

PREFACE

**LIFE, POLITICS, THE REVOLUTION**

This book is about Paul Coates and Eddie Conway, who met years ago, neither can remember exactly where or when, in the Baltimore chapter of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP). Eddie and Paul are two solid, intelligent, funny—two very different African American men, who, through time, space, and all their differences, remain connected. This book is about their lives, their politics, and their friendship. Just that simple. Just that complicated.

In 1970, Eddie Conway, twenty-four years old and Lieutenant of Security for the Baltimore BPP, found himself facing charges—based on sparse, governmentally skewed evidence—of fatally shooting a police officer and attempting to kill two others. Scores of local people pitched in to help Eddie, including Paul Coates, who knew Eddie slightly, but didn't much like him. Although this support probably allowed Eddie to escape the death penalty, he was given a sentence of life plus thirty years. Finally, in 2014, on the strength of a recent legal precedent, Eddie Conway was released from prison.

All during the years that Eddie lived behind bars, Paul never left him. Now that Eddie's out, Paul's still around. Today, Paul is the celebrated founder of Black Classic Press, one of the few remaining independent publishers of work by and about people of African descent. Paul is also the father of seven children. Over the decades, as he built his business and raised his family, Paul visited Eddie in prisons all over the state of Maryland, often taking his kids—one of whom is the writer Ta-Nehisi Coates—with him.



I too visit friends in prison and have done so for more than twenty years. Most of these people come from a protest lineage that crested in the United States when a new Black militancy was emerging from the civil rights

movement. These were years when the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense formed around a Ten Point Program beginning with the revolutionary imperative that Black people determine their own destiny; when Indigenous Americans fought to take back what little remained of theirs at places like Wounded Knee; and when many white people sidetracked their life trajectories to end racism and the Vietnam War.

The people I visit are serving life sentences or the equivalent. They're convicted of breaking the law—sometimes using armed struggle—in their fight against imperialism or racism or patriarchy or capitalism. They see their cases as part of the fight for The Revolution. Back in their day, The Revolution was something many people fully believed was just around the corner.

Some of these people living long years inside actually did what they were charged with. Others have been framed by law enforcement, set up. Eddie Conway is one such person.

I first met Eddie in 2012 when he was in his forty-second year of incarceration and well into his sixties. With my partner, Laura Whitehorn, I visited him at the Jessup Correctional Institution, just outside Baltimore. The Jessup visiting room was bleak and fluorescently lit, with the usual din of conversations from other visits going on. Yet, even amid all the standardized grimness, it was actually fun talking with Eddie.

Hearty and personable, with a keen sense of humor, Eddie got into talking, among other things, about the sci-fi books he loved, especially the *Star Trek* series. He struck me as a deeply ethical person, interested in and informed about the politics of the day. I wasn't surprised by any of this: among the disproportionate numbers of Black and Brown people inside its prisons, the United States holds some of the world's most enlightened and morally diligent human beings.

What did surprise me, though, was Eddie's absolute certainty—given his forty-plus years into a life-plus sentence—that he was soon to get out. Laura and I saw Eddie in September; he told us he expected to be home with his family by Thanksgiving.

A Black Panther convicted of killing a cop? Yeah, right.



To understand how farfetched Eddie's idea of getting out seemed, look back into history and see how intolerable the reality of the Black Panther Party was to the United States government. After the assassination of radical Muslim leader Malcolm X in February 1965; after the Watts Rebellion six months later, when residents of a Black Los Angeles neighborhood, fed up with police brutality, destroyed over 40 million dollars' worth of property; after almost a hundred years of Jim Crow laws and the lynchings and police killings of unarmed African Americans that accompanied them, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense emerged rather quietly in Oakland, California, in the fall of 1966.

The civil rights movement, by the mid-1960s, had, according to some accounts, basically played itself out.<sup>1</sup> In seeking a legal end to racial segregation, using dignified public pressure and respectful, nonviolent protest, the movement achieved phenomenal victories. But the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965 did almost nothing to address the daily poverty and discrimination endured by most Black people in the United States. Then suddenly, the Panthers appeared as a force demanding answers beyond the reach of established laws.

Twenty years earlier, the United Nations had issued a Declaration of Human Rights proclaiming the equality and freedom of every human on the planet. And, with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China providing support to independence movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America there was, for the first time, the hope of a global uprising that would liberate colonized and subjugated peoples. The Panthers saw themselves as part of this movement for socialist revolution—and not only for Black people.

The Panther program evolved to demand liberation for all people of color and all oppressed peoples around the world. Inspired by the Cuban revolution, Algerian independence, anti-colonial resistance in Vietnam, Panthers studied the Marxist-Leninism that helped structure revolutionary movements outside the United States. They read—and sold—Mao Zedong's *Little Red Book (Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong)*.

