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Untold Stories of a Black Panther: Barbara Easley-Cox

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ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: Untold Stories of a Black Panther: *Barbara Easley-Cox*

By

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History often overlooks those who do not serve in dynamic roles or who perform tasks away from the public view. These people do the thankless and less glamorous jobs – but no less important work – that keep organizations running. Barbara Easley-Cox was one of these people. From 1967 to 1971, Easley-Cox was a Rank and File member of the Black Panther Party who sold newspapers, did the breakfast program and ran the Oakland office at one point. She lived abroad for a short period in Algiers where the Black Panthers held an international office.

Although she is not as well-known as Bobby Seale, Huey P. Newton, Angela Davis and Kathleen and Eldridge Cleaver, Easley-Cox was deeply integral to The Black Power Movement and spent time hiding abroad in exile just as her more famous counterparts. The purpose of this thesis is to highlight the contributions of Easley-Cox whose stories rarely get told.

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[[EASLEY-COXPROFILE/BROWN_542021
TRT:TBD]]

HOST LEDE: Over the years the Black Panther Party has had many stories shared about them and their impact. Most recently the Oscar-nominated film Judas and the Black Messiah highlighting Chicago Panther, Fred Hampton and informant Bill O' Neal. However some stories that continually go untold are those of Rank and File members of the party. Those members did the day-to day work to keep the party functioning. Recently, reporter Ashlea Brown sat with a Rank and File member to share their story.

AX/EASLEY-COX: you're trying to figure out if I go back to America, what will I do? What will happen? Who is left? The struggle still has to go on.

TRK: That's Barbara Easley-Cox, former member of the Black Panther Party from 1967 to 1971.

She was a student at San Francisco state college at the time and learned of the Black Panthers when **two members** of the party came to visit the school...but she wasn't sold on them especially because of their attitudes towards women. However she was friends with Emory Douglas, an artist with the party at the time...

AX/EASLEY-COX: and Emory said, Barbara, I want you to meet someone he's perfect for you. And that was my husband, Donald Cox,

he explained what he was doing with the black Panther party.

TRK: DC as she called him was a field Marshall a part of the central committee with the party which meant he helped open new Black Panther offices around the states. He opened Barbara's eyes when he took her to a black power conference and at that moment she knew this Party was something she needed to be a part of.

AX/EASLEY-COX: that was the beginning of a, a whole new life for me. and a very good one, maybe dangerous in some ways, but I never had any fear in terms of myself. We were young. We were young...

TRK: As she likes to say, she may be older but she still has the spirit of a 25 year-old , she sits with a laid-back yet elegant stature with a short natural haircut with finely curled grey hairs and she wears her square shaped glasses with eyes that pierce right through you. Barbara sat me down looking at me like any grandmother would ready to spill her wisdom.

Her story is one unlike others.

Barbara was in her early 20s when she met DC. She joined the party as a rank and file member, which is a member of the party that does a lot of ground work between selling newspapers and

running offices. For the next four years, they worked out of the Oakland, San Francisco and Philadelphia offices until they had to leave the country...As we sat at her round wooden table Barbara took me on a journey in her Philadelphia home.

AX/EASLEY-COX: exile is a bitter pill. Don't let nobody tell you it's not...April of 1970, there was a , question of, conspiracy to commit murder, on the East coast. And my husband had been indicted for some of this activity.

TRK: DC had been accused of being a part of a conspiracy to murder a Panther named Eugene Anderson who was believed to be an informant out of Baltimore.

AX/EASLEY-COX: He had made up his mind that he would not be going to jail. And, he said, well, I'll go to Algiers with Eldridge Cleaver. And that's what he did. ...that left me in San Francisco and Oakland. Feeling a little leery. I was pregnant.

And a lot of the people that I trusted, especially Panthers were going different places. I really felt very vulnerable.

