



REMEMBERING “EL GATO NEGRO”

By Käto Cooks © 1993

Primordiality

What brought me to the Party were several events: the assassinations of Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter and Jon Jerome Huggins at UCLA, and Fred Hampton in Chicago, and the LAPD assault – I labeled it a ‘shoot-in’ - on the Central Avenue office of the Southern California Chapter of the Party, up through 1969. I was a program coordinator with Los Angeles-based radio station KHJ-AM and a broadcast log keeper with its sister television station KHJ-TV at the time, studying for a news writing internship under then-news director Baxter Ward.

Seething just below the surface of my sensitivities, and gnawing at the fabric of my sensibilities, was the question of who I was in relation to the events exploding around me. Always an activist, I visited the Party branch office near my home in south central Los Angeles. I wanted to do something to help. I held black belts in two martial arts styles, had served as Jr. Assistant Director of the Florence Symphonic Youth Bands since age fourteen and, with an IQ above the 98th percentile, was in the gifted program at every school I ever attended. I knew I must have something to offer.

Meeting the Mind of Mao

The workers at the branch office were curiously accepting considering the whirlwind of events at play at the time. I thought they’d want me to teach a karate or kung-fu class or join an underground cell. Instead, they put me to work with the Free Breakfast for Schoolchildren program serving and coordinating the young “comrades.” Along with the service activity the Party required continuing P.E. (political education) classes. Mao Tse-tung’s essays, in the “Red Book (Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung),” were the first order of study.

What Mao’s writings did for me was provide a digestible framework with which I could analyze phenomena. This allowed me to define the conditions and forms of my existence in relationship to society. Defining phenomena, I determined, is the first step in working with it. Even with the starkly different economies and history of America and China, I easily drew inferences and identified analogies. Mao’s writing style, as presented by the translators, locked me into the text with its lyrical yet commanding posture. I found the vernacular, tinged with British intonations, all the more intriguing.

I don’t bow to sycophantic ritual so I never followed *Mao*. His essays, however, provided the foundation upon which my analytical thinking grows. Two essays, “Methods of Thinking and Methods of Work” and “On Practice,” remain as my most quoted references. Another, “Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?” is a close second.

And then cam Huey...

It was through this course of events that I became acquainted with Huey P. Newton, who became a significant influence in my sociopolitical development. Huey was in jail then, awaiting trial for the alleged murder of an Oakland (CA) police officer (I no longer refer to them as pigs very often, although my perception of them is unchanged). Huey Newton's Black Panther Party took me in tow and accelerated, intensified my education through assignments in the Emeryville and Berkeley chapters in Northern California, and through the Los Angeles chapter where I invested the majority of my service.

Huey hadn't published much back then, save for a few articles here and there. By the 1970s, though, Huey began a stream of position papers and essays *intended* for publication. This was part of a proactive defense and propaganda effort. In 1971 Huey released a collection of his essays entitled "To Die for the People." Within a year, Huey released his autobiography, "Revolutionary Suicide," and co-authored "In Search of Common Ground" with famed psychologist Erik H. Erikson. Huey also published a book of poetry with Party member Ericka Huggins (Jon Huggins' widow) entitled "Insights and Poems." Huey's History of Consciousness dissertation, "War Against the Panthers: A Study of Repression in America," was published in 1980. UC Santa Cruz conferred Huey's Ph.D. that same year.

Huey's "To Die for the People" became the centerpiece in our P.E. sessions. It was with this book that I gave form to my interpretation of social phenomena and opted for a course of action in my efforts to manipulate social forces.

The party Huey founded was the largest Black, militant political organization in this country's history. The Party had chapters in nearly every state in the Union and had "Committees to Support the Black Panther Party" in The Peoples Republic of China, Germany, Denmark, Algeria, Canada, Japan, Belgium, Cuba and England, among others, and in nations all over Africa.

The Party made fashionable many of the terms still in use today: Power to the People (borrowed from the Enlightenment) and *pig* are the best known. And several key concepts found life in the theoretical propositions put forth by the Party: Intercommunalism, which predated socioeconomic analyst Robert Heilbroner's concept of the world as a reactionary socialist state, was the product of the Party's analysis. The *lumpenproletariat* as the driving force in a contemporary American revolution alarmed many social commentators and traditional theorists but we swore by it 'cause Huey said it.

The axiom "Power is the ability to define phenomena and make it act in a desired manner" has Huey's stamp. All of these things contributed mightily to the "Define, determine, deploy" alliteration that I now employ. The Party lives in those of us who continue the struggle in "the shadow of the cat."

About the author: Käto Cooks joined the Party's Southern California Chapter in late 1969 at the age of 19, shortly after and in response to the televised LAPD assault on the Chapter's Central Avenue office. He began his service working in the Free Breakfast for Schoolchildren Program as a cook and server. Käto later served as the chapter's news bureau chief, magazine and newsletter editor, photojournalist, program coordinator, martial arts/self-defense instructor, liberation school education aide, and security coordinator. He also worked in the Party's Emeryville and Berkeley chapters supporting the Ministry of Information as a photojournalist and editor.

Käto worked with the Party until it closed its Los Angeles chapter in 1984. Some of his photographs are part of the traveling "Louder Than Words" Black Panther Party Photo Exhibit. Käto's oil on canvas portrait of Malcolm X, painted by former Black Panther Party member and acclaimed muralist Charles 'Boko' Freeman, has been exhibited at the SPARC Museum in Venice, California.

Käto was a named plaintiff in the successful ACLU/Coalition Against Police Abuse lawsuit against LAPD for police spying. He now consults in government contract management, forensic fraud and labor standards enforcement. Käto owns SysTech Forensics in the Los Angeles suburb of Walnut, California, and Pi Sciences LLC in Las Vegas, Nevada. He is also a patron of the arts, sitting on the board of directors of the Fountain Theatre in Hollywood, and is a donor member of the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles and the Pasadena Playhouse.

Käto Cooks has also served on the boards or advisory boards of: The Girls Club of Los Angeles, Westminster Neighborhood Association (Watts, CA), Southern California Coalition for Responsive Philanthropy, Faith Children's Center (Los Angeles), Diogenes Foundation, Los Angeles Pediatric AIDS Consortium, Mayor's Youth Advisory Council (Los Angeles), Ambassadors Youth Council (Los Angeles), Community Services Unlimited, Inc., Coalition for Economic Survival (Los Angeles), Police Misconduct Lawyer Referral Service (Los Angeles), and the South-central Planning Council for United Way's Underserved Geographic Areas Project. Käto served two terms on the Community Funding Board of the Liberty Hill Foundation (Santa Monica, CA).