

ANARCHISTS IN THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY & THE BLACK LIBERATION ARMY



original
interviews
from

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INTRODUCTION

"Each Generation Must – Out of Relative Obscurity Discover Its Mission – Fulfill It Or Betray It" – Frantz Fanon

This zine is comprised of interviews with two anarchists: a former member of the Black Panther Party and a former member of the Black Liberation Army. Their words and histories, and their survival through intense government repression, are inspirational both to me and to an entire generation of people engaged in social justice and liberation struggle. Their words and deeds emphasize the importance of remembering our histories, honouring revolutionaries who have been killed, and actively supporting those who remain in jail to this day.

Our struggles are continuous and ongoing. We live in a context where black people and other people of colour, particularly youth, are still systematically harassed, profiled, beaten, jailed and killed by a racist police system. At the same time, these communities are marginalized in oppressive education systems and are economically and spiritually dispossessed. As global capitalism expands, we see another aspect of this racism: the rise in the present day exploitation and repression faced by (im)migrants, particularly the undocumented. Living in this present reality, it's essential to look to our elders to learn from their struggles for self-determination.

Our current campaigns for migrant justice and against racism have much to learn from the black liberation movements.

Ashanti Alston, a former Black Panther, an anarchist and veteran community organizer, is still politically active, and based in New York City. Ojore Lutalo, a former member of the Black Liberation Army and an ex-prisoner of war, was only just recently released after 28 years in prison, 22 of which were spent in brutal solitary confinement in an attempt to contain his potent political ideals. Ojore, based in New Jersey, is active in his community.

As anarchist people of colour, politically rooted in our diverse communities, we often find ourselves working with people who don't have explicitly anarchist ideals. These two interviews help explain how it is possible to both align ourselves with anarchist principles and, at the same time, remain committed to work within our communities. That is, in itself, an important anarchist principle.

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These two veterans of black liberation struggles set aside a doctrinal anarchism -- based specifically on white theorists of centuries past -- and instead make anarchism a living, breathing practice, applied in their own contexts. I put together this zine because it is based on conversations with people who are part of a historical movement that deeply inspired me. Growing up as a young black woman, I've always felt a strong affinity with the black liberation movement in the United States in the 1960s and 70s which expressed a radical politic that was not diluted, that embraced political education as an ideal, and brought it into peoples' lives with concrete action.

The Panthers and the Black Liberation Army, in their own ways, took the maxim of 'survival pending revolution' and tried to make it real through breakfast programs, mass community mobilizing, and self-defence. Though these struggles did not define themselves as explicitly anarchist, they remain inspiring to so many of us because of the concrete and tangible liberatory movements that they built. We shouldn't glorify history or look to historical antecedents as moments to be blindly replicated without question.

This publication is for everyone who wants to look back at the past for guidance and inspiration as we also root ourselves in the present, continuing to build our collective movements towards liberation.

As Ojore Lutalo puts it: **We need to be our own liberators.**
This zine is inspired by that powerful idea.

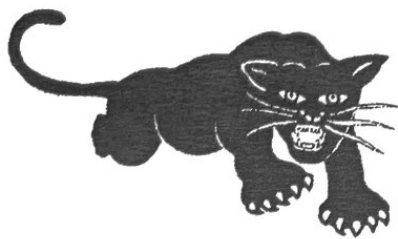
-- Robyn Maynard, May 2010.

The two pieces in this zine are excerpts from interviews that originally aired on **No One Is Illegal Radio** (CKUT Montreal), part of a radio special on anarcho-indigenists and Anarchist People of Colour (APOC).

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ASHANTI ALSTON



This is Ashanti Alston. First I want to say all power to the people, and it's an honour to be a part of this specific project that you're doing. I'm calling from providence Rhode Island, I'm here with my wife and son who was born

January 11th, and his name is Biko Ajane, named after Steven Biko.