TRK: During that time Eldridge Cleaver, a prominent member of the party was **also** living in exile from previous police-related incidents in America. While already abroad in Algeria he attended a Pan-African cultural conference and networked with other revolutionaries from Africa and he eventually opened an international Black Panther office in Algiers...

After being separated from DC for a few weeks Barbara got a call to join them abroad to be with Kathleen Cleaver, Eldridge Cleaver's wife, another prominent member of the party. They were both pregnant and were already good friends from their time working in the San Francisco office.

AX/EASLEY-COX: So I immediately got on the bus and came to Philadelphia to say goodbye to my mother and also, Bill and Merriam Sidler, my Jewish godparents.

TRK: Going abroad wasn't going to be Barbara's first time around people from other cultures. She grew up in a diverse South Philadelphia neighborhood with Jewish and Italian people.

However, it was Barbara's first time leaving America and strangely going abroad she felt safer than staying home. She thought it was a lucky opportunity since she was personally close with several of the leadership who were already abroad. To her this trip was just another place to do the work of a Black Panther, despite the larger picture that she was going into exile and saying goodbye until who knows when to her family.

AX/EASLEY-COX: I got on the plane and, we landed in Paris. And then we went to Algiers, when I got to Algiers. I remember, Don Cox picked me up at the airport...

TRK: For Barbara there was a lot of confusion and layovers. Her first stop was to Algiers to finally see DC after being separated from him. She recalls seeing many Africans, hearing a lot of French language and feeling overwhelmingly tired.

AX/EASLEY-COX: flying is not a good thing when you're pregnant... I get off the plane. One of the African men said, come on, let me help you. And we had a cup of tea or cheese sandwich, and it was very interesting because the waitress who waited on me, she looked just like my aunt. I mean, I would have thought I was still in Philadelphia or at least in America.

I spent one night and the next morning they took me back to the airport with a little Korean man who had, a suitcase handcuffed to his arm. we landed in Russia, Moscow...

TRK: The stop in Algiers with DC was brief because she was actually headed to North Korea to meet Kathleen Cleaver so they could have their babies. While living abroad, Eldridge Cleaver had built a strong relationship with North Korea and their leader at the time Kim Ill-Sung and they invited Kathleen to have her baby there...

As far as Barbara...well she was tasked with being a good rank and file Panther sister and told to go alongside Kathleen.

After overlays and many hours of flying...

AX/EASLEY-COX: we landed in a pyongyang, North Korea, and I think, you have a picture of myself with one of the welcome committee.

TRK: Barbara showed me the picture of her standing side by side to a Korean woman. With flowers in her hand Barbara was smiling ear to ear with her picked out afro, bulky print dress as her stomach poked out with her son waiting to jump out any day.

AX/EASLEY-COX: Kathleen came, she was there and they put us in a car and took us to right outside the city. Like you would call it the suburbs to a house with servants in it. I mean, it was very nice.

TRK: They were staying at a nice house that the Koreans put them up in as they were special guest a part of the Black Panther Party. I still wondered though,

TRK: how did you guys get this, like set up, like, is it because they knew that the Panthers were coming? How did you guys get this?

AX/EASLEY-COX: Well, see, Eldridge had a black Panther international headquarters in Algiers, and you must remember the Vietnam war was going on the, liberation front and Africa, South Africa Angola, a variety of African countries fighting for their freedom and non-colonialism with the European and Portuguese communities, et cetera...

People had spread the word about this group in California, and you must understand that we were growing across the country. and I'm glad you're in the neighborhood is what they were saying. And it was really good. I mean, the support and things...

That's how I got to North Korea and nothing about that seemed strange to me even now. But I recognize unless you work with the state department or you got two or three PhDs behind your name or your, maybe a medical doctor would have some adventures, but it all seemed like everyday events to me, it didn't seem unusual, but now looking back. Yeah. Sometimes I tremble...

And I told you the story about having the baby.

TRK: No..

