

## **Be careful of your man-tones! Gender politics in revolutionary struggle**

### **Ashanti Alston in interview with Hilary Darcy**

*Anarchist Panther Ashanti Alston came to Ireland March 2009 to speak at the 4<sup>th</sup> annual Anarchist Bookfair in Dublin<sup>1</sup>. Growing up in Plainfield, New Jersey, during a turbulent and politically charged time, Ashanti's life reads like a timeline of recent revolutionary history. Inspired by the 1967 rebellions across the United States, Ashanti joins the Black Panther Party at age 17 and takes part in setting up a chapter in his hometown. Two years later, with comrades facing the death penalty, he decides to join the Black Liberation Army and organises to break them out of jail. In 1975 he begins an 11-year sentence for a "bank expropriation" and spends his time self-educating. He has visited the Zapatista movement, organises with Anarchist People Of Colour (APOC) and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, and is co-chair of the Jericho Amnesty Movement while also travelling widely to share his experiences with radical movements.*

*This interview<sup>2</sup> took place on the 4<sup>th</sup> of March 2009 and focuses on gender politics within the Black Panther Party and beyond. In particular I wanted to understand what forces shaped and changed the patriarchal nature of the Black Power movement in the late 60's from a time where women were viewed as a threat to the strength of masculine self-realisation, as detailed by bell hooks, to a point where women held leadership positions in the Black Panther Party.*

**Thanks for taking the time to meet with me, Ashanti. Could we begin by talking about masculinity with the Black Panther Party, in particular the influence of Malcolm Xs teaching on the role of women within the Party?**

I think a part of me is going to feel this is a challenge in the sense that, man, I know there's a lot of experts on Malcolm X, I ain't amongst them but I think that I do have a good understanding of him and I can also speak about his impact on me. And then as the years go on when I get into learning and studying other things I begin to understand his impact on the movement even broader.

One of the things happening that I think is really good is almost a resurgence of academic interest in Malcolm X. It's been good in the sense that you get to

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<sup>1</sup> A video of the talk Ashanti gave in Dublin 7<sup>th</sup> March 2009 is available to view here <http://vimeo.com/3954733>.

<sup>2</sup> Ashanti made minor edits to the transcript of this interview.

understand Malcolm as more than just the Black Nationalist leader because, at this point, you have the Black Womanist perspectives on Malcolm. You have the people who are doing the progressive, radical, psychological analyses of Malcolm. Even schools of Rhetoric will do studies of Malcolm's speeches for style and deeper meanings in terms of his choice of words and what they meant.

But I don't remember Malcolm's death for example. I don't remember when he got assassinated but it was '65 so I had to be like ten, eleven years old. But '67, there's the rebellions<sup>3</sup> all over the United States and I know that Malcolm's words were really big. In the living room my older brother Joe had the autobiography of Malcolm X. I never paid it any attention but the cover of the old original paperback was this picture of Malcolm; finger pointed in what for us was a traditional way, pointing at something authoritatively and the subtitle said *"former pimp, hustler, robber, who becomes leader of the Black Revolution"*. It's what really got me because it was saying people that come from that kind of background can play a heroic role in the struggle.

So the rebellions happened and Plainfield<sup>4</sup>, my home town, has a really great rebellion, 6 days, but the fact that black people could take over the black community for 6 days with guns meant a lot to me because it gave me an image of black men and women in heroic roles in our community crashing all the myths about us being "niggers", all that stuff.

Then I come to find out more and more, I'm trying to read the autobiography, I'm struggling with it every day. It's hard but the more I understand it the more I understand our oppression, my life in this society through Malcolm X's autobiography.

