

Don Cox: Just Another Nigger: My Life in the Black Panther Party Berkeley, CA [Book Review]

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Abstract:

At first glance, a person perusing the aisles of a bookstore, archives of a library, and/or online book listing may do a double take after stumbling upon the memoir of the late Don Cox, aka DC. Similar to a moth that gravitates to a flame, the moment when the prospective reader fixes on the book cover, it is the word “nigger” that draws one’s attention. Cox probably figured that his choice of title was both risqué and brazen, but one that would foster a dialogue across cultural and social group differences. Just Another Nigger is Don Cox’s autobiography. It captures key moments in his upbringing in Appleton City, Missouri; his transition and acculturation to San Francisco, California; his growth as an activist and community organizer; his experiences within the Black Panther Party (BPP); and his life and reflections as a self-imposed exile in Algeria. Overall, Cox’s vantage point on the BPP serves as a sealant that fills many cracks left by other Panther testimonies and memoirs. Cox, an authentic revolutionary offers a raw, honest, and untethered perspective of life in the Black Panther Party.

Keywords: Don Cox | Black Panther Party | American History

Article:

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For novices of Black Panther Party history, Cox is not a name with which many would be familiar. This, of course, is the result of limited media representation and the reluctance of some scholars to delve deeper into the complexity and multiplicity of individuals that comprised the BPP, beyond Oakland, Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. As the BPP's Field Marshal (positioned in March 1968), Cox occupied a position that tapped into his abilities to strategize, while reinforcing his knowledge of the acquisition, maintenance, and handling of guns (skills that he educated other Panther members on). In this capacity, Cox played an important role in the BPP. From the very beginning, the duties and responsibilities of the Field Marshall were never made clear to Cox. In many ways, Cox was left to his own devices. A natural problem-solver, Cox was tailor made for a position that relied on cunning, know-how, and improvisation. From the organizing of a Panther office in San Francisco to the proper establishment and continuation of branches throughout the nation, Cox's presence was felt throughout the organization. With his study and training in guerrilla warfare, his insatiable hunger for knowledge of politics and identity, and his love for humanity, Cox grew to become a critical asset in the liberation movement for oppressed people worldwide.

As a Panther who committed himself to the revolution, Cox revealed the dichotomy he faced in balancing the need for social change with the unsavory disposition of key leaders in the BPP. In his candid testimony, he provided an uncompromising perspective on how certain iconic members of the organization became both victims of and perpetrators of vices such as drugs, sex, and violence, and self-aggrandization. Rather than placing the onus on governmental repression, Cox argued that it was mainly certain key leaders' selfishness, alongside blind conformity that fragmented and destroyed the organization. It was this climate that forced out many of the organization's members, and for Cox, led to his eventual self-exile from the USA to Algeria, where he lived out the remaining forty some odd years of his life.

After reading *Just Another Nigger*, readers may be left wanting a more climatic ending or a "to be continued" statement. Although a justified reaction, maybe this was Cox's strategy: to focus on the conditions that shaped who he was, his experiences and disappointments with the BPP, and a few key experiences while in Algeria. One can only surmise that for Cox, rather than bogging readers down with complex terms and concepts that often plague leaders and writers who profess to be revolutionaries themselves, he instead focuses on matters that everyone can relate to such as identity, politics, interpersonal relationships, and sustainable struggle.

As the Party's Field Marshall, Cox was somewhat of an ambassador, and as such, he was sensitive to the importance of making connections with people and finding a common language that would fuse and maintain relationships. While in Algeria, for example, he came to realize how his "Ameri-centrism" was unintentionally communicated to others in his attempts to come across as a part of the struggle. This revelation spoke to Cox's maturity as a leader and a plea for current and future leaders to engage in self-revolutions before attempting to take arms against larger governmental forces. In his final message, Cox remained adamant that by effectively teaching oppressed people about the forces of abusive power and providing them with the proper leadership, only then will the people respond accordingly in their quest for justice. This is what Don Cox committed his life to and the message he has left for future generations.

Like many books written by those who had once been members of the Black Panther Party, Cox's work is not without its revelations. Despite how well-respected Cox was within the Party's ranks, Cox talks openly about the time his life was threatened by two well-known leaders within the organization. Although in-fighting within the organization is well documented, Cox provides some shocking details of people and events that heretofore may or may not have been known, but

certainly never put in print by any former member of the BPP. Cox's discussion of Eldridge Cleaver is nuanced and informative. In the end, Cox's book is not the compelling read that is Flores Forbes' *Will You Die with Me* or Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power*; still it is a worthwhile read that will allow students of Panther history to fill in some holes that have been left gaping for many years. If there is a criticism, it is that the autobiography seems unfinished. Not much is known about Cox after he left the BPP. The book reads as if the memoir out of which this autobiography was derived ended shortly after his tenure with the Party, forty some odd years before the book was published. Be that as it may, for those interested in BPP history, *Just Another Nigger* should occupy a space on their shelves.