often been seen as a turning point in racial awareness in Curaçao, this chapter has shed light on a campaign

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[203] American Consul Curaçao, *Report of Commission to Investigate Causes of May 30th*, 2.

[204] American Consul Curaçao, *Report of Commission to Investigate Causes of May 30th, 1969 Riots on Curaçao*, 3.

for racial awareness that emerged before that moment, exploring how ideas on racial equality made their way to the island through *Vitó*'s revolutionary movement. Even if Trinta di Mei had never happened, this transnational exchange would have been worth investigating because it broadens our understanding of what motivated certain communities to try and make a change in their own environments. Why did Brown and other Curaçaoans feel it was necessary to bring the Black Power movement to Curaçao? And why, in particular, did they choose to do so by adopting the model of the Black Panther Party?

As this chapter has shown, the answer to these questions is twofold. On a local level, the answer lies in the applicability of the Black Panthers' revolutionary nationalism to the Curaçaoan context. The ideology of the African American organization corresponded to *Vitó*'s pre-existing ideas about colonialism and capitalism. What the Black Panther model added to their intellectual model was the critical approach to racism as a third component to that equation. Although Brown and others had already understood race to be deeply intertwined with these systems, structural racism had not yet been acknowledged to the same extent as colonialism and capitalism had. What the revolutionary nationalism of the Black Panther Party offered them was thus a new framework for racial discourse that complemented, rather than replaced, their already existing beliefs.

On a transnational level, their affiliation with the Black Panther Party furthermore allowed these Afro-Curaçaoan activists to position their anticolonial struggle within a much more global network of resistance. By proudly carrying the name and symbols of the notorious African American organization, the BPC was able to show Curaçaoan activists that their work on the tiny Caribbean island did not stand in isolation but was part of a worldwide operation for decolonization. While there is little evidence that the BPC ever established contact with the Black Panthers or that the latter was even aware of its existence, their writings clearly illustrate that the Curaçaoan group positioned itself within the same radical tradition as the African American freedom struggle, Jamaican Black Power, South African anti-apartheid, and African anticolonialism, and believed it was necessary for these movements to "unite and defend each other" if they wanted to destroy the disproportionate power of the West. As Brown himself would later put it: "Our revolution did not depend on any

foreign government, (…) but we did fight for the liberation of Martin Luther King, Eldridge Cleaver, and Malcolm X. Those were our leaders!"[205]

These ideas became immensely popular among the young protesters at the Gomez Square, but also the labor movement with which the 'Revolutionary Guard' had become entangled.[206] Beyond *Vitó*, however, the Black Panthers of Curaçao did not reach much of an audience. There are a number of possible explanations for this. One was that the BPC's discussion of racism was simply too radical, as centuries of taboos around race had created severe limitations to public discourse on the topic. Another possible explanation is that Brown's own role in the organization undermined its potential, as he was himself "whiter than a recently imported macamba from Holland," as one Dutch journalist wrote in 1969.[207] To Curaçaoans, who understood race as a spectrum and did not believe Brown's ancestry made him Black by definition, his call for racial empowerment was confusing; impossible, even, to those authorities that were unable to imagine that Brown himself could have been behind the BPC. While this may have created some misunderstanding among the Curaçaoan elites, however, Brown was sure his complexion never stood between him and the Black masses, "who came to identify me with blackness so much that nobody ever saw me as white."[208]

[205] Brown, interview by Oostindie.

[206] Brown discusses its popularity within the labor movement in "Black Power," *Vitó,* August 20, 1970, 3. This will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter.

[207] Habraken, 4.

[208] Brown, interview by Oostindie.