AX/EASLEY-COX: So when he was born, the interpreter said to me, how is it? You have a white baby because you're Brown.

So that's when I introduced them to jet Ebony and other magazines, because I think we, we really must understand that you've heard that expression, the iron curtain, they were really behind the iron curtain. And even though they knew Africans, they did not really know African Americans.

TRK: As Barbara was flipping through the baby book looking at pictures, a flood of memories came to mind. Barbara and her fellow panther Kathleen Cleaver had just given birth at this time.

AX/EASLEY-COX: I think it was very funny when, after we had the babies, they took us in town and this particular night there was a circus. I think we almost caused the riot because of the Afros, because of the short skirts and many people, they had never seen African-Americans even the Africans who were there studying, they would stop and look, now they knew we weren't Africans quote, unquote, but what were we, what were you? You know?

TRK: For the first few months abroad, Barbara relaxed in North Korea, cared for her newborn son, Jonathan Carlos Cox and learned the culture of North Korea.

AX/EASLEY-COX: In Korea, we just dealt with the babies and the learning. They had films, they showed us, they tried to make scrambled eggs one day. I watched them ferment kimchi or whatever. But it was beautiful, landscape. I remember that. They kept us entertained between the movies going in town and the tutors, the educators.

And one day this brother comes and see I called him a brother seen that it's not. That's what he looked like. He came in his skin was I think about your color, but with a shine, black hair, Kathleen and I liked this and just the sweetest man. He was so honored to talk to us about Ju shea and this and that. they kept us busy.

TRK: Ju Shea is an ideology that means self-reliance where its language is from and based on Marxism (MARK-SIZ-UM) but ultimately means the man is the master of his own destiny. The meaning has changed over the years, but it is one that shaped Kim Il sung and influenced others like the Black Panthers.

AX/EASLEY-COX: it was very strange I never felt bored.

TRK: But after three months it was time to go, the cold weather was coming...

AX/EASLEY-COX: they wanted us to leave before it got too cold, but there's a plane once a week that takes you to Russia and we missed the plane.

So by this time we're starting to become a little antsy and we want to go home.

Guess how we got home?

Hold on, close. This book,

TRK: Barbara began shuffling through her scrapbooks to find some pictures not only for date reference but as proof because she knows how unbelievable this story sounds

AX/EASLEY-COX: arrival in North Korea.

Kim IL song, great-grandfather now of the current North Korean young man.

TRK: The "young man" she's talking about is current North Korean leader Kim Jong-un

AX/EASLEY-COX: This is his wife. She came to visit and I said, I want to go home. She said, I have a private jet. They'll pick you up tomorrow.

And let me tell you something. If I ever get some money, I want a private jet.

TRK: Why did she come visit you all?

AX/EASLEY-COX: Well, you must understand, the black panther party was circulating our concepts, and we had published her husband's book on Ju-Shea self-reliance.

TRK: During Eldridge Cleavers exile abroad in 1969 he and a few other Panthers made an alliance with North Korea because of their interest in Kim Ill-Sung's book Ju Shea self-reliance. They were interested in how those concepts related to African American revolutionary liberation. The panthers began reprinting excerpts of his book and sharing those ideals.

AX/EASLEY-COX: so they were reaching out like all nations reach out for.

Good publicity, cooperation with other movements...

TRK: During the fall of 1970 after three months in North Korea, Barbara and Kathleen headed back to Algiers.

AX/EASLEY-COX: That was October of 70 and I think Huey had been released.

TRK: Barbara is talking about Huey P. Newton, one of the leaders and co-founders of the Black Panther Party. His release was huge news because Huey was jailed a few times but this particular arrest was for the 1968 connection for the conviction of manslaughter in the murder of police officer John Frey.

Not really knowing what to plan for heading to Algiers, besides connecting back with DC, Barbara was mostly excited to get to work.

AX/EASLEY-COX: people were coming to Algiers, a few ex panthers later on hijackers.

