



Paul J. Magnarella. *Black Panther in Exile: The Pete O'Neal Story*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020. 282 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-6639-4.

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For all of its national and international reach, the Black Panther Party drew its lifeblood from local politics. Founded in Oakland, California, in 1966, the party expanded its work to sixty-eight cities by the end of the decade and opened an international office in Algeria in 1970. Panther chapters organized around the principle of community self-determination. They recruited among the most dispossessed: the young, the jobless, the incarcerated. As Sean Malloy has observed, they translated the revolutionary theory of Frantz Fanon, Mao Zedong, and others into local vernaculars of song, chants, imagery, aesthetics, and profanity.[1] The Panthers ran breakfast programs and health clinics and clothing drives and a variety of other “survival programs.” They mobilized to defend their communities against lawless and racist police departments. These initiatives were necessary, they argued, because the United States had failed in its basic obligations to recognize Black people as rights-bearing citizens. To organize Black communities in defense of themselves was to reveal the extent to which they existed as “internal colonies.” It was to provide the foundation for the revolutionary overthrow of this colonial relationship.

Given the community-based politics of the Black Panther Party, it is not surprising that in recent years a number of scholars have sought to

shift attention from the national story, with its well-known protagonists, to the local chapters where the Panthers’ vision was put into practice. [2] *Black Panther in Exile: The Pete O'Neal Story* offers a useful contribution to this corpus. The book follows the life of Pete O’Neal, one of the leaders and founding members of the Kansas City, Missouri, chapter of the party (KC BPP). Raised under difficult circumstances, in and out of trouble, O’Neal found a cause, a discipline, and a moral code in the Panthers. At its height, the KCC BPP fed seven hundred children a day with its breakfast program, offered counseling and addiction services, and organized a free clothing distribution program. The chapter developed broad community support and clashed with local police. But, as elsewhere, the KC BPP’s program was met with state repression. In 1969 O’Neal was arrested on a spurious weapons charge and sentenced to prison in 1970. With his wife, fellow Panther Charlotte Hill O’Neal, Pete O’Neal went into exile, first in Algeria, and finally in Tanzania, where over the past several decades the O’Neals have recreated the community-based programs that they championed as members of the KC Panthers.

O’Neal’s story reveals interesting tensions between the Kansas City local and the national headquarters. The KC Panthers chafed at what they felt were heavy-handed directives from Oakland that

failed to grasp the dynamics of midwestern urban politics. “Our activities were ... stifled by national headquarters,” remembers O’Neal, “in part by their dictatorial practices without any consideration for our particular situation and the particular mindset and values of the midwestern community” (pp. 82-83). O’Neal’s recollections suggest that at least some local members were unenthusiastic about the ideological evolution of the party away from Black nationalism and toward Marxism-Leninism. O’Neal views the Panthers’ “side trip into Marxism” as a big mistake, and views the core philosophy of the organization as residing the principles elucidated by Malcolm X: community control, autonomy, and Black economic development. When O’Neal and other members of the Kansas City chapter broke from the Panthers in 1970, they named their new organization the Sons of Malcolm.

The flight of the O’Neals from the United States also reveals details about the Panthers’ legacy abroad. In Algeria they joined Eldridge Cleaver, Kathleen Cleaver, Sekou Odinga, and other exiles in the diplomatic residence organized for the Panthers by the revolutionary Algerian government. Pete O’Neal expresses pride in the relationships forged with other revolutionary organizations like the African National Congress, the South West Africa People’s Organization, and the Palestinian Liberation Front, but views the activities of the Panthers as being hampered by the group’s lack of experience in international affairs, by members’ womanizing and marijuana use, and by the racism of their Algerian hosts. The O’Neals found a more fertile ground for their work after moving to Tanzania in 1972. Eventually settling in a small village outside of Arusha, they co-founded the United African American Community Center (later the United African Alliance Community Center, UAACC), which—following the tradition of the Panthers—was organized to build upon and nurture the strength of its community. The UAACC works on development projects, promotes cultural ties between African Americans and Tanzanians, of-

fers a variety of educational and health programs, and runs a children’s home. The work of the O’Neals in Tanzania reminds us that the legacy of the Panthers resides not only in the radical political formations they inspired in the United States and abroad in the 1960s and 1970s, but also in the work of its former members to carry on the “spirit of the panther” into the organization’s afterlife.

