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Diary

Elaine Mokhtefi

In 1951 I left the US for Europe. I was working as a translator and interpreter in the new postwar world of international organisations: UN agencies, trade-union bodies, student and youth associations. My plan was to visit France briefly, but I stayed nearly ten years. For anyone living in Paris, the Algerian war was inescapable. Where did your sympathies lie? Which side were you on? In 1960 at an international youth conference in Accra, I struck up a friendship with the two Algerian representatives: Frantz Fanon, a roving ambassador for the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic, and Mohamed Sahnoun of the exiled Algerian student movement. After the conference, I flew to New York, where I met Abdelkader Chanderli, the head of the Algerian Office, as the unofficial Algerian mission at the UN was known. Chanderli invited me to join his team, lobbying UN member states to support Algerian independence.

In 1962, with independence declared, I went back to Algeria. Vacancies left by close to a million fleeing Europeans meant that jobs were on offer in every ministry and sector. Before long, I found myself working in President Ahmed Ben Bella's press and information office, where I received foreign journalists, scheduled appointments and dished out information to the reporters from Europe and the US who were streaming in. I even learned to fake Ben Bella's signature for his admirers.

I stayed on after the coup that brought Houari Boumediene to power in 1965. I had made a home in Algeria; I was happy with my life and my work in the national press. In 1969, events took an extraordinary turn. Late one night I received a call from Charles Chikerema, the representative of the Zimbabwe African People's Union, one of many African liberation movements with an office in the city. He told me that the Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver was in town and needed help.

It was June. I remember it very clearly. I can see myself walking down a side street between the Casbah and the European sector of Algiers towards the Victoria, a small, third-rate hotel. I climbed four flights of stairs and knocked. The door opened and there was Cleaver, and beyond him, flat out on the bed, his wife, Kathleen, eight months pregnant. The sense of awe I felt that day never left me. The shortcomings of the Black Panther Party are clear enough in retrospect, but they took the battle to the streets, demanded justice and were prepared to bear arms to protect their community. Their slogans – 'The sky's the limit', 'Power to the People' –

resounded through black ghettos across the US. They denounced American imperialism as the war in Vietnam gathered pace.

Cleaver had arrived secretly in Algiers using Cuban travel documents. After ambushing a police car in Oakland, he had jumped bail and headed for Havana, where he spent six months as a clandestine guest before he was 'discovered' by a journalist. The Cubans had put him on a plane to Algiers without informing the Algerians. Cleaver felt his life hung in the balance. He had been assured in Havana that everything had been cleared with the Algerian government, that he'd be received with open arms and allowed to resume the political activities denied him in Cuba. But his handlers at the Cuban embassy in Algiers were now telling him the Algerians weren't willing to offer him asylum.

I'd never known the authorities to refuse asylum seekers, whatever their nationality. Since I was the only American the local officials knew, I was often called on to interpret and explain, and to take responsibility for Americans who arrived without realising that hardly anyone in Algeria spoke English. Later that day I talked to the official in charge of liberation movements, Commandant Slimane Hoffman, a tank specialist who had deserted from the French army to join the Armée de Libération Nationale (ALN) and was close to Boumediene. I explained that Cleaver wished to remain in the country and to hold an international press conference. Hoffman agreed straightaway, but insisted that Cleaver's presence be announced by the Algerian Press Service. 'You saved my life,' Cleaver told me repeatedly; he was convinced the Cubans had set him up.

The press conference went ahead, in a hall packed with students, members of the local and international press, diplomats and representatives from the world's liberation movements. Julia Hervé, the daughter of Richard Wright, came from Paris to interpret from English into French. I did the same, into English, for the Cleavers. 'We are an integral part of Africa's history,' Cleaver said at the conference. 'White America teaches us that our history begins on the plantations, that we have no other past. We have to take back our culture!'

