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Ashanti Alston on the Black Panthers and the Zapatistas | Black Anarchism

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Anarchism

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2006

It is not romantic to see your comrade get shot, die right in front of you.

That stuff is not.

What drives us to that point?

Where we feel we gotta take this system on, take the war to them.

You know, it ain't just like frustration and we're just irrational.

We have thought about it. We have felt it. We have waited.

You think about the fact that you ain't never gonna see your family again, but it's for your family.

You think about the fact that you want to see your children grow up, but you know that your life might end in the next six months or next year or whatever.

You might go to prison and a lot of us ain't, you know, I mean a lot of us felt like [at] 20 we was either gonna be dead or in prison. You know, but we want give it our best shot.

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ASADA and others who have given the story, the Black Liberation Army exists in the minds of a whole lot of young people out there.

You hear it in their in their hip hop and and their writings and and they're making other kind of uniforms.

Communication at some point.

Point they are going to be those who get together and say we gotta take it to the next place, you know, and then you're going to see where others in the movement.

Place themselves in relation to that.

You know how many people was supporting ASADA when ASADA Shakur?

First got captured.

Was only a few, you know, white movement in general, no Weather Underground, yes.

Black nationalist groups, yes, you know.

When she got liberated, you know, same thing, you know it was.

Some people still had a, you know, the nerve to criticize it, you know?

But it would like, we just like, OK, listen, we're gonna get our political prisoners out by any means necessary.

That's it.

If you don't know why, try to consider what our lives is like in your position.

In relation to us, don't put your moral standards on us.

Don't do none of that stuff.

We are fighting for our very.

It is really war on us, you know, and and if people can't recognize that, we ain't got.

Time to to get into the debates and all the other stuff and believe me, it's not romantic.

Yeah, it's not romantic to take a position of armed struggle.

It's not romantic to go underground.

And just just a small thing like at the time of the the the Black Liberation Army, the Weather Underground, and others, because so many on the left didn't like what we were do.

Played a part in our isolation, you know.

I mean, the immediate government on them was already on the thing of isolating us.

But because you got some problem with the way that we choose to fight back, you are also not going to write about us or not going to write about us accurately.

Just blot us out or just tell people that weird.

Cultural leftists or, you know, anarchists, you know, and a lot of us wouldn't even accept the term anarchism back then, right?

But it's like you play a part, you know?

You play a part.

Just like in Seattle when some folks was trying to catch those breaking the windows up.

What's the coffee place, Starbucks and what you gonna?

Hold him for the police.

You know, and I mean, I have been all in favor of them getting theirs kicked because that that's you don't do that.

You know you don't like what we do.

Don't **** with them.

Then you do your thing, but don't be blocking, holding somebody.

But those, I think those are some of the things that are that we're going to have to deal with.

As different movements.

You know that there is going to be again at some point beyond me.

I ain't gotta be about a.

Part of it.

A Black Liberation Army.

You know, at this point there is effectively no black Liberation Army in a physical sense, but because you got people like me and

Ashanti: First thing, first thing, first thing... Power to the people.

Audience: *silence*

Ashanti: Oh! Wait a minute... First thing, first thing, first thing... Power to the people.

Audience: Power to the people!

Ashanti: Oh my God, I'm like, whoa... And what we usually say when someone says power to the people, the response is; all power to the people! Alright, so I give you the first one. Yeah, I mean, that's OK, 'cause I was practiced, right?

But all power means that all power goes to the people, right? Didn't say to the party. Didn't say to the state. It didn't say to the slick talkers. Not other ones. To the people, to the people, to the people, right?

So for me it's like, that's very anarchistic, you know, to the people, right?

Power to the people!

Audience: All power to the people!

Ashanti: Right on. That's pretty good, that's pretty good. ...

What I'm going to try to do tonight is talk about our experience in Chiapas. This was last year though, so this wasn't, this was all before the 6th declarations, and a lot of the things that's going on with the 6th Declaration I am still trying to understand.

I have not formulated any analysis, any positions. I am just open to what's going on there and especially hearing people's interpretations when they go and come back or the things that I can find on the Internet. I'm trying to understand, but this is still, for me, one of the most exciting struggles that have been going on probably since [the] Spanish Civil War, early days of the Chinese revolution, early days of maybe even the Cuban and some of the African liberation movements and other third world liberation movements. This is exciting stuff happening here, and it's why it's exciting to me [is] that [it] brings in my past in terms of the Black Panther Party.