ANARCHISM IN PRACTICE: BROADER SOCIAL STRUGGLES AGAINST OPPRESSION

Well for me, it is possible to work for the liberation of people of colour, who aren't always explicitly anarchist, because I felt like I was grounded in enough of an understanding of anarchism, from the readings, and working with people who are anarchists. I began to see that a lot of the ways that people live and a lot of the things that people do is very anarchistic. A big part of that was, ways that I could relate to people without being very doctrinally anarchist, without every other word coming out of my mouth being something related to anarchism, or one of the founders, or one of the most well-known people. It's just to promote those principles or those concepts of anarchism that create community, that creates respect for each other, that also encourages people to feel hopeful about the future, and fight back. There was nothing inconsistent with anarchism in that. Whether I'm talking to my family members, whether I'm talking to my neighbours, whatever their beliefs, whether they're Muslims, Marxist-Lenninists, or the community that I come out of, the black nationalist community. It's just really trying to bring that into situations: for example, if we're working together, doesn't it feel better or work better when we respect each other? Can we do that if one person is over another? Can we do that if one person is that kind of leader where their egos just demand such obedience that you feel like shit? If you don't feel like your input is valued, you don't feel like you can have input. But if you are feeling valued, then you are going to be more encouraged to be a part of this collective endeavour. So my language shies away from formal political revolutionary language, but I want people to get it from what we really do with each other. The kinds of behaviours or attitudes that we really value in each other, that makes working with each other and being around each other not only a pleasure, but a necessity. And a way to face some really big challenges: in terms of how do we bring down empire, how

we stop oppressions, even when it's frightening. And for me, my grounding in anarchism gives me the best way to do that, because it values people.

I think that even before, I learned a lot as a Black Panther. Because so much of the Black Panthers was working with people in the community, but you're working with them as a revolutionary yourself. You had been doing readings, you had been coming upon greater understandings of your oppression, you're beginning to get ideas of what you're fighting for, even if some it was under such terms as communism or socialism. But at least it wasn't just that you fight against something. You began to visualize what kind of society you wanted. The difference between then and now is that Panthers felt like we had an ideology and a way to go, and that people should just come on board. What anarchism gives me is a way to be open to other peoples input. And also to give my own input. Because I'm not the revolutionary outside of the community, I'm in this community, I'm a poor folk just like everybody else. So when I see what the police do, and I talk about getting rid of the police and getting rid of prisons, I want people to understand that I want to do this with them, but I want them to see why it's important. So can we dialogue, can we figure out how to bring all that we have on the table. And not just because I bring up the idea to assume that I have the answers. I don't. I learned from the Zapatistas that it's better to have a revolution that asks questions while we are travelling on this road together, then to come with the high falutin' ideas that gives the assumption that you've already got the answers and the way to go. So I work with people today around political prisoners, how can we come together around political prisoners? I have my ideas, you have yours. Can we sit around the table and mix it up a bit, and see what we can do about freeing our political prisoners? That for me is anarchist because I want something that's inclusive. I want something that brings into play everyone's activity, and doesn't limit people to being like pawns on a chess-board.

ANARCHISM AND SOLIDARITY: DRAWING INSPIRATION FROM LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL STRUGGLES

I still get my inspirations from the peoples' struggle that I'm immersed in. This black struggle here in the United States from Malcom X going back to Harriet Tubman, and all those enslaved Africans who fought. My inspiration comes from all those unnamed people, all those faceless people who fought back. Those marooned communities that tried to create free lifestyles in the midst

