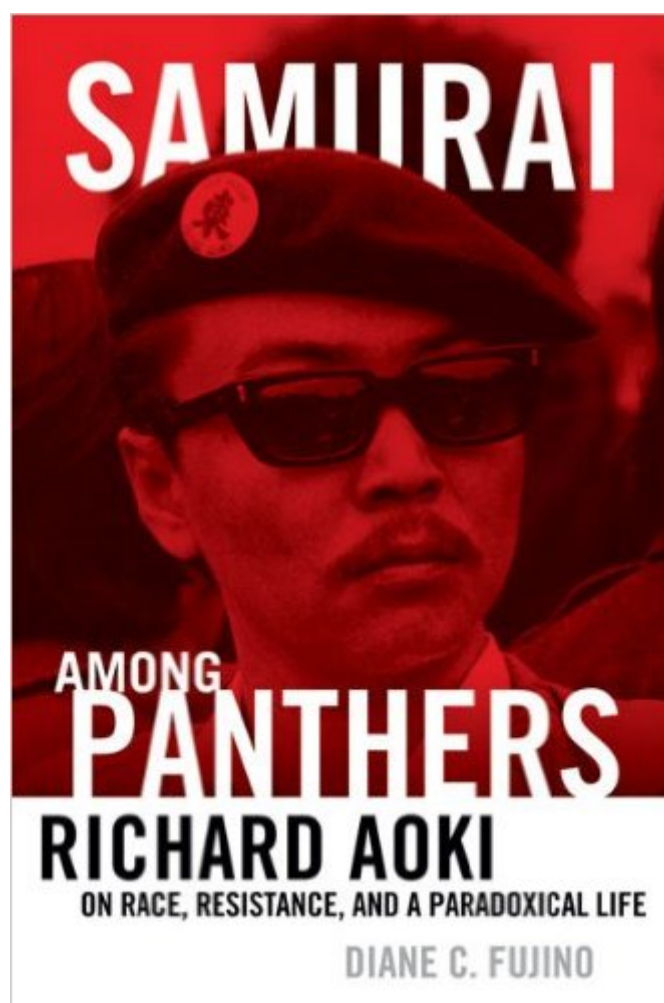


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# Samurai Among Panthers: Richard Aoki On Race, Resistance, And A Paradoxical Life (Critical American Studies)



## Synopsis

An iconic figure of the Asian American movement, Richard Aoki (1938–2009) was also, as the most prominent non-Black member of the Black Panther Party, a key architect of Afro-Asian solidarity in the 1960s and ’70s. His life story exposes the personal side of political activism as it illuminates the history of ethnic nationalism and radical internationalism in America. A reflection of this interconnection, *Samurai among Panthers* weaves together two narratives: Aoki’s dramatic first-person chronicle and an interpretive history by a leading scholar of the Asian American movement, Diane C. Fujino. Aoki’s candid account of himself takes us from his early years in Japanese American internment camps to his political education on the streets of Oakland, to his emergence in the Black Panther Party. As his story unfolds, we see how his parents’ separation inside the camps and his father’s illegal activities shaped the development of Aoki’s politics. Fujino situates his life within the context of twentieth-century history—World War II, the Cold War, and the protests of the 1960s. She demonstrates how activism is both an accidental and an intentional endeavor and how a militant activist practice can also promote participatory democracy and social service. The result of these parallel voices and analysis in *Samurai among Panthers* is a complex and sometimes contradictory portrait of a singularly extraordinary activist and an expansion and deepening of our understanding of the history he lived.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Something doesn't add up here --Let's speculate first that Aoki was an informant : there were always some very out of control, unstable characters on the periphery, around the more focused and righteous Panthers -- Seale and Newton's accounts will support that statement, as will George Jackson's. (That was also true of pre Panther movements -- look at the records of spies and double agents that hung around the Nation of Islam in Malcolm X's time. )It is possible that Aoki as a young man, was torn in many directions, and was tempted by the dollar bill. That is possible. And many of us may have done the same in his shoes -- we cannot say for sure we wouldn't. Brought up in the toughest ghettos and brutal streets, interned in a racist concentration camp, marginalised by white racists who contemptuously considered Asians a joke, just 'gooks' and railway track workers, not 'real men' like Anglo Saxons -- who knows how you or I would react to all that hate? Who knows how we would react to survive as very young men and teenagers in those conditions Aoki found himself ? We do not know how we would behave. Are we perfect? I'd say we are not. But -- if he was an FBI plant, then other parts of the story simply do not add up -- if he was a spy, surely he'd have split from the scene as soon as he could, or as soon as he'd made his money -- surely, it would be dangerous to hang around the scene after having been a plant. But Aoki stayed around the Panthers and their causes for his whole life, long after the state was interested in watching them. Aoki stayed with the Panthers when they were no longer a powerful danger to the state, and were just a group of dignified elders. Now, think about it -- does that sound like the kind of man who was a spy and an informant?

"Samurai Among Panthers" is a biography of Richard Aoki, a Japanese-American activist who played a crucial role in Left, Black Power, Asian American and Third World movements in the Bay Area from the 1960s. Dr. Diane Fujino, an unambiguous booster of her subject, writes persuasively of Aoki's experiences in light of their lessons for Asian-American and interracial solidarity. Unfortunately for Fujino, shortly after this book's publication, it was discovered that Aoki had been a high-level informant for the FBI over a period of decades. When the allegations initially surfaced in 2012, Fujino and a number of Richard's comrades, colleagues and confidants immediately pushed back, denying the claim's validity and suggesting they lacked any documentary basis. It was all a plot, they claimed, to besmirch Mr. Aoki's name and do irreparable damage to the legacy of the Black-Asian alliance. In the years since, however, a virtual deluge of detailed FBI documentation regarding his role as a paid informant--involving hundreds and hundreds of pages of text--has been released through successful FOIA petitions, appeals and (apparently) legal action. Though this new set of documents provides incontrovertible proof of Aoki's duplicitous actions, his defenders have

now gone silent. The truth is that recruitment and manipulation of activists by the intelligence services has been standard protocol even before the days of COINTELPRO up until the present. Indeed, no social movement in modern history can be understood without reference to the roles of informants and agents provocateurs within its ranks. Understanding how an apparently committed activist could be torn in different directions by his various loyalties and personal pathos would truly engage readers in the "paradoxical life" mentioned in Fujino's subtitle.

Having known Rich Aoki during the early 60s and being shocked by the recent news that he was a government informer for 17 years, I decided to pick up this book and see what the author has to say in his defense. It is apparent she was not familiar with the allegations when she wrote the book and nothing in it refers to or suggests Aoki's connections with the FBI. I found the book to be quite interesting, the story of a young Japanese-American who became alienated from the U.S. government, and Franklin Roosevelt in particular, for sending the entire West Coast Japanese community to desert prison camps without any due process whatsoever. His extensive family in California, many of whom were citizens, was given 24 hours to pack up, and then their homes and real estate assets were confiscated, never to be returned and with no compensation!! The author prints verbatim Aoki's reminiscences and then finishes each chapter with notes from her research verifying his recollections. By and large she found his statements were accurate and true. There are some questions which are not answered: there is no mention in the book as to how Aoki made his livelihood during the early 60s when he was apparently informing on the Panthers, the Socialist Workers Party, and the Young Socialist Alliance. How was he being supported? He says his Mom, who he lived with as a young adult, was earning minimum wage. His father was a criminal who lived hand to mouth. So where did Aoki get the money that paid for the guns he donated to the Black Panthers? Here was Rich Aoki with highly expensive rifles giving them away freely to Huey Newton and other Panthers without a second thought!

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