But at this time there was nothing that would give me an understanding of the role of women. There was nothing that would give me an understanding of such concepts he may have spoken about in terms of socialism or the really more advanced anti-colonial struggles coming out of Asia, Africa, Latin America; I'm going to get this as time goes on. But from that moment on whenever there were struggles coming out of communities and organisations were popping up, Malcolm was the iconic figure of that more nationalist movement, more so than Martin Luther King. For a lot of us who was young, it was just like, we don't want integration, we don't want nothing that sounds like we have to even ask the white man for anything. So the language played a big part because of him coming out of the Nation of Islam<sup>5</sup>. The Nation of Islam's impact on the black community was broad but it was never covered by the media so they kind of slept on the influence of Nation of Islam. But in our communities when we heard somebody speaking about the white man and white man being the devil

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<sup>3</sup> In 1967 National rebellions which took on a political and anti-colonial character rose up in Black ghettos across the United States.

<sup>4</sup> Plainfield, New Jersey. Site of one of the most significant rebellions of 1967.

<sup>5</sup> A Black Muslim religious nationalist organisation established in 1931 and based in the United States.

and the black man needing to have his own, that language was there. Our oppositional language was shaped in sexual terms. It was the *black man's* struggle for our dignity, for our rights and it was just supposed to include everybody and I mean we didn't challenge that. I know I didn't. I didn't have anything that would give me a way to challenge it until I joined the Black Panther Party<sup>6</sup>.

So, by '69, '70 we began learning about the Black Panther Party. When we started reading about the Black Panther Party we saw that this group called themselves "*The angry children of Malcolm X*" and what I understood of Huey Newton, Bobby Seale and Eldridge Cleaver is that they wanted to take Malcolm's teachings to the next level and some of that meant like, OK, he obviously was changing his opinion on certain things; his positions around nationalism, around violence/non violence, around coalitions, the possibility of coalitions with white people primarily.

So, the Panther Party saw that even around women his position was changing. When he left the Nation of Islam, when he formed the Organisation of African-American Unity (OAAU, after the Organization of African Unity)<sup>7</sup> there was women in leadership positions in that and he was also building relationships with political women activists from the South; Fannie Lou Hamer<sup>8</sup>. So the Black Panther Party was trying to bring that to this more revolutionary level. A revolutionary nationalist and socialist organisation basing itself eventually on a Marxist/Leninist interpretation, fighting sexism within the party and actually making policy that we must combat sexism within the party and actively building coalitions with other ethnic groups, even white activists.

It was different from Malcolm from what I understood because I used to go to the Nation of Islam meetings, I just never became a member. I wasn't keen on white people myself, I hated white people but it was coming into the Panther Party where I began to learn that that's not cool; you just can't hate a person because of the colour of their skin and they're your oppressor, you know. You learn about John Brown<sup>9</sup> and all these other people. Panthers would come to my home town with this one white woman in particular who was an ally and I

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<sup>6</sup> Founded in 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale (Eldridge Cleaver joined later that year) and advocating the right to self-defence against police brutality rampant in black communities, the Party's focus evolved to incorporate socialist, communist and nationalist doctrines. At its high point the Party had a 250,000-newspaper distribution while also running survival programmes, which included free breakfast for children programme, ambulance service, medical clinic, drug and alcohol rehabilitation and education programmes. Following a continued state crackdown against the Party the group dissolved in 1976.

<sup>7</sup> A black nationalist organisation established in 1964 by Malcolm X to fight for the human rights of African Americans and promote alliances between Africans and African Americans.

<sup>8</sup> Fannie Lou Hamer was an African American civil rights leader and voting rights activist and later became the vice-chair of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

<sup>9</sup> John Brown, was a white American abolitionist who organised with former enslaved Africans to end slavery and advocated to use of armed insurrection for this end.

would see her and I wasn't really that open to her but the fact that she was cool with them and she was about supporting them I watched her and I found her to be an honest for real person so with them talking to me about my own hatred, anger more, I said, well shit I can't hold on to this! And so I began to allow myself to appreciate her and like her and then all the anti war activists and you're going to anti-war demos to support the anti war movement and you're meeting all these other people. We felt like all of that was taking Malcolm's teachings and putting them into practice though we were clear as Malcolm was clear that our primary responsibility is to black people and black people's liberation.