And once we settled in,

I didn't want to be a babysitter. So we had to figure out who's going to take care of these kids for a couple hours. And, Charlotte was pregnant. So she got involved with the children. We created a nursery.

TRK: Charlotte Hill O'Neal was a black panther a part of the Kansas City chapter of the Black Panthers who eventually crossed paths with Barbara.

AX/EASLEY-COX: I had to get ready to understand there. Wasn't no Pampers at the store, very little baby food. So we started making our own, I also had to understand that, Islam and religious holidays, I had to observe that sometimes if I would get on the bus to go downtown, I would kind of cover my head, you know, because,

You create, a circus atmosphere. It's like where you come from, because you're not looking like an African woman. You're looking at something else. A few times I would walk to the neighborhood store and I would hear the word collusion, collusion dog...

TRK: Those were snickering calls she would hear. Barbara eventually chose to adjust with how she presented herself. She realized she was no longer in America where she could freely go out with her afro and mini skirt without causing uproar, especially in a Muslim society where women covered their bodies, where modesty was favored.

AX/EASLEY-COX: You must understand the value of a woman and I'm smoking cigarettes got on short skirt. I mean, it took me a minute to realize I had to curve myself down.

TRK: Despite that obstacle, Barbara had no issue finding meaningful work to help the advancement of the party internationally.

AX/EASLEY-COX: I'm a busy body. I just started gathering materials to start a library.

TRK: Barbara began starting a library because she recognized the international office needed to be a place that people could go to look up what The Black Panther Party had done and what they were doing. The library wasn't just a collection of books the panthers studied but it was history, information, pictures and documentation of the panthers work.

AX/EASLEY-COX: Unfortunately, all of that was destroyed when other people started leaving or the police got it.

TRK: The library amongst other things were destroyed because of the abrupt split that occurred within the Panthers. By this time it was early 1971 and it was a fight amongst leadership behind ideals, drugs and other issues. It was Eldridge Cleaver vs Huey Newton which left panther members split between deciding which person they wanted to follow behind.

AX/EASLEY-COX: I was in Algiers. Huey had been out of jail almost a year.

AMBI: phone ringing... "Hello, I'm at the house."

TRK: That's Barbara answering the phone for a longtime friend and fellow Panther Ethel who she met within the Philadelphia chapter.

AX/EASLEY-COX: Okay. Come on

This Ethel coming ...

TRK: But back to the split...

AX/EASLEY-COX: the split I was overseas

TRK: COINTELPRO is largely credited as being one of the main reasons the party split. COINTELPRO at the time, was a project by the FBI to surveil, infiltrate, and destruct organizations such as the Black Panther Party. Huey and Eldridge could not see eye to eye on how to continue running the party. Their ideals had shifted. Huey saw it was time to alleviate the violence and follow the direction of government and other resources while Eldridge could not agree on that stance. To this day, any Panther you ask has a different opinion about the rift that would tear the Panthers apart.

AX/EASLEY-COX: West coast, East coast, East coast went with overseas Eldridge, mostly some on the West coast and a lot went with Huey...

AMBI: Door bell ringing

Ethels here.

TRK: Ethel walked in and immediately laughter and smiles filled Barbara's living room. She was stopping by to pick up a dress Barbara borrowed from her and ironically we happened to be talking about the Panthers.

AX/EASLEY-COX: I wasn't here. Okay.

and, Oh, the dress I tell her I'm getting ready to sit. Yeah. So yeah, people were shooting each other and Robin Webb got killed , Robin weapon, New York, take that off, yea people split between Huey or Eldridge...*Fade out*

TRK: I sat listening as the two recounted Panthers splitting between leaders and how it was a heavy blame on the FBI. Essentially Barbara made the decision to leave the party herself even being abroad she felt the ripple effects of the split.

AX/EASLEY-COX: I started getting messages. Body was found the biggest piece they found was about the size of a quarter.