of the slaveocracy inspire me. A lot of times people just mean "who are the major thinkers that you're talking about". And I get it from them too, I get it from Bakunin, Emma Goldman, but I get it also from people who are not necessarily anarchist. There is such great thinking and organizing coming out of Africa today, just around basic survival. People are tending to do it in very anti-authoritarian ways. I've been learning about the struggles of the Ogoni people in Nigeria, the Ebo, the Awareness League, I don't even know if it exists anymore in Nigeria, but it was definitely an anarchist organization. They inspire me. Then you get to here in the United States, when things wasn't happening, and then Seattle jumps off, and you see this anti-authoritarian organizing where the anarchists are playing such a great part. It's not so much the theory, but it's the theory within the activity. That shows people that we can mix the two. The two can be one, and we can learn from there, and we can go from there. I'm inspired by Dylan Rodriguez, who teaches out of the University in California. He's a penal abolitionist, very radical. Young guy. I love his writing. There's others out of the Puerto Rican independence movement. There's Andreas Lit out of the Native American movement. These people are all just really bright, putting forth different ideas. And I don't think that these people call themselves anarchists. But it's like, what do I get from this? How does it help me to understand our situation, the complexities of it, and also give us new inclinations on how we might have to organize and fight back differently, so that we can have some victories that are not so easily co-opted back into the system?

STRUGGLES OF THE PRESENT

The work I do, fighting for prison abolition, and police abolition, this is anarchist in a sense that anarchists fight all forms of oppression. If people in Puerto Rico are fighting for independence, you don't necessarily have to agree with all of the ways that they envision that, and the way that they fight, but you know that they have a right to conduct their struggle in the best way - that they need to do it to get that boot of imperialism, U.S. imperialism in particular, off their neck. You support that. Our struggles here in the United States, the black liberation struggle is still in so many ways an anti-colonial struggle, a 500 year old struggle. People may not agree with it, but we have to fight it the best way we can. If you're an anarchist you look to get rid of all forms of oppression, support people and give the solidarity that they need, without replicating those methods of domination that other authoritarian groups tend to use. I join with people who are fighting police brutality, but if they're just stopping it at police

brutality I'm not going to not support them because they won't go any further. I will support them, fight with them, but I will also take this opportunity to tell them that we have to think about getting rid of that police force. Because just fighting the brutality is one thing, but it doesn't necessarily say that you have an understanding that it is a force that is there to protect a racist classist insane system. So my input is not only to be shoulder to shoulder, but if I have some insights on it, I want to be able to share it in the same that they can share their insights or their thoughts on my struggle. Anarchists can not just be about one dimensional struggle. We just can't do it. If you are anarcho-syndicalist you can NOT just fight for workers. You can't even just look at the world in terms of just workers or bosses, where none of us are Africans, Mexicanas, Puerto Ricans, poor folks, or Appalachian mountain folks. You must look at us as who we are, and support our struggles as well.

As an anarchist people of colour, we have struggles, like the struggle that I am in right now, as far as my people: what is happening to people of African descent in the United States, is still genocidal. It is hard to get even the broader anarchist movement to look at our struggles and find out ways to give us support. Our political prisoners have been locked up now for 3 or 4 decades. And though certain sectors of the anarchist movement do take a lead in giving support, the broad sectors of the anarchist movement don't. And what does that mean when one doesn't support Leonard Peltier, or Mumia Abu Jamal, or many of the others ones who are not so well known. We don't put it at the top of our agendas to support political prisoners. It gives us the feeling that we are fighting alone. Even within the movements that should, theoretically, support us. But I'm still optimistic, because I do feel that the anarchist movement in general, and anarchist people of colour in particular, have the potential and the desire to step up to the plate. Even if we don't have all the right tools, we're more willing to fight internal contradictions, much more than other sectors of the broader left movement. I want to see anarchism within the United States take a quantum leap into the forefront of many of these struggles. Because we can show people that there are ways, really of creating power through people where it stays there and is not just rhetoric. And I'm still that optimistic Panther from them days. I encourage people to get involved, and not to be afraid of the internal struggles that we have to conduct as we confront the larger, mega-systems of oppression.