So I think it's important because we're still engaged in this project here of making revolution in the United States and I smile when I say revolution 'cause I love the word revolution.

I just learned to change big 'R' Revolution to small 'r' revolution, and I'll probably get into some of that today, because for me that's a big step, coming from a time period where revolution meant that there was a particular way that you had to think, organize, fight, with a particular plan that led to a particular goal that would look like a particular thing. Whether we call this socialism, communism, whatever, you know, and to go through so many changes in my own lifetime to being open, to learning, to come to the conclusion like the Zapatistas that there are no "plans", there are no final plans. There is no big 'R' revolution, there have never really been one that has succeeded. But small 'r' revolution means that the small people get to make this revolution happen.

They bring in their creativity. They bring in their diversity coming from different places in life different experiences, different knowledge bases means that no one can come and say, well, I got it all, you just got to follow me, you just got to follow our organization, you just got to see our vision. So for me this is abbatis if revolution becomes like what we could have done in the 60s at our height, is what the Zapatistas I see doing now, right their vision, their style of working with people, how they draw from their own cultures, how they're open to pulling knowledge, information from other areas of the world and all of this stuff they they do.

So, I look at the things we did in the Panther Party and said, man, I wish we could have done this, I wish we could have done that. Maybe we wouldn't have these laws.

But it was the same like when I was just a Panther party field worker.

You, you know, you got somebody with you who's a little bit more experienced and they help to walk you through it, you know, and it becomes.

You know, and and I mean that just seems to work.

You know, we are, we've been raised to be terrified of the powers that be.

So how do we break some of that down?

We got to figure out ways in all kind of ways to like confront, confront, you know, and and sometimes it's just simple, like Fanon would talk.

I think this is in his section of wretched of the earth on violence.

And it was a whole thing about to kill the colonizer, freeze the colonize for for me.

I mean, it can happen in many different ways to even look your oppressor, your colonizer in the eyes.

Freeze you.

Because you know the whole thing, even with with black people, it was, it's it was hard even to this day, it's hard for a lot of us to look a white person in the eyes without the tendency to put your head down.

Now you imagine the 60s.

This was just before black power.

Black is beautiful.

After that, you know you had black folks going up to white cops.

Smacking them in the face.

Case, you know, it was a different time.

I I mean I think that's sometimes that points to like the colonization of activists thinking.

And who's setting the standards for what's legitimate actions and what's not?

Even coming in, I came into the Black Panther Party at a time where it was just before the split in the Black Panther Party, so 1970/71 there was. There was Panthers that already been driven under underground exile. There was.

Shoot out. People died on both sides, yet here I am coming 1617 years old.

Uhm, but it's like it was easier because Plainfield, NJ.

Was one of them where the police is always a presence, always ***** with you.

You're always in combat, you know, with so many people came into the Panther Party party in a certain way, with combat ready, one of my comrades in the in the, in the PLA, in in the cell that I was in Vietnam.

Veteran already combat ready.

But then.

Now you have like like this particular one I'm talking about just.

I had never my thing just to back up a little.

I was a burglar, right?

And even coming into the Panther Party I used the burglary skills me and my closest comrade to.

We broke into to the white communities outside of playing field.

We call us, you know, Robin Hood stuff.

You break in, you get stuff, you take it to the fence.

You get money, you go get the food.

And now in your lunch program for the kids, one of them, you know, we got popped and stuff and and all like that.

But that's some of the things.

We did going.

Underground was the first time I was going to be introduced to weapons.

And it's having that comrade that was a Vietnam veteran.

By my side, that gave me the courage, even when I was scared to do some of the things that we had to do, you know?

Ashanti's involvement with the Black Panthers

Coming from a small black town in New Jersey, Plainfield, NJ.

Uhm, black power was what pushed a lot of US young people to more radical positions before that civil rights movement held sway.

And it was all about integrating into the empire.

A lot of us are learning from Malcolm X and looking at some of the other struggles going on.

The world was like, why do we want to integrate?

Into a capitalist society that is thoroughly racist.

Killing us?

What is this thing about?

Wanting a piece of the pie.

So from them kind of inspirations we looked for different information.

And at the time.

It was 1968 made in France. It was the struggle of the Vietnamese against the from the French to the United States.

The Third World liberation movements.

Were giving us ideas, new ways to go, and for a lot of us to be exposed to socialism and Communism and Marxism.

That was really, really great stuff at the time.

And for someone like me, who was just like an average high school student, not really great, not really interested in reading.

The Black Panther Party found me at a time where it made learning one of the most exciting things in the world, but learning about how to create.

How to build our own power bases, how to take our lives back.

In that time period.

We did our best.

And when I say we did our best, we organized not only our community, but so many different communities were inspired to organize.

So it wasn't just us.

It was the the Latino communities, the Asian communities, workers was doing their things, women were doing their thing.

The antiwar movement was strong.

It just seemed like this was a time.

Of possibilities.

Anything was possible, we just had to figure out how to come together and do it.

The Black Panther Party stood out from a lot.

Of the revolutionary.

Black nationalist groups is what we called ourselves was because we was about working with anybody.

Who was down with this idea of revolution?

Who was down with this idea of liberation for the different communities within the empire?

We work with everyone from poor whites in the Appalachian Mountains.

To our Puerto Rican neighbors, like if you come from me from New York and New Jersey, we all live side by side.

And it made sense that Puerto Ricans were fighting for independence of their island, who may have lived in New York and New Jersey.

Still, independence was their objective and those of us fighting for black power in our communities, United States, it made sense that we would bond together.

And that was happening in different ways and different expressions all over the country.

And it was happening in different ways and different expressions all.

Over the world.

You know how can we work.

On stuff, you know, understanding that this system still.

Is not gonna allow us to do **** that's going to threaten this power.

But we want to live.

You know, as dangerous as it is to take that step and say I'm going to.

Confront these people.

With all their new technology, their their terrifying weapons.

Like he also says, you know, the spirit of the people is greater than man's technology. You know, I do believe that, you know, the people can defeat the most ferocious monster in the world. We can do this.

We just need to really see how much is available to us in terms of the fight back.

In with SE as one of the things that's very prevalent in Mexico is the self hate of the indigenous people.

There's a lot of people who deny their indigenous blood.

The the two most famous sayings you here is that no test in India?

No, she's in India.

The school.

So don't be so Indian.

Don't be a barefooted Indian.

How do the separatist us?

Try to change that mindset from the Mexican people who deny their indigenous blood and refuse to be how they say the indigenous people coming back to where they were, you know, the caretakers of that land.

And I'm sure that was part of the Black Panthers.

To the self hey I I can tell you, I can tell you one of the things like like Panthers I think that the fact that.

We knew we were going to have confrontations.

I always wanted to.

I always want to confront them right and and really a lot of my wanting to confront and that's just the police in them, right, because we got so much fear of just these frontline.

So much fear, you know, and sometimes just eyeball the eyeball.

Looking at them is takes a lot of courage.

But it's a step.

And to even daring to think that we could.

Really push him out.

Of our neighborhoods in all kind of ways.

Just keep him out.

You know, and and so for me, I'm always a proponent of people arming their struggles, their communities, because I know.

So as far as I'm convinced, there's always going to be a necessity.

But it's like you begin to realize it takes many forms of struggles.

That's why I like the whole thing.

Like with the with a lot of the anarchist influence struggles here.

You know, we from the convergence is to the to the spokes, count of spokes, councils, all these other things.

Like diversity of tactics and all this other stuff is like we figure out ways of like.

Carrying these struggles in ways that we really think they need to be carried out, you know, and don't nobody come tell me that I cannot.

Defend my community by any means necessary.

I'm not going to tell you that.

You can't block that bridge, you know?

But maybe we can you we can figure out a way you can block the bridge at the same time.

I want to take over my community.

We might can.

Make that **** work.

But one of the things that I do think that happened that weekend.

Was that it got to a point where we saw that it had to be like one way, one path to revolution.

And then and that Marxism, Leninism, even maybe Trotskyism and others did play a big part in that.

But it was the idea of a scientific revolution that you had to think scientifically, that there was an analysis that if we held to the correct analysis.

And organized among specific groups that was designated as the only revolutionary class or group that could do this, that would lead us to this final objective of freedom, communism, socialism, wonderful terms, but all was like taking away from these different.

Individuals struggles on integrity and what I mean by that is that not all of us was really buying into that.

It just had to be one way.

There was folks that there's Native Americans, indigenous people here was like they didn't want.

To hear that stuff.

Like the indigenous people of Mexico they like, they had their own ways of understanding the world.

And they wanted that respected.

But I think that one of the mistakes we made is that we was trying to push you everybody one way.

Our revolution.

That and what the counterintelligence program was doing.

And the counterintelligence program was merely playing on our own weaknesses, on our own contradictions.

Like that it did what it was supposed to do.

It made sure that we felt that we destroyed ourselves and it's always better to get the oppressive when it looks like they're destroying themselves by their own hands.

Rather than to have the government, CIA and others do it.

So that's why it always looks better for black hands to shoot Malcolm X.

Rather than some white.

FBI wipe some white police.

You know, because it affects us more in our spirits when it seems to happen from our own hands.

And they know what they're doing because they have been crushing revolutions all around the world.

But what was important for me was to being.

A part of an experiment.

In changing the world, it inspired me.

It inspired so many other people.

So it didn't matter.

A lot of this as me in reflection, but in the midst of it I learned. I was a Panther, a fieldworker on the ground organizing.

A Panther on the ground who brought up believing that niggers ain't shit, niggers will never organize, they will never unite, never, never, never, never do anything positive.

Now here comes the Panthers, who got programs with black people feeding black children, black people providing clothing for black people, or anybody actually in that neighborhood area was getting fed, whether he was black, white, you know of color didn't matter.

Free clinics. Right. Liberation schools, and the whole idea was that we could do for ourselves to live it and to take those kind of risks where you are actually serving each other destroys all the myths that you were brought up on.

So, no longer was it niggas ain't shit. We are black people. We are people of African descent. Africa is our roots. Black is beautiful. That was heady stuff. That was stuff that was not only cleansing us, but it was giving us a nurturing that made us feel like nothing was impossible.

Zapatista show.

Is that nonviolent struggle?

Is still doable.

They just don't make it the be all end all.

But it's like here and everything draws me back here because I watched them, right?

They use nonviolent struggle effectively in combination with being an armed group, right?

And it makes me think, here's like, here we have not even.

Use the tip of that iceberg of non via.

Struggle all the things we can do.

If you beat Gene Sharp and all these other things, we ain't even got creative with that.

We just do basically the same two or three things, you know?

But I mean, even Gene Sharp, him and his stuff was about how to like, take over your lives, whether city blocks, neighborhoods, whatever, and.

And that's what like the Zapatistas showed me is that even if it was a group like the Black Panthers and the Black Liberation Army, you know, we could have played more of an effective role in promoting so many different forms of struggle.

We got to the point where if you wasn't ready to pick up the gun, you wasn't even a real revolutionary, right?

But you see them women.

Where's the women when they pushed out the the soldiers?

In polo.

A lot of places, yeah.

You you see the Zapatista women, right?

They like the soldiers is in the in the, in the, in the Community and they and they they want their community back and they are just physically pushing these soldiers out.

You know, I'm like, that takes so much courage.

But it's creative too, you know?

And like, damn, can we do something like that here?

One of the things that stands out about the Zapatista struggle is its Mayan base.

And its openness to other ideas.

You know.

But it's definitely a mind based struggle, you know, and it was great for me that these minds of brown people, you know, because like for me, people of color in the United States, we are still battered every day.

We still gotta deal every.

Day with a bombardment of negative messages about who we are and.

And even the best of us.

Sometimes have doubts.

About what we can do as individuals and as peoples.

And there's things you gotta do every day.

To kind of keep.

His spirits up.

Keep your sense of who you are together.

But I love the fact that the Zapatistas concern is power being with people, that they decide how to do this, you know, and it and it is a really great thing, so we can figure it out as we go.

But I I think for me it's obvious that those ways we've tried to do it in the past have never worked.

Never worked.

They've been a successful revolution.

I'm feel to this day.

Russian, Cuban, Chinese.

I got in a big respect for the Cuban people and even big respect for Fidel, right?

But it's like Mao and them all did the same thing.

They became the new oppressors, you know?

All that stuff changed.

Rhetoric stayed the same.

One of the things I think.

The Black Liberation Army

But again, FBI counterintelligence program, the local police departments, people fears, and your community the media's role into just shaping people thoughts all played a part and to frustrating our efforts to keep this revolution building, building and building so by 1974, maybe the early 70s. For all intents and purposes, there were no more revolutionary movements. They were on decline, which meant that a lot of us might have been on the run, or just trying to hold together the movement from an underground position.

And I was one of those who was trying to hold it together from an underground position because at some point I was recruited into the ranks of the Black Liberation Army.

Never was the Black Liberation Army a figment of our thoughts, it was very real. It was a part of the Black Liberation movement, and when we went underground and we took up arms, we were part of a movement, an army that was the same as the Chinese Liberation Army, that was the same as the Tupamaros. That was the same as the MPLA in Angola.

So we saw ourselves as developing that armed force within the United States that could protect those of us who are activists in the communities and also to help promote through financial means, whatever our needs were.