All them things was in place and even the anti sexism, it was in place but it wasn't... I mean this in retrospect too. I mean Eldridge Cleaver himself who wrote *Soul on Ice* and in *Soul on Ice* there's certain parts in there where he's actively raping women. He wanted to rape white women as an act of rebellion and a lot of people found that controversial. But in the Panther Party he was one of the main leaders who at least pushed for us to be anti sexist not necessarily meaning that he was anti sexist himself but I think that he knew that it was important.

In the Panther Party when I joined I'm just 17 years old. I felt like my own machismo was still forming. So it wasn't really solid. But I'm coming into the Panther Party and it's saying you can't treat women as objects, you've got to treat them equal. I come in and find out that women in New York and New Jersey are in positions of leadership, men in the chapters are supposed to do work that's traditionally for women from washing the dishes to sweeping the floor to helping to take care of any kids that's in there and I'm like, well shit! I'm inspired, you know and I know that that wasn't everybody's experience but I think I was one of those people that was like, wow! This was just so great because at the same time that we're being this way in the communities, we're standing up to the police and all of that.

But I knew that there was also a lot of sexism in the party. I can't say that I even had a consciousness of how deep mine still was and I didn't begin to see it until later when I went to prison. I thought we did pretty good and when I talk to former members years later, even when you talk to the sisters in the Black Panther Party, the stories are mixed. Some of them are really harsh on the sexism within the Black Panther Party. Others... the stories are just as harsh but they felt that the Panther Party gave them a way to be different women because they were in a sense empowered to fight sexism and partly around the fact that everybody was armed. Sisters would tell you that because everybody had guns there were certain ways that they could tell a brother, "you're not going to fuck with me, I'm not going to be your sexual object because I got a gun". Others in the party would create a condition where women who had skills or who had abilities to be in leadership positions, they was there and brothers who didn't accept that, there was ways that they were disciplined.

That's 1970, '71, '72. By '74 I go to prison for a long time. I don't come out until the end of '85. So this is when I'm reading feminism, radical psychology, critical

theory, the anti-authoritarian stuff, the anarchist stuff, sitting in this prison now with no choice but to reflect. First I've got to reflect on me because those things allowed me to see me as more than just *Ashanti the Panther, Black Liberation soldier*, I had to see me as even that kid in the nuclear family who had pops, moms, they was the authority. I come out of a Baptist church but I come out of a tough neighbourhood too and pops used to be a prizefighter.

I used to think of all this stuff while I am reading, Wilhelm Reich and all this stuff was telling me that your family also prepares you for this very authoritarian sexist person you're going to become so I'm like, if that's me I know that's a lot of my comrades in the Panther Party and then to be able to see how that's the leadership of the Black Panther Party too and the leadership's relations with those of us who were the field workers. Whatever is said up top, there was no real way that we could integrate our opinions into the decision making process so I'm like, well shit! There was a lot of sexism within the party that we didn't have either theoretical understandings of or better cultural practices within to help us really break it down. I just feel like we did the best we could.

**What were the organised efforts to create changes within the aims of the Party that would challenge patriarchy, addressing family structures, addressing masculine & feminine roles?**

There were several things. One we had to read about other people's struggles and when you read about these other liberation struggles you know you find that these anti-sexist struggles **within**<sup>10</sup> those struggles is really powerful. So when we read about Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, struggles in South Africa, in Asia and Latin America that the more Marxist, Maoist-influenced liberation movements were actively fighting sexism. You would see women not only with the guns, women guerrillas next to the men guerrillas, but you would find out that some of them were even in positions of power. Those things were giving us one way of reinforcing that we got to also replicate that.