From then on, we were a team. Cleaver was tall – he seemed to me towering – and sexy, with a perfectly developed sense of humour and expressive green eyes. He and I had a rapport, no sex but much sharing of confidences. When the Cleavers arrived, I was working at the Ministry of Information organising the first Pan-African Cultural Festival, which was to bring together musicians, dancers, actors and intellectuals from every country in Africa and the black diaspora, including members of the Panthers from the US. For more than a week, the streets of Algiers overflowed, performances filled the day and carried on into the small hours. Among the performers were Archie Shepp, Miriam Makeba, Oscar Peterson, and Nina Simone, whose first performance we had to cancel after Miriam Makeba and I found her dead drunk in her hotel room. The local stagehands were shocked: they had never seen a drunk woman. The Panther delegation stayed at the Aletti, the best hotel in downtown Algiers, and were provided with a storefront – they called it the Afro-American Centre – on rue Didouche Mourad, one of the city's two main commercial thoroughfares, where they distributed party literature and screened films late into the night. Cleaver and his companions – most of them also refugees from US justice – were quickly integrated into the cosmopolitan community of

liberation movements. The Panthers may not have noticed, or perhaps didn't care, that Algeria itself was a conservative, closed society, that women were not really free, that a form of anti-black racism existed among the population, and that the Algerian establishment's generosity required certain codes of conduct and reciprocity on the part of their guests. The Panthers ignored whatever they didn't want to deal with. After the festival, the delegation returned to California, while the exiles got down to business. I received invitations for Cleaver to meet the ambassadors of North Vietnam, China and North Korea, as well as representatives of the Palestinian liberation movement and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (the Vietcong). I accompanied him on these visits: he was dignified and lucid, performing like a seasoned diplomat, despite his past as a school dropout, rapist and convict. He could also close down, and retreat to an inaccessible place.

Shortly after Cleaver's arrival, the ambassador of North Korea invited him to Pyongyang to attend an 'international conference of journalists against American imperialism'. Cleaver was the star of the conference and stayed on for more than a month. One morning, shortly after his return, he showed up at the Ministry of Information, where I was part of a small team working on a political magazine for international distribution. He was wearing shades and slumped down on a chair next to my desk. Then, without any preamble he lowered his voice: 'I killed Rahim last night.' I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Rahim, aka Clinton Smith, had escaped from prison in California with a fellow inmate, Byron Booth, in January 1969. They had hijacked a plane to Cuba and joined up with Cleaver. Not long after sending Cleaver off to Algiers, the Cubans packed off Rahim and Booth too.

Cleaver told me that Rahim had stolen the Panthers' money and was planning to 'split'. He and Booth, who witnessed the murder, had buried the body on a wooded hillside a little way out of town, near the sea. Once he'd finished telling me this he put on the cap he'd been playing with and strolled out of the office. I couldn't get Rahim's face out of my mind. I was angry with Cleaver for imagining I needed to know any of this. Did he think I could help him if the Algerian authorities got wind of the murder and decided to take action? Several days later a French friend told me that he had seen Rahim and Kathleen Cleaver 'smooching' in a cabaret when Cleaver was in North Korea. My friend didn't know that Rahim had 'disappeared'. When I next saw Cleaver he told me that the hastily buried remains had been discovered, and added that it must have been obvious from the afro and the tattoos that the victim was an African-American. By then Booth had left the country. A French friend of the Panthers was summoned to police headquarters to identify the body but no one from the Algerian authorities ever got in touch with the Panthers or with me, though I was sure the killing had gone on record.

The Panthers financed themselves thanks to donations from supporters and Cleaver's advances on book projects. His royalties from *Soul on Ice*, the defiant confession that had made him famous, were blocked by the US government. Over lunch one day in the spring of 1970, Cleaver pleaded with me to find a way for what the Panthers were now calling the 'International Section of the BPP' to be recognised as a sponsored liberation movement, allowing it access to a range of privileges, and a monthly stipend. I turned the problem over to M'hamed Yazid, who'd been the Algerian provisional government's first representative in

New York. He spoke fluent English and was married to Olive LaGuardia, niece of the former mayor of New York City.



M'hamed invited us to lunch at his house outside Algiers, built in the Ottoman period. We sat at a table in the garden, the Cleavers, Don Cox – the former military leader of the BPP, known as 'DC' or 'the field marshal' – and myself. M'hamed charmed us with stories of his life in New York, all the while sizing up his guests. The interview went well and soon afterwards he called to say the Panthers had been assigned a villa formerly occupied by the Vietcong delegation in the El Biar sector of the city. They would be provided with telephone and telex connections and Algerian ID cards; they wouldn't need entry or exit visas; and they would receive a monthly cash allocation.