OJORE LUTALO

"History can attest that voting don't work for the downtrodden and the dispossessed." - Ojore Lutalo



My name is Ojore Lutalo and I am a new African anarchist. I'm a former prisoner of war who was released on August 26th, 2009, from New Jersey State Prison. I served 28 years within the prison, and 22 years in the prison's Management Control United for entertaining political thoughts that their ministries didn't approve of. I've been involved in struggle on behalf of African people since the early 1970's, and I've maintained my affiliation to that over the years. This repression continues: I was kidnapped off of a train, coming from L.A. back to Chicago. I was accused of endangering public safety. At this junction, the case is being litigated. The charges are being dropped 5 years after I was kidnapped. They're accusing me of making terrorist threats which were found to be untrue. Presently I'm trying to organize and teach youth about the missing links that took place between struggling in the 1980's when I was captured up until today.

REFLECTIONS ON PRESENT STRUGGLES FOR ANARCHIST PEOPLE OF COLOUR

I've been an anarchist since the early 1970's. Then, and since getting out of prison, I haven't seen a white anarchist movement, I've seen a scene. Anarchist people of colour today are also lacking in a lot of areas: political ideology, structure, on-going political education, and what is their foreign policy? Do they have the economic programs that are necessary to win the hearts and minds of the oppressed, including the vast majority of white folks? I was in prison; and I never received a post-card from anyone who identified themselves as an 'anarchist person of colour'. Anarchist people of colour today have a lot of political education to do, to decide who they are, where they're going, and how they're supposed to assist in the liberation of people of colour. It takes serious money to struggle with. How do they propose to bring about economic programs for the dispossessed and the oppressed? What I'm saying might sound harsh and critical, but that's the reality of anarchist people of colour and white anarchists, today. We have to come into our own, by defining ourselves, and moving to build structure, organization, as anarchist people of colour.

We need economic programs, clothing, housing, food, and jobs. We need to develop our own land projects. We aren't going anywhere: It's not like we're going to the moon to liberate ourselves, we need to do it right here on earth. You can have a good idea, but a good idea without money is just a good idea. It takes money to realize any kind of social change. Community organizing needs economic programs independent of the state. If we can't determine our own economics, we're off. Whoever controls the purse-strings controls your life. You have to dance to their particular tune, because they control economics. I believe in economic independence. Endless demonstrations and rally's without material change is just a waste of time. I spent 20 years in prison, and that's all I've seen going on, out here, and I'm bearing witness to that today. That's why the vast majority of oppressed people don't turn out to rallies and demonstrations: because there's nothing out there to better their lives, and make things less difficult for them. We need tangible things that people can identify with, and not just rhetoric. Anarchist people of colour need to do some internal research of who they are, and how serious they are.

One way to do that is through the issue of political prisoners, and prisoners of war. These are not a big thing in the black community, because they can't identify with people that they don't know. Political prisoners are not getting the recognition and support that they require today. You need to contact political prisoners directly. Find political prisoners or prisoners of war, and find out what kind of support might need. That's the first step. And you do that by writing and visiting. And you have to be consistent in what you do and say. I would like people to support all the political prisoners that are left behind inside. We also need to focus on political education. It's what brings about understanding. Without political education you don't have understanding. You have to understand why you are struggling, who you are struggling against, and what you are struggling for. **Until people get serious, our repression will remain intense, and forever.** I would also like to encourage people to stay away from drugs. The government loves to see people of colour taking drugs, and distracting from the reality of our oppression.

Also, a message to send to youth of colour, for those sisters and brothers who are being exposed to police harassment: **you can start monitoring and recording police actions themselves.** With video cameras, tape

recorders, and things of that nature. You have to develop a profile, of what's going on in your communities. You should stand up for their rights, you have a right to engage freely in your communities without being harassed. To do that you have to monitor your oppressors. And be careful in engaging in activities that will give the police an excuse to harass you, which they really don't need, because of the colour of your skin. You have to analyze your own situation. Youth of colour know better than I do, in their particular communities.