TRK: There was a lot of violence happening within the party and killings that Barbara could not account for since she was overseas. Another call Barbara got was that her Godfather Bill Sidler was shot and killed in his storefront.

AX/EASLEY-COX: My husband came in and he said, Barbara, they just killed bill and I fainted

TRK: Everyone within the community knew they were big supporters of the party and she automatically equates the split and drama to his death. It all became too unbearable and Barbara felt it was her time to exit the party.

Barbara's doesn't like to dwell much on these memories because she hates thinking everything that happened—the death, the disillusionment, and sometimes even despair.

AX/EASLEY-COX:Being worried about friends and comrades , yeah, it was, it was worrisome. you can't fight a war from a distance, and you can't keep up with it. So we just did what we could do. You know, I remember Eldridge was on the phone all the time news-people calling...

Cut to AMBI tape

AMBI: tape recording: on movements like the black Panthers, which of course thrive on a state of bad relations with the United States and the web one disillusioned Algerian official credit in the Sunday times says frankly, the panthers along the way out and they knew it. Do you agree? I think it may be to go to the and the original little group of fair black Panthers that came up, came with him because after he was admitted...fade out

TRK: That was a tape recording during the 1971 split within the party that Barbara and I stumbled across in her crate of archives. Some of those things like that tape she has kept buried to avoid thinking about the painful parts of being Panther.

AX/EASLEY-COX: People started leaving and I didn't want to come back to America. I said, I want to go to Germany. I want to go to Germany because the GIS were there.

TRK: After visiting Germany for a previous trip regarding Black Panthers, Barbara found it fascinating that there were GI's who were in resistance to the military involvement in the Vietnam war. There was also a huge radical newspaper called the Voice of the Lumpin that reported on issues the GI's faced. She remembered friends she made on that prior trip and decided to leave Algiers and was off to Germany with her son.

AX/EASLEY-COX: I found that very exciting rather than just sitting around and Algiers where I didn't speak French... And I was like, I'm out of Algiers. My husband, that bothered him a lot. But I was, I was growing. See, I was growing, and I'm used to working. He, he didn't like that, but I said, so, um,

TRK: She spent a over a year in Germany until the Vietnam war was over.

AX/EASLEY-COX: November the 27th, 1971, I sent my son back to America with a GI from this area

TRK: Barbara remembers playing outside with her son Jonathan in the snow in Germany when a man approached them.

AX/EASLEY-COX: the gentlemen saying it's a beautiful son you have there, Barbara.

And I knew the way he addressed me and stopped over us with, you know, in the snow that he was the police for all or some figure that was watching us. And, I thought if I was to get arrested or something, what would happen to my son? I figured it would be safe for him to go live with my mother, but it was a year later that I actually came back myself.

TRK: That time spent in Germany allowed Barbara to put her energy into The Voice of the lumpin newspaper...

AX/EASLEY-COX: basically, we were focusing on, trials that GIS had got arrested for things of that nature. Vietnam things in America. I didn't really use my

panther' identity that much because it wasn't necessary until. Attica happened and big black and, GI came in and said, Attica prison break something, because that was huge...

TRK: At the time Attica Prison Riots made headlines when incarcerated folks of Attica Prison in New York decided to take charge and advocate for better prison conditions and treatment within the facility. The Voice of the Lumpin wrote stories about this and more issues relating to social and political rights. Barbara and her friends were always looking for ways to spread the word about the issues happening around the world.

AX/EASLEY-COX: We would hit the guest houses bars. And when we would come in myself, Helen, Jessica, Lucy. So the four of us afro-centric girls and Uta bringing up the rear. them, cats would go and guess what they do. Everybody bought the paper, but the German girls in the bar "Sssssss, sssss...." you could hear, and the men, the brothers...*panting*

you look like my mama, can I touch you? Can I touch you? And they buy all the papers and what we would do with say, now there's four or five of us, right? Why don't you come to the house the next Saturday? Why don't you come next Saturday? So you got bout five niggas you done told the come, one night 90, a hundred niggas shit, white boys too.

So guess what I told you what we did sat them in this room no bigger than this, about this size. And we put on the battle of Algiers and nobody moved. They watch, then we talk to them and what they said, well, is there anything you need? I need some food. I need a, whatever they had on base that they could bring us.

We didn't want money. One day nigga showed up with a gun that big, I was like, Oh God. You know, you, you want to separate guns. You don't want that. That's what destroyed the party in some ways.

TRK: Educating the men on things like the Battle of Algiers which was a film based on the Algerian war against the French government, was something Barbara loved doing, but...

Eventually all that work Barbara was doing fizzled out by 1973.

AX/EASLEY-COX: Things were starting to close down, disappear. I guess you would say our base of operations. We had no one to service, especially in Germany. The GI, the war was almost over. The GIS were going home. My son was in America. And so I knew I had to come back to America.

TRK: In 1973 Barbara was preparing to come back to America while her husband was not ready to return and wanted to see more of the world, what was next for him was Paris, but she knew she needed to get back to Philly to raise her son.

AX/EASLEY-COX: my first thoughts were securing a place to live. I was living with my mother and my son and the one bedroom apartment, not ideal at all, but I didn't really have independent means of supporting myself. I was very fortunate that, in my mother's apartment building, there was a woman named Roxanne Jones and she had started the, welfare rights organization for women on welfare dealing with, Section eight housing dealing with landlords, a variety of services for poor people, and she managed to secure employment for me...

TRK: About a year passed between the time that Barbara got back to Philly, and she eventually moved into a place of her own with her son.

I was able to get a waitress job for about a year. In a community restaurant, which was very good because I never had to buy food, but I knew I had to find some shelter. And I think I had mentioned my, Jewish godmother, Merriam Seidler sold me, her house for a dollar.

TRK: Barbara took me to see the life she made for herself after reentering America from being exiled.

AX/EASLEY-COX: See that house, 1937. I lived there. Wait a minute. That's where the old Jewish woman sold it to me for a dollar.

TRK: why is it a dollar bill?

AX/EASLEY-COX: you had to put something down.

I had three bedrooms, a nice bathroom. What else? Small kitchen. But nice. And, uh, I had some friends from Germany who had tracked me down and they put a whole new heating system in.

that little white door, that was a speakeasy, a speakeasy. this was an abandoned building, but that was a speakeasy run by, Reggie shell, who was the captain of the Panthers after the Panthers split.

TRK: Do you remember how old you were about this time?

AX/EASLEY-COX: Why you keep asking about age,

TRK: I'm trying to get a timestamp? Okay.

AX/EASLEY-COX: Uh, wait, I can tell you at least 28...

But I lived right there. and the bar was right here, you know, and that was a supermarket right there.

AMBI: Yeah, but this was, this was the Avenue where

you had a whole lot of things going on...

AX/EASLEY-COX: never saw white people walking up and down Columbia Avenue , right here was where we had our black Panther office,

this space right here in 69 through, I would say maybe 72. Cause then the split came...

TRK: and then it got torn down?

AX/EASLEY-COX: Well, not torn down, but more or less abandoned, things of that nature...

It's it's a million memories with all this stuff, you know? but you move on...

TRK: After our car ride we continued to reminiscence on how far she's come even after leaving the party. still holding the roots of it as a motivation for things she's later done in life including now volunteering at the Church of the Advocate with the soup kitchen and it's church tours. Barbara holds firm to a saying..."If I can not do great things, I will do small things greatly"

AX/EASLEY-COX: yesterday's memories are captured on film in books in black and white pictures and some oral histories. They are filled with love youth adventures, romanticism friendships revolution, and for some of us pain, I, for one, thank the gods for all of it. Barbara Easley-Cox. Black Panther Party for self-defense.