Other things were like, we had to do domestic stuff. The men did, you know. We were not to sit around and let women do stuff; cooking, cleaning and that was important too because that was not the role we were coming up with in our communities, especially that lumpen culture is like, "that ain't the role for men". We wanted more flashy shit, "that's what women do", but now it's like "no, we do that?" and it's enforced and things were in place where you were disciplined if you were falling in those areas. I can remember one thing; to be late for a meeting, if you're late for a meeting you may be doing some runs around the block and if it's a New York meeting it means it's a very big block. But whoever came late, men or women, we all had to run and the first time I did that I was very

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<sup>10</sup> Emphasis added by Ashanti here and elsewhere in the transcription.

surprised that, one sister in particular, Safiya Bukhari<sup>11</sup> was kind of big, and like the rest of us she lead the way. It was seeing things like that that was like, oh right on! I think my age had a lot to do with that. I think that impressionable 17, 18 and it's like they're saying, "This is what the new man is going to be like. This is what the new women is going to be like'.

If a woman felt like she was being pressured for sex she had to let somebody know. And when she let somebody know there was a stop to it right then. A lot of the times. Some things I didn't necessarily see but I heard about later on. There was one case in particular where one brother was being very abusive to his partner to the point where he beat her in public. I think there was a court date in Brooklyn and the police had vamped on the Panthers in Brooklyn and they went to court and one day in court he jumped on her and beat her for what ever reason and that Panther chapter banned him from New York State, they told him he couldn't come back any more. When that story was told and it would get to us and it would tell us how serious this struggle is. We did good but man there was so much we didn't know and because of that there was (like with the cultural practice that I know now), god if we knew stuff then what we know now, god we could have been more effective.

**There were alliances between the Black Panthers and the White Panthers<sup>12</sup> and the SDS<sup>13</sup>. Were there any alliances between Black Panthers and factions within the feminist movement?**

I think that there were some but it was more nominal, it wasn't really developed relationships and I think that one of the mistakes of the Panther Party was that it was limited to the white feminists. We didn't really make the same outreach to black feminists.

Or if there was some kind of gathering like the Revolutionary Peoples Constitutional Convention<sup>14</sup> where there was all the different groups even the queer groups, it's like there's space for the white queer organisation but the Black Panthers organisation because of the homophobia wasn't outreaching or trying to find out who was the black feminists or black queer folks in the struggle. So I think it was more that, we knew that we had to be in an alliance or a coalition with all kinds of different forces but how much it actually worked, I don't think that they actually worked.

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<sup>11</sup> Safiya Bukhari aka Bernice Jones was Communications Secretary of the Harlem Black Panther office. Ashanti Alston and Safiya Bukhari married in 1984. See *The War Before*, her autobiographical writings (just published, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> An anti racist, revolutionary, white American political collective founded in 1968 following an interview with Huey P Newton in which he was asked, what white people could do to support the Black Panthers. He replied "Form a white panther party".

<sup>13</sup> Students for a Democratic Society, a student activist organisation.

<sup>14</sup> Initiated and led by the Black Panther Party, it brought together a really broad array of activists from different "colonized nations," movements and issues whose objective was to write a new people's constitution envisioning a new America. 1970.

And even with Jean Genet<sup>15</sup>, he is a French lumpen rebel, whose support of the movement was well known, did a lot of his writing in prison but when he came to the United States he was a big supporter of the Panthers. I read some accounts of his experiences among Panthers and it was kind of mixed. There were some panthers (like Zayd Malik Shakur<sup>16</sup>) who fully embraced him. Others who knew or saw that he was this gay man they were a little, eh! Except for the public appearances. But behind that was like, eh (shrugs)!

So I think it was things like that where we knew that we were supposed to be a much different nationalist group because we were always a revolutionary nationalist group. But I think that the effort to really build relations with feminist groups of all nationalities and queer groups of all nationalities, I don't think we put real effort and probably because the phobias mean that you are a little scared of that which you don't know. What it might mean in terms of your image to your community or what it means for you, how it might make you look a bit insecure. But those things I learnt sitting in the prison cells having a chance to read and reflect from all these different readings so it just told me that you know them things like that meant that there were some real divisions, that whatever looks good in public is not necessarily the essence of the relationship. So it means that your movement doesn't have these strong unities going on unless you can figure out a way to deal with the things inside you that block the possibility of real unities, whatever that might mean for you, because definitely any real unity is going to question who you are.