STATE OPPRESSION: LESSONS FROM THE PAST & PRESENT

When I got captured in 1982, and since my release in January 2009, I find that repression is more intense in 2009 than it was in 1982. When I was captured in 1982 we still had a resistance movement in place. Today people are walking on eggshells so to speak. People are afraid. They're afraid to speak, to do anything else than what the government allows them to do, or say. That's the state of our supposed movement today: fear, and lack of the initiative which was lost during the 60's and 70's that has to be regained. Without that everything will remain the same. What inspires me is that back in the 60s and 70s you had a movement; we had a lot of different formations to bring about social change. Nowadays we don't have that. I was in prison for 28 years. Once I got out I've seen that repression now is more intense than it was back then, because back then you had resistance to government oppression. Now you have people just allowing the government to do what it sees fit. Now everything is reactive as opposed to being proactive. The government doesn't want to see the 60's and 70's realized again. They're doing everything they can to suppress any kind of opposition from Day 1. That's the big difference. We also need to bring back the focus that we had, then, on respect for women that we had, and to make this part of our culture. This culture of respect is essential in the world we're trying to build.

People have to understand that the state won't just sit back and let our people take something that is independent of the state, that they don't have control over. So from the beginning you have to have the means to defend your personal self and what you are building. You have to have self-defence in place. Without that, you don't stand a chance. The state can just do what they want with you. And to you. Invade your property, lock you up, do whatever they see fit.

Non-violence does not work. Non-violence has never worked. Look what happened to chattel slaves in that era, look at black people then... the Klu Klux Klan openly slaughtered them, because they weren't defending themselves. It's good to be non-violent if someone will be non-violent to you. But you need to have the ability to oppose aggression with aggression. I believe that 100%. Self-defence is not just a legal right, it's a human right. And people should be willing to exercise that right.

ANARCHIST IDEALS, INSPIRATION, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR BLACK LIBERATION

The black liberation movement was not an 'anarchist' organization, but I've been an anarchist since the 1970's. I was just using the concepts of anarchism to realize my ideas and go forward. I'm an anarchist who is coming from a position of consensus and tolerance. The role that I played in the black liberation movement was on a clandestine level. And at this time, I can't elaborate on my particular role in the struggle, for security reasons.

I don't believe in organizing for a new improved state because most of the people who have state power ambitions are opposed to the concepts of anarchy, because anarchism doesn't advocate for dictatorships of any sort. It'll always be that way, because people who harbour state power ambitions don't recognize the concept anarchism at all, because they're power hungry.

I draw much of my inspiration from the late New African Anarchist Kuwasi Balagoon. I also get inspiration from Lorenzo Ervin's Anarchism and the Black Revolution. I use that as my bible, to inspire myself and other people to embrace anarchy. To me, the anarchy of old 17th, 18th century anarchists has no bearings on the reality of life in America today.

It only made me stronger to be kept locked down in a control unit for 20 years. The government, and white supremacy, it reigns supreme, but it hasn't affected me in any way.

We are our own liberators. We have to define our reality. We have to come up with our own solutions. White people can't define us or liberate us. I don't rely on the concepts of anarchism coming from another point of view, if the person is not of colour.

You have to put power in the hands of the people. If people had the option to determine their own destinies, this determines whether it will be successful

or unsuccessful for them. We need to have people with the self-determination to do that. I believe in total responsibility: I don't believe in sitting back and relying on other people to do what I should do for myself, or other people desire to do for themselves. If people just sit back and wait on others to do for them, that creates a self-dependency on the state. The government shouldn't take away our responsibility to do things for ourselves. That's why I believe in self-determination and autonomy, and the importance of an economics independent from the state.

The people that came before me inspire me, and help show what I know we can be: the people who stood and fought the fights they had to. They took on their duty. I don't want to die a slave. I don't want to see my children or their children grow up to be slaves. This is why we have to fight. We have a responsibility to not just ourselves, but to the next generation. I look back at the people before me, and I get strength from this, and know that I have to fight for the right for my children to live free from slavery... This is a fight in which so many of us have been killed, or gone to prison for, but it is our responsibility. That's all.