Why did the authorities decide to support the Panthers more openly? Perhaps they would serve as a bargaining chip in negotiations with Washington over Algeria's oil and gas reserves. There were ideological reasons too. It was obvious to everyone living there that Algeria was not neutral in the struggle between the superpowers. Ties with the Soviet Union dated back to the liberation war and the Eastern bloc's generosity in providing weapons, training and education.

Cleaver was on top of the world after receiving formal recognition. In May, he shipped his pregnant wife off to give birth in North Korea. The wonders of the Korean health system, it was thought, were unsurpassed, and the decision would strengthen the BPP's ties with Pyongyang. Meanwhile Cleaver had met a gorgeous young Algerian called Malika Ziri who was constantly at his side. Attaching herself publicly to a black American at least 15 years older than her in a society where discretion was the rule would have required immense self-confidence. The Panthers were stars in Algiers, but their flamboyance was also looked on

critically. They helped themselves to scarce resources – basic entitlements in American eyes – that other liberation movements didn't have access to: houses, cars, media coverage, visiting celebrities. They openly dated attractive women, both Algerian and foreign. I can still picture Sekou Odinga, an exile from the New York branch of the Panthers, swooping along the rue Didouche in a shiny red convertible with the top down, a lovely auburn-haired American at the wheel.

The official opening of the headquarters of the International Section took place on 13 September 1970. 'This is the first time in the struggle of the black people in America that they have established representation abroad,' Cleaver told the crowd at the 'embassy'. A few weeks later Sanche de Gramont, a French-American journalist, published a cover story in the *New York Times Magazine* entitled 'Our Other Man in Algiers'.

Soon after the opening of the embassy Timothy Leary, the high priest of LSD ('turn on, tune in, drop out'), and his wife arrived in town. Leary had been sprung from a US prison by the Weather Underground, who'd been paid \$25,000 (some say \$50,000) by the Brotherhood of Eternal Love, a California hippy group that manufactured and distributed high-grade marijuana and LSD. Nixon had called Leary 'the most dangerous man in America'. Cleaver and I gave Slimane Hoffman a toned-down version of Leary's story, emphasising his career as a Harvard professor. Cleaver assured Hoffman that he was capable of controlling Leary's drug use and his bouts of nonsensical eloquence. The commandant wished us well.

My first impression was that the Learys were elderly hipsters. I don't know what I expected: something crazier, more flamboyant and exciting. In the name of the revolution Cleaver decided that Leary had to denounce drugs, and Leary agreed to take part in a BPP film session aimed at US audiences. Cleaver opened the interview by saying that the idea that drugs were a way to liberation was an invention by 'illusionary guys': the real path was through organisations like the Weathermen and the BPP who were involved in direct action. Leary's reply was cagey. 'If taking any drug postpones for ten minutes the revolution, the liberation of our sisters and brothers, our comrades, then taking drugs must be postponed for ten minutes ... However, if one hundred FBI agents agreed to take LSD, thirty would certainly drop out.'

The Panthers decided Leary should join a delegation invited to the Levant by Fatah, Yasser Arafat's party, then the dominant force in the PLO. Leary should break cover there, it was argued, not in Algeria. The group, headed by Don Cox, landed in Cairo in October without incident, then went on to Beirut, where they were put up in a hotel frequented by the Western press. Leary was spotted and the hotel was besieged. The delegation was followed everywhere and it became impossible for them to visit Fatah's training camps in Jordan and Syria as planned. They returned instead to Cairo, where Leary, paranoid and hysterical, became 'uncontrollable', DC reported, scaling walls, hiding behind buildings, raising his arms and screaming in the streets. The Algerian ambassador put them on a plane back to Algiers.

From there, they hired a car and began spending time in Bou-Saada, an oasis in the Sahara where, at their ease on handloom carpets, they partied with LSD. Algeria is an immense country, four-fifths desert, but one is never quite alone. The Learys would smile blissfully and

wave to the astonished shepherds who came across them. The Panthers didn't approve of these escapades and in January 1971 'arrested' the Learys, putting them under guard for several days. Cleaver filmed the prisoners and issued a press release that was distributed in the US: 'Something's wrong with Leary's brain ... We want people to gather their wits, sober up and get down to the serious business of destroying the Babylonian empire ... To all those of you who looked to Dr Leary for inspiration and leadership, we want to say to you that your god is dead because his mind has been blown by acid.'