The political charisma of Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, who started the Panther Party in Oakland, galvanized the public. Chapters sprang up around the country as the Black Panthers began addressing everyday realities of Black life that the civil rights movement could not.

Panthers monitored and tracked beat cops and were occasionally able to prevent police brutality by showing up, armed, during arrests of Black men and women. They promoted Black self-sufficiency with action plans such as the Free Breakfast for Children Program. On May 2, 1967, the Panthers grabbed international headlines when thirty Party members in uniform—tough leather jackets, black pants, black berets—appeared at the Sacramento Courthouse, openly (and legally) displaying shotguns and rifles as proof that when they said “self-defense,” they meant it.

The defiance of the Panther Party was deeply shocking to the ruling powers of the United States—the country with the largest stake in crushing a worldwide revolution. To law enforcement agents such as the FBI’s J. Edgar Hoover, the rise of the Panthers portended the reappearance of the rage of Watts, newly organized and in freshly menacing form. The government became bent on infiltrating and destroying every chapter in the country, most notably through the FBI’s Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO).

Today, in conventional mid-American classrooms and most news media, the Panthers are considered, if they’re considered at all, as a macho mistake that destroyed the racial inclusion of the civil rights movement. Virtually none of the hope, the creative energy, the solidarity of the radical Black movement has remained in the collective consciousness of America’s mainstream. But the lives and daily work of people like Eddie Conway, whom COINTELPRO effectively sent off to die in prison, illuminate who the Panthers were and what a vision of Black self-determination can look like.



Eddie’s getting-out-by-Thanksgiving dream could not have stayed so strong without William Paul Coates. While Eddie was in prison, Paul Coates founded Black Classic Press, bringing to light the texts of Black scholars and historians, forgotten or gone unnoticed over generations. He did that, in part, to help Eddie in prison. Paul also cultivated a rich family life, working hard to raise his seven children and keep them safe from the police.

I met Paul Coates in New York sometime in the 1990s, probably at some leftist literary conference. For years, we’d run into each other at

various book events. We didn't know each other well, but I always perked up at seeing him. When I visited Eddie at Jessup, I started learning about his connection with Paul.

Back in the late 1960s, Paul had a steady union job as a baggage handler for United Airlines, which was helping him start a family. He remembers:

It was the best job I ever had, because I got to read. I read newspapers from the West Coast, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Examiner* ...

He read about the Bay Area Panthers and got interested in the national Panther Party.

Paul began to hang out around the Baltimore Panther office as a community worker in the fall of 1969. There, he met Eddie Conway. The main thing Paul recollects about Eddie was his off-putting political correctness:

Eddie was this senior Panther. He really, really had his head up in the air somewhere. He had this reverence around him. Yeah, I thought he was an arrogant ass.

What seemed like arrogance to Paul might have been a suppressed state of alarm, as Eddie was beginning to suspect that the Panther chapter he'd assumed was a bulwark against racist injustice had been heavily infiltrated—maybe even started—by law enforcement agents. Eddie remembers:

There was barricades 24/7. Real barricades. We were under surveillance, and that's a stressful way to live day after day ...

It wasn't until 1976 that the US Senate Church Committee revealed the extent of the problem. The reason for those barricades was largely COINTELPRO—designed to derail those social movements deemed by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and his ilk as being “un-American.” Although right-wing outfits like the Ku Klux Klan were nominally targeted for “neutralization,” the brunt of COINTELPRO hit progressive movements, bearing down on antiwar and liberation groups, especially if the people demanding liberation were Indigenous, Latinx, or African American. COINTELPRO hit no group harder than the Black Panther Party, considered by Hoover to be “America's greatest threat.”

Back in Baltimore, 1970, when Eddie Conway was arrested, Paul Coates began to see something in Eddie beyond the “senior Panther”:

Something happened that gave me a different Eddie Conway. He showed me something that never changed. He was always on the side of people. He was true to those principles we swore to in the Black Panther Party. He was always, always straight with me. That straightness showed me a person I could be committed to. It was inside that commitment that our relationship grew.

During the years Eddie was in prison, he and Paul worked together on any number of projects, from legal campaigns, to political rallies, to books. Eddie remembers:

Paul was just there for whatever we needed. The Black Classic Press that exists today grew out of the fact that we needed to get political books to prisoners.

As it turned out, Eddie didn't go home for Thanksgiving in 2012 or 2013. Time passed and I assumed that Eddie's “out-by-Thanksgiving” had probably been something he needed to hang onto so he could last a little longer inside. Then early in 2014, Eddie's lawyer, Bob Boyle, phoned and told Laura and me to come to Baltimore for a court hearing. Keep it quiet because that hearing might get Eddie out.