I mean for me to work with white folks it was not easy. But I had to question who I was, you know, why I was hanging on to it (this anger) and then later on when I began to understand my own sexism, it's a challenge. The more you understand your own sexism, it's a challenge. Then you've got to ask your self are you willing to take the challenge. I felt like for me and for many people in the movement but definitely for me, Malcolm became such an iconic figure because his life was one that was willing to change, willing to challenge beliefs that he had held and then got shaken on but was willing to go through the struggle no matter where it might take him. So that became more important, that part of Malcolm became more important for me.

**bell hooks has written a lot about how Malcolm X was a figure or an icon of black masculinity. How much of a figure would Angela Davis have been not just for women but also for men within the Black Panther movement?**

Angela was very important, maybe there was two things; one she was a smart women, you just got that from her, here's a smart, black woman and a good speaker. I think it was less important or maybe a little bit ignored that she had

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<sup>15</sup> (December 19, 1910 – April 15, 1986) Early in his life he was a vagabond and petty criminal, but later took to writing. Became a prominent and controversial French novelist, playwright, poet, essayist and political activist.

<sup>16</sup> Black Panther and Black Liberation soldier.

these connections to the Communist Party because I think a lot of people in the black community were still either phobic about the Communist Party or if you were in the movement you would ask yourself "why is she in the Communist Party?' But the image of her was of this beautiful black woman who was smart and willing to speak out in terms of the issues in society. You had her and you had Kathleen Cleaver, same thing.

But Kathleen Cleaver was one of the leaders in the Black Panther Party and her figure in the Black Panther Party was really important because she held a high position. So she was not just Eldridge Cleaver's wife but she held her own and she wasn't just a stand back person she was really active in her leadership. She brought a lot to the Black Panther Party and then on local levels you had other figures who became important like Afeni Shakur<sup>17</sup> at the New York Black Panther Party. Afeni was one of them figures who commanded a lot of respect in the local chapters in New York and then later on people like Safiya Bukhari and in other places, women who were good speakers, or were good speakers and good organisers and they knew how to wield leadership. So their images from the national one to the international one like Kathleen and Angela to the more local one who may not have been known as well or as broadly but at local areas they was like, you look to them, you were inspired by them.

**One area I'd like to move on to is the complicated combination of race, class, and gender. These different terms in some ways define political strategies so it's difficult to be politically active holding that triple framework. It's really hard to find politics that addresses these. Have you found a framework that does?**

I think I have more of a grip now. The prison experience allowed me the time to think about our struggle and its complexities. Whereas on the streets we learnt so much quickly, broadly, deeply and directly. It's unbelievable how much we learnt from being local to our communities to joining the Panther party and the whole new world but now in prison you are beginning to look at that world in it's complexities. So reading the feminism allows me to see how important anti-sexism is in the picture. Readings on authoritarianism allows me to see the same picture but differently, you know the role of anti-authoritarianism. All the cultural and social mechanisms in place that just kind of breathe authoritarianism like it's just second nature. And so if you're in this struggle you are not just in this struggle to overthrow or to stop some oppressive body over there but you begin to recognise like the anarchists say, *there is a cop in your head*, the internal oppression, and then to understand anti-colonial psychology that says those mechanism are still in you too. Franz Fanon becomes important again. So you've got understanding racism, understanding sexism, understanding anti authoritarianism.

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<sup>17</sup>One of the Panther 21 trial defendants and held position in New York City Black Panther branch leadership. Best known today as the mother of Hip Hop artist Tupac Shakur.



At some point I began to understand more of homophobia and that was just from having a very close queer friend. I said something to her one day kind of innocently but it was really fucked up, so homophobic. So she said, *Ashanti I've got something I want you to read*. So the next day we're going to work and she gives me this book *Queer Theory* and it's like, queer theory! I have struggled to be a good ally but now she's asking me to read this book. So I am on the subway with this book (laughing). I am so conscious that I have this highly charged title and so I don't hold the book like I do normally, I reading it like this (holds the book cover down), now I'm holding it down so people can't see the title and I'm conscious of myself doing that.