Black Panther in Exile is credited to Paul J. Magnarella, who served as Pete O’Neal’s lawyer between 1997 and 2001. It is two parts autobiography, one part legal brief. Part 1, which comprises the majority of the book, presents Pete O’Neal’s (and, to a far lesser extent, Charlotte Hill O’Neal’s) oral testimony in large block quotes, with minimal contextualization. Part 2 is an account of Magnarella’s attempt to overturn O’Neal’s 1970 conviction. Part 3 offers a brief account of the O’Neals’ current work in Tanzania, including Charlotte’s emergence as an international celebrity (as Mama C). It also contains the notable disclosure by Magnarella that in 2014 a federal prosecutor attempted to solicit Pete O’Neal’s help to lure Assata Shakur to Tanzania to effect her capture. O’Neal treated the solicitation as a great offense.

This book is, in other words, more primary source than secondary source, more memoir than scholarly account. The Pete O’Neal story informs a number of topics of interest to scholars, though it does not explicitly reference literature. The O’Neals’ involvement with the Black Panther Party is not read in the context of other memoirs, nor are the insights about the Kansas City chapter of the party connected to the growing collection of local studies, spearheaded by Judson L. Jeffries and others (Reynaldo Anderson’s account of the Kansas City BPP is not cited at all).[3] The O’Neals’ experiences working in the Panthers’ International Section in Algeria are not contextualized within the experience of other exiles, nor is Sean Malloy’s useful work on the International Section cited. Pete O’Neal’s exile might have been productively linked to the experience not only of Shakur but

those Panthers who served long prison sentences as political prisoners (some, like Sundiata Acoli, Veronza Bowers, and Ed Poindexter remain incarcerated). Gender relations within the BPP, both in Kansas City and in Algeria, are not linked to rich and important discussions surrounding the gender politics of the BPP at large. The O'Neals' lives in Tanzania are not explored as a case study of African American-African exchange, nor theorized within the literature on diaspora or pan-Africanism.

There is nothing wrong with this approach, of course. Memoir has great value in its own right, and Pete O'Neal's story is deserving of attention. What is hard to explain, and troubling to this reviewer, is that the book is not presented as a memoir. Given the number of words that directly quote O'Neal—surely a larger number than written by Magnarella—it is unclear why O'Neal is not credited as a co-author. Is O'Neal's authorship omitted for a legal reason? There is no explanation. Given that the primary value of *Black Panther in Exile* is the Pete O'Neal story, and given that the story is told nearly entirely by O'Neal himself, the silence here is concerning. Considering O'Neal's regard for Malcolm X, his affinity for Malcolm's politics, and the parallels in journeys from illicit activities and incarceration to Black Power activism, a more fitting attribution for this text might be "As Told to Pete Magnarella."

Notes

[1]. Sean Malloy, *Out of Oakland: Black Panther Party Internationalism During the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

[2]. See Judson L. Jeffries, ed., *Comrades: A Local History of the Black Panther Party* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Yohuru Williams and Jama Lazerow, eds., *Liberated Territory: Untold Local Perspectives on the Black Panther Party* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Judson L. Jeffries, ed., *On the Ground: The Black Panther Party in Communities across America* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010);

Donna Jean Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Orissa Arend, *Showdown in Desire: The Black Panthers Take a Stand in New Orleans* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2012); Lucas N. N. Burke and Judson L. Jeffries, *The Portland Black Panthers: Empowering Albina and Remaking a City* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016); and Judson L. Jeffries, ed., *The Black Panther Party in a City Near You* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018)

[3]. Reynaldo Anderson, "The Kansas City Black Panther Party and the Repression of the Black Revolution," in *On the Ground*, 96-124.

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