It did.

That hearing wasn't The Revolution; it was more a case of justice working in mysterious ways. Based on a precedent-setting ruling called the Unger decision in the state of Maryland and some good lawyering, Eddie Conway was taken, on March 4, 2014, from Jessup prison to a downtown Baltimore courthouse. There, after a requisite amount of legal argument, the judge announced that Eddie was free to go.

Minutes later, Laura and I were standing on the sidewalk outside the courthouse. About five feet away in the biting March air, I saw Paul Coates locked inside the world's hardest hug with Eddie Conway.

There's a photo of that hug. I might have taken it; I can't remember. In it, Paul's grasping a cell phone he'd been using to snap pictures of Eddie in a jacket someone had just given him—his first civilian coat in forty-four years. There are more photos I do remember taking at a party a couple of hours later. Paul is showing Eddie how his cell phone works. Eddie—exhausted and placidly stunned by these wondrous gadgets he had heard

about but never until now touched—is just smiling and smiling into his friend, Paul Coates.

Who are Paul and Eddie to each other? Is the word “friend” enough? Aren’t they also comrades? Brothers? Paul and Eddie use all these words, though none completely works. Each man, after all, is not the primary person in the other’s life. There are wives and children and colleagues and hundreds of other friends. “For us,” says Paul,

it was always a matter of me and Eddie and then the world. You can see that if you understand the Panther Party has never left me. If someone comes up to me and says, “I heard you were in the Panthers,” Eddie’s going to be present. Yeah, he’s always, always there.



Both Eddie and Paul grew up relatively poor, without access to a lot of formal education. The kind of education they did have, they were often happy to skip out on. As the Vietnam War was heating up, each young man went into the US Army, and there each faced off against different, though comparable, hurdles. Eddie and Paul deeply wanted—want—not just racial equality, but a chance for Black people to shape a new world.

When they met, Paul and Eddie were in their twenties. They are moving now through their seventies. Paul has dedicated his life to the written words of Black people, chronicling and commemorating the many thousands gone. Eddie, inside prison, counseled, mentored, and organized Black communities. Outside prison, he continues this work, besides covering prison issues for The Real News.

Paul and Eddie’s story is one among many. It’s unusual because it’s ending well: people like Eddie—Black, convicted of murder—don’t often get out. Other people, former Panthers as well as nonpolitical prisoners, remain inside more years, in worse conditions, without family or friends. Many die there. That’s partly why seeing Paul and Eddie together and out in the world made me want to honor them with this book. I want to show this business-as-usual country, which daily disappears countless anonymous lives, how sometimes faithfulness and defiance can bring people back.

I want to let Paul and Eddie do the talking. They can’t be understood outside of their own individual stories, told in their own inimitable voices.

Or outside of their conversations that spontaneously combust whenever they get together.

A couple of months after Eddie's release, I began recording Paul and Eddie talking, separately and together, usually at Paul's office at Black Classic Press or Eddie's office at The Real News.

I asked them about their lives and politics. I've recorded hours of their talk, and from the texts I've transcribed, I've taken out maybe 64 percent of the references to Paul and Eddie laughing. These guys just yuck it up too much for my editing skills to handle.

I must add that my partner, Laura, who herself spent over fourteen years in prison on "un-American" charges, is a silent, though immensely welcome presence in this book. At the time of Laura's arrest in Baltimore in 1985, she had heard of a Panther named Eddie Conway who was doing hard time. Over the years, Eddie also heard of her, so their bond is deep. Laura sat in during many conversations between Paul and Eddie—who opened up about their feelings and politics in ways they probably wouldn't have without her there.

I wish there could be nuanced plot twists in this book, deft foreshadowing, startling character revelations. But the artistic stuff of novels wouldn't be very truthful here. I wish this book could deliver the full account of Panther life in Baltimore; Eddie's life in prison; Paul's life outside. But because this is just Eddie and Paul talking, many people and their related, equally worthy stories don't appear here.

I also wish I had had enough space and time to interview the formidable dozens of people like Cheryl Waters, Ta-Nehisi's mother, and Dominique Stevenson, Eddie's partner—and many of the women who've made up much of Paul's and Eddie's lives—who've led amazing lives of their own. But this story is enough: Eddie goes to prison; Paul sticks by him; Eddie gets out; Paul and Eddie are still tight.

But that's where the beauty is. In this story lie galaxies of others, as yet unheard. Each person who has spent years in prison; each person outside, who has stood by someone inside, holds a story deserving volumes. But for now, because of real-life limitations, this is one small book about Eddie Conway and Paul Coates, talking about life, politics, and, of course, The Revolution.