At the same time as I'm reading this I'm beginning to understand queer theory and what's the importance of it in terms of understanding people's identities and what that means in our struggles, understanding what all of this is around me, different sexualities and stuff like that just brings more lenses for me to see. Not only our struggle outside of me but how those struggles are inside of me as well. Those intersections that you are talking about now (race, class, gender). But for me too, I never put aside the anti colonial perspective because for me our struggle in the United States especially for people of African descent, we're still in an anti colonial struggle and for me that's going to be the struggle until we're free.

It keeps in my mind all the different systems of oppression that we have to fight so I began to understand more when I got out of prison; I began to work with other people and to interact with other folks. Then to watch how mainly the anarchist movement & the feminist movement would have practices that incorporate more of these things because they were more concerned that there was all kinds of oppressions that we have to deal with, how they are all still trapped off into us, how we manifest them and how they can really poison our relationships inside these movements while we're trying to destroy them on the outside and that shit wasn't working.

For example, first time I went to this anarchist meeting and before the meeting started it was like laying down some of the conditions for the meeting and one of them was directed towards the men and it was some simple shit like *men have to take a step back and men have to shut up*, not for the whole meeting. It was like men have to know when to shut up, like you've said your piece. Be careful of your man-tones and when you've said it shut up and let somebody else speak or say what you have to say and step back. And damn that's really it, that's really good; we didn't do that back then.

Or like when it was time to get into the strategy sessions and make the decisions, these groups seemed to be very concerned about who has been historically excluded, who's voices and how to make sure that we bring them in. I'm like oh, this is really great! Because these meetings were like mixed meetings and I know a lot of times black folk in a meeting with white folks, we would just automatically just be kind of quiet, and then here's folks in there saying make sure that we hear from everybody or make sure that there's space for those that may be not feeling comfortable, say what you've got to say. So even things like

that gave me a way to see that we were looking for and experimenting with different inclusive practices. It reminded me of things I had read about the early civil rights movement which stood out, stuff around participatory democracy. Just to include everybody. And then to understand that that's the Zapatista way too<sup>18</sup>, figuring out how to include differences, get out of the thinking that we have to be the same, the monolithic stuff, that's it's ok that there are differences, from differences of opinion but to differences of culture, spirituality, sexuality, analysis. So that made me hopeful because it's like we can do this, because all of these things have divided us for so long, we can take this thing down and turn it around.

### **Let us talk a little about APOC, Anarchist People of Colour<sup>19</sup> - are there anarcho-feminist groups within APOC?**

APOC is not an organisation; it just seems to be how we identify ourselves. So every city where there is APOC, it may be just a way that they meet and get to know each other to some places where they decided to form organisations. So I'm not sure though if there is anarcho-feminist groups within APOC but I do know that from the beginning, say the first conference 2003 in Detroit<sup>20</sup>, the first conference was a majority women and queer folks and usually wherever queer folk gets together those voices are strong. Not saying that we don't got a lot of work to do but I think that there is a tendency especially for the women and the queer folks within APOC spaces to make sure that those issues are dealt with, that people be on point about sexism, homophobia and stuff like that you know.

I think it does good but a self criticism or criticism for men within APOC is, where are the men's groups at? I've been to like 4 or 5 men's groups before and none of them ever last long and I think that if we're going to deal with things that we have historically done that's fucked up we need to have men's groups (that are learning how to live anti-sexist, dick-traitor lives). We're always finding other things that we have deemed important to do that we have not come to terms with how deep our shit is nor with how critical it is for our movements in terms of sustaining our movements and really building and having some successes. We haven't grasped that yet so I think that it has to happen if we're going to be really serious. I know that in New York some of the men want to have a men's group. When that happens I'm always happy to hear that. But then I know my own personal schedule right now, I'm all over the place right now but I want to be there and I will always encourage them to do it and I'm going to have to figure out a way to be there.

