

An Open Letter to Julius Lester

Karen Wald

Dear Julius,

Although our actual contact has been infrequent, I have felt very close to you since we first met, and our shared experiences, including writing for the same papers, added to this. But in recent months your columns have puzzled and confused me. I don't know you any more; I don't know where you're at; I can't imagine why you are saying (writing) the things you are.

In a recent column you attack your former brother-in-arms Eldridge Cleaver; you attack the Black Panther Party. Criticism is essential to the health of any revolutionary movement or organization if it is valid criticism. But it surpasses comprehension to understand why, instead of meeting and talking with these brothers, you have chosen to use the media for the purpose of condemning them for inappropriate use of the media!

Some of your points surprise me. You accuse Carmichael of sometimes seeming to say "whatever was necessary to get the desired response, instead of saying what was necessary to build revolutionary consciousness." Are you saying that the response he was seeking was counter to building revolutionary consciousness? If so, why didn't you speak out and stop him then? Why now, when in your next paragraph you say he has ceased to perform this function?

Your accusations against Carmichael, in fact, seem to be only for the purpose of introducing your criticism of the Black Panther Party and one of its most articulate spokesmen, Eldridge Cleaver. Aside from the incredibly impolitic timing of your attack -just when the total forces of the state are gathering to put him back behind bars—the level of your criticism is hardly that of a revolutionary and an intellectual.

Do you really believe that Cleaver's influence in the black and white radical communities in the U.S. and abroad comes solely from his status as an "ex-convict rapist revolutionary"!? Julius, that's THEIR game! It hurts to see you playing it. Cleaver has reached thousands of people—and is desperately sought for annihilation by the Establishment -because he has something to say! He has something to say to black people, and to revolutionary white people. He is valuable not because of his gory past, but because of his articulate espousal of the goals and program of the Black Panther Party.

And just as it is not Cleaver's jailbird past that signals his importance, neither is it the black jackets and berets of the Black Panther Party that makes them a vital organization today. It is the platform and program of the Black Panther Party which Huey Newton and Bobby Seale drew up nearly three years ago, and with which the Panthers have been organizing and educating the black community.

The Black Panther Party has built and organized in many ways, some tried and tested before among radical blacks, some revolutionary innovations. Yes, they taught the black man to arm himself for self-defense. Is that so startling a concept? Is rebuilding black dignity and self-respect new? Is it inappropriate to teach the black man to stand up against the brute power of those who would colonize him only because they have the power?

Is de-sanctifying the image of the policeman, the local and national administrator by calling him "pig" unhealthy? If you really believe it is only rhetoric to use words, why is it you, Julius, are carrying out your part in the revolution through the use of the written word? Isn't it because you think the written or spoken word has value, can change people, can move them to action? Are your words revolutionary, and Eldridge Cleaver's "just for entertainment?"

You use the example of the Vietnamese not “announcing” Dien Bien Phu in condemning the Black Panther Party for announcing to the world their intent to Free Huey. Aside from the fact that I never say the Panthers lay down the blueprint of their battle plan in front of the enemy (and yes, the Vietnamese DID tell the French that they intended to drive them out of their country), your example is particularly inappropriate.

For the Vietnamese more than any other people have taught us the valuable strategy of fighting the battle on many fronts. You say “the Vietnamese didn’t even bother speaking to the French” before they defeated them at Dien Bien Phu. But they would have if it had seemed wise tactically, just as they are speaking to the American government now. The Vietnamese fight on the military front, the political front, and the diplomatic front simultaneously. It is the key to their ability to endure and the reason why they will win.

And the Black Panther Party is doing just that.

Yes, the media talks about their guns and jackets. But why are you so preoccupied with those? Guns aren’t strange to the ghetto. What is far more interesting about the Black Panther Party is their door-to-door approach to ghetto residents. Their political campaigns for local office. Their petitions for police control boards and restructuring of the police departments. Their community meetings. Their political education classes.

Before the Black Panthers marched on Sacramento, they fought for and obtained a street light at a dangerous intersection near a ghetto school. Before he was imprisoned, Huey taught ghetto youngsters everything from math to black history after school. Do you think ghetto residents aren’t aware of what the Black Panther Party is doing for them? Do you think it’s just the guns and jackets that are causing Black Panther chapters to spring up all over the country? Was it Huey Newton’s black beret that made people—and continues to make people—willing to lay down their lives for him?

Before the Black Panther Party came along, SNCC and other militant black organizations were doing valuable work in organizing the black community. But it was Eldridge Cleaver’s eloquent expression of the principles of Huey Newton and the Black Panther Party that raised the level of struggle. For Cleaver was the first to create a meaningful working alliance between revolutionaries—black, brown, and white. The Black Panther Party—sure of itself, of its strength, of its goals, of its program and of its independence—was not afraid to tell whites, not only you CAN be revolutionaries, we EXPECT you to be revolutionaries.

OUR job is to liberate the colony. YOUR job is to create revolution in the mother country. If we both do our jobs effectively, we will be working side by side. Stokely took the first vital step when he told whites, “Your job is to eliminate racism where it exists—in the white community.” The Black Panther Party took it one immeasurable step further in saying, “Racism is only the beginning. Your job is to eliminate capitalism and imperialism. And that will become our job, too, because none of us can survive unless we eliminate all three.”

Julius, I cannot believe that you have really attempted to know and understand the phenomena that is the Black Panther Party, or the men—Newton, Cleaver, Seale, Carmichael—who are its best-known spokesmen. If you had, you would not be attacking them in the manner you are. Sometimes the enemy doesn’t have to sneak in from the rear—he comes out of our own mouths. We should watch for him.

We have known and loved you as a brother, Julius, and have missed you out here on the West Coast.

We’ve often invited you to come out for a visit. Several times you’ve promised, but you never came. Why don’t you take a trip out here now, Julius. You might learn a great deal about the men and the Party you are so mistakenly slandering.

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