When he was freed, Leary complained to the Algerian authorities and we were summoned by Hoffman. The atmosphere was heavy until Cleaver and DC produced bags of drugs recovered from Leary and his visitors – enough for 20,000 hits. Hoffman's jaw dropped. Tim was tired of us and wanted to move on. He no longer hid his dislike of DC and me; we felt the same way about him. Early in 1971, he left without saying goodbye.

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There must have been thirty Panthers, men, women and children, in the International Section. They operated in military style with strict regulations, daily worksheets and activity reports. They maintained contact with support groups in Europe and other liberation organisations in Algiers. They ran training sessions in self-defence and weapons instruction. Just before the embassy opened Huey Newton, the legendary BPP leader who had spent almost three years in prison on a manslaughter charge for killing a policeman, was granted parole, awaiting a new trial. When he was released from jail ten thousand people turned out to greet him. But the man who took back the leadership of the BPP was not prepared for the transformation that had taken place in his absence. The party had become a powerhouse that the FBI was bent on destroying, waging war against its members, attacking chapter headquarters, letting loose an army of paid informers and circulating fake information. Newton's reaction was to demand total control, dismissing groups and condemning individuals who failed to fall in line.

With the attempt at containment came self-aggrandisement. He was living in a penthouse, had taken over a nightclub and was walking with a swagger stick. At the start of 1971 he was due to appear on a morning TV show in San Francisco and asked Cleaver to join him to demonstrate their alliance and dissipate the rising tension. The International Section met and decided unanimously to use the occasion to confront Newton. When Cleaver appeared onscreen he demanded that Newton overturn his expulsion edicts and called for the removal of Newton's lieutenant David Hilliard. Newton cut short the broadcast, then called Cleaver. 'You're a punk,' he said and expelled him from the BPP. Chapters and members across the US took sides.

Cleaver had taped the broadcast and the phone call. He asked me to come and listen to the recording, worried about the Algerian reaction. I didn't think they would get involved: 'It's not their problem, it's yours, Eldridge.' The Panthers took down the BPP plaque at the entrance to their embassy and started to call themselves the Revolutionary People's Communications Network. They hoped to enable information exchange between left-wing groups around the world and to produce a newspaper for distribution in the US and Europe.

To take the measure of the damage caused by the Newton/Cleaver split, and launch the network, Kathleen and I headed for the US in October 1971 on a month-long cross-country speaking tour. We soon realised that the party was collapsing.

The group in Algiers plodded on. There was no reaction from the Algerians, no sign that they were following events in the BPP, though Newton had sent a formal message to Boumediene denouncing Cleaver. Then, on 3 June 1972, I received a call from the head of the FLN telling me that a plane had been hijacked in Los Angeles and was heading for Algiers. The hijackers had demanded that Cleaver meet them at the airport. They were holding \$500,000 in ransom money, which they'd obtained in exchange for letting the passengers go. We stood on the tarmac, Cleaver, DC, Pete O'Neal (the former head of the Kansas City Panthers) and myself, and watched Roger Holder, a young African-American, and his white companion, Cathy Kerkow, slowly come down the steps from the aircraft. All were in high spirits until we realised that the Algerians had taken the moneybags and were not about to put them into Cleaver's eager hands. The money was returned to the US; Roger and Cathy were granted asylum and became part of the local community of US exiles.

On 1 August another hijacked plane arrived, this one from Detroit. The hijackers, black but again not Panthers, had been paid \$1 million by Delta Airlines for releasing the plane's passengers in Miami. This time the authorities in Algiers kept the Panthers at a distance, and once again sent the money back to the US. The Panthers were furious: they were 'vibrating to the overtones of dollar bills', Cleaver would later admit. They wrote an open letter to Boumediene: 'Those who deprive us of this finance are depriving us of our freedom.' DC told his comrades they were crazy and resigned from the organisation: 'The government is not going to risk the future of their country for a handful of niggas and a million dollars. There's gonna be trouble.' He was right. Reproaching Algeria's head of state in public showed a lack of respect. The police invaded the embassy, confiscated the Panthers' weapons, cut the telephone and telex connections, and closed it down for 48 hours. When the guard was lifted, Cleaver was called in by a senior official and severely reprimanded. The atmosphere cleared within a few days: Algeria wasn't ready to abandon them.

Cleaver and his colleagues knew little of the country that had taken them in. They never ventured beyond Algiers. They didn't read the local press or listen to the radio. Except for women friends, they knew few Algerians and never visited Algerian homes. They knew little of Algeria's colonial past, the ravages of the war, or the under-development the regime was attempting to tackle. They saw themselves as free agents, able to protest and use the media at will. Some of them even proposed organising a demonstration in front of Boumediene's offices. Cleaver had to remind them that this was Algiers, not Harlem. They had no real understanding of their hosts, their politics or their reservations about their American guests, and they underestimated them.

The Algerians, for their part, weren't sure how to deal with the Panthers. Algeria was a leading light in the Third World, active in the non-aligned group of nations. It was hosting and training liberation movements from Latin America, Africa and Asia. There was too much at stake for the FLN to let itself be pushed around by these American exiles. And it couldn't

allow international hijackers to make Algeria look like a nation that didn't abide by international rules.

With a dying organisation in the US and international support fast slipping away, the Algiers Panthers were close to stateless. 'The International Section,' Cleaver later wrote, 'had become a sinking ship.' He left the embassy. Malika had been replaced by a series of Algerian women. One of them, to my astonishment, was a veiled neighbour of mine who never left our building unaccompanied. He had wooed her as she hung out the laundry on her balcony and had been meeting her in my apartment while Kathleen was in Europe, seeking asylum for the whole family.

'To each his own' was a formula Cleaver used on many occasions. When he used it now, he was signalling his withdrawal from the organised left. The community of exiles began to look to their individual survival. They started leaving Algeria towards the end of 1972. Some settled in sub-Saharan Africa, a few attempted an underground existence inside the US; others, Cleaver included, left for France on forged passports: within a few years he would be back in the US, a born-again Christian. No one was ejected from Algeria. The group of Detroit hijackers left in mid-1973; Roger and Cathy were the last to go in January 1974. Cox, the field marshal, returned to Algiers that year and lived and worked there for another four years. The arrival of the Panthers in Algeria had been more than an education or an experience for me. I believed in them, I loved them and shared their goals. I hated to see them go.

I had made the arrangements for Cleaver's departure: I found the passport he would travel on, the *passeurs* who would see him safely across national frontiers, the hideout in southern France, and the apartments in Paris. Before long, he was taken up by influential people there. His French residency and legal immunity were sorted out by the minister of finance, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, shortly before he became president. Then I stopped hearing from him. To each his own, I reminded myself.

[Vol. 39 No. 11 · 1 June 2017](#) » [Elaine Mokhtefi](#) » [Diary](#)
pages 34-35 | 4151 words

Letters

[Vol. 39 No. 15 · 27 July 2017](#)

I lived in Algeria at roughly the same time as Elaine Mokhtefi, and I remember vividly the various exiles – Chileans and Palestinians in particular – hosted by the government (*LRB*, 1 June). I also remember the troupes sent by fraternal countries, such as North Korea, to stage events designed to promote cultural and ideological exchange. Almost invariably cultural difference won out over ideological sympathy. The North and South Americans tended to behave, as Mokhtefi reports, as if they were still back home; the Koreans, with shorter exposure, displayed incredulity towards their host society.

The reciprocal respect expected by the exiles' Algerian hosts was often not shown. There seemed to be little understanding of the physical and mental devastation caused by colonisation and war, or of the magnitude of the tasks the regime faced. Expatriate teachers and oil workers mocked the Algerians. There was constant partying and open

sexual promiscuity in what was a poor, conservative country. Another issue was the effect of exile on the exiles themselves; there can be a 'creep' in mindset. In Tunisia, after 1982, the PLO and its supporters were gradually drawn into patterns of consumption and individualism that destroyed their unity and lost them their hosts' sympathy.

Mokhtefi's article also illustrates the effects of a half-century of Western historiography. Who now would believe that the North Korea health service was 'unsurpassed', or credit the support the USSR gave to the Algerian independence movement, 'in providing weapons, training and education'. Half a century later many young Tunisians, exposed to the Western media, tell me it was the US that freed Algeria.

Anne Murray

Tunis