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<sup>18</sup> Zapatista style of inclusion and multi-dimensional organizing and struggle.

<sup>19</sup> APOC became the name that identifies and recognizes people of colour within the anarchist movement and the left in general.

<sup>20</sup> The first conference that pulled together anarchists and anti-authoritarians of colour in the US with over 200 people in attendance.

But it's real simple to me at this point, if you can't build those really good healthy even joyous relationships with your comrades who are queer, who are women, then what are you doing? You just want to get into some combative thing against the system outside of us, there is something wrong there. I think APOC folks in general are more eager to move in them directions then others I've seen though and I think that we've even developed good alliance with some of the other white radicals and I would even say white anarchists, who also want to move in that direction and who know that it's really important that we do this and not just give it lip service.

### **Could you tell me about any womanist or feminist groups active within contemporary radical black politics?**

One is a great group in New York called Casa Atabex Aché<sup>21</sup>, great group, they are like a women of colour group who don't identify as anarchists but it's like they're there. And for me it doesn't matter. They are big supporters of the Zapatistas. They been there several times and it's like they get so much inspiration from them. They're really good, to interact with them is like, you see powerful women of all sexualities who you come out learning something. So if there was one group you would want to know about it would be them. I'm a general member of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM)<sup>22</sup> in New York City.

It is a revolutionary nationalist organisation, the closest I feel that follows in the spirit of the Black Panther Party. They have *six principles* including fighting sexism within organisation and in the community. They are in the process of developing a seventh principle around being anti homophobic, anti-heterosexist. It's been a struggle but they are like, *we're in this!* And I think because of it, even for a revolutionary nationalist group to take a position on sexism is big but to take the next one in terms of being anti homophobic it's really unusual and unique but I think because of it they've actually had queer activists coming in to the membership now. They've finally got a space to come in. There's a lot of nationalist folks out there who are queer (or "In the Life") but never have felt comfortable in the regular Black Nationalist organisations. So within MXGM, knowing what they're fighting for that they can come in and help create that space for the first time you have an organisation that's changing in a really revolutionary way.

### **You've described how women in the Black Panther Party could assume certain power because they were armed; they had authority behind the gun. It reminds me of an article called "Gendered**

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<sup>21</sup> House of Womyn Power, a healing space for womyn of color in the South Bronx, New York City.

<sup>22</sup> <http://mxgm.org> – "The Malcolm X Grassroots Movement is an organization of Afrikans in America/New Afrikans whose mission is to defend the human rights of our people and promote self-determination in our community".

**Revolution' in the second edition of the Irish anarchy-feminist magazine RAG<sup>23</sup> in which the author compares the experiences of women in the Spanish civil war with the Sandinista revolution. She argues that despite achieving gender equality through participating fully in physical combat and political organising in the earlier stages of the movements, patriarchal relations soon returned segregating women to pursue what was deemed to be "women's issues'. She explains that part of the political aims of revolutionary struggle must also include ending a gendered division of labour.**

**De-gendering revolution would surely involve deconstructing the patriarchal, macho, warlike images that are so much a part revolutionary iconography for men. Is there a tension here and how would you begin to resolve it?**

I think we've still got to figure that out. I mean Angela, Kathleen, Afeni, Assata Shakur<sup>24</sup> especially because she's like the most well known figure from that period of being this woman who was in the Black Liberation Army, the newspaper called her mother hen of the Black Liberation Army but people loved Assata Shakur. She's been in Cuba now for 30 years. She is such an important figure in our struggle because of that image of her. We need images of people who fight back but there are some pitfalls to it and I believe today you need women who had access to a gun if they got to defend themselves. From stories I heard, women having guns in the Black Panther Party made some men back up.

But then you really got to see at some point that it still fits into these iconic roles that are really constructed by men, so how do we deal with that? I'm not sure we've quite figured that out.

Today it concerns me that a lot of young brothers who come into the movement, they're not critical of these images. They see those images of Malcolm, Huey Newton sitting in a wicker chair with a spear and a shot gun or they'll see Jonathon Jackson<sup>25</sup> rolling up into the courtroom and I love all of them images but now you've got a culture of violence for real! You've got to really look at that.

With the gun culture in the United States and this seeming love of guns and what guns can do, how much do you really want to uncritically promote them images and I don't want young revolutionary brothers coming into the movement thinking that the rigid macho image is what we're striving for.

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<sup>23</sup> Contact RAG at [ragdublin AT riseup.net](http://ragdublin AT riseup.net).

<sup>24</sup> Former Black Panther and soldier in the Black Liberation Army. Liberated from a women's prison in 1979, and eventually given safe haven as a political exile in Cuba. She presently has a million dollar bounty on her head.

<sup>25</sup> He was the 17 year old brother of imprisoned Black Panther field marshal George Jackson, who died leading the legendary Marin County courthouse raid to free 3 Jacksonites on trial. The state shot down the escaping van killing all inside except for prison revolutionary Ruchel Magee. August 7, 1970.

I think that my lesson from the prison is that we need to be soft. We need to be soft with the capacity ( if we need to), to fight.

So you've groups like The New Black Panther Party<sup>26</sup> and everyone is real rigid, mean. They don't bust a smile, they look like they're gritting on you, you know they'll kill you in a minute. Parts of that I'm like, ok, I understand it and I appreciate the fact that they'll even fight the police. But that's not where I'm at today in terms of what I would want them to really know.

And you can hold Malcolm up (on a pedestal) because it gets to the point where he is beyond question. But the feminist question him, (beyond) good leader or good spokesperson, but was he a good father? Was he a good partner to Betty? Ask Betty. Betty would say that sometimes she thought about leaving him. Betty raised those four daughters, Malcolm was being a leader and I want people to be critical of that so that even in our relationships I want people to see how important our personal, family, social relationships are, because we didn't do that well back then and that played a part on weakening our power as a movement, as an organisation. You can't put that in the background, they need to be in the forefront, and I think that says a lot about how we're really seeing this movement and our ability to create a new world by how we even look at our relationships.

But I did confess in Belfast, some guy said, well what's my relationship to my children and I said, not good, not good because I'm a grandfather now. But do I take time out to spend quality time with my grans? Do I go see my children, spend time with them? (Shakes his head) I think a part of it is because for 14 years....I never had a chance to do it but then when I came out (of prison) it was almost like, *the man revolutionist addiction* stops me from doing it because at some point I've got to stop and develop relations with my children and my grans, go see my mama and my brothers and sisters more, as part of being a revolutionary, just being a human being who develops a fuller life.

**...and that part of oneself doesn't have to exclude revolutionary activity, it can be just as revolutionary.**

Not at all! Put it on the same level as revolutionary activities. I learnt that from the sisters in the Black Panther Party afterwards. They had to raise kids in this environment and they would tell you in a minute that was revolutionary. The things they had to do; what they had to impart to the kids, a lot of time the kids wouldn't understand why the parents were the way that they were; teaching them all this stuff. If that can get put in the picture instead of getting put in the back (because it's deemed what mothers do) then we might be getting to look at all of those as part of the struggle.

I guess it goes to the whole thing too of how we look at political struggle as the struggle and social struggle as subordinate to that and I think the thing I liked

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<sup>26</sup> A black nationalist organization in the US which takes the name of the Black Panther Party but works in a different ideology and style.

about anarchism when I began to really understand it was that anarchism talked a lot about social struggle. It didn't put all that priority on political struggle. It's like the social struggle and the social revolution and the more I understood that I'm like, yeah that makes sense! And it confirms a lot of stuff coming out now around cultural studies and these universities things that really focuses on how people live on that day to day or what's the cultural aspect of people's lives and how important that stuff is, I think compared with Marxism, anarchist thinking was always directed more to how people really live or how people really are, so I found myself thinking that's where I want to be.

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**About the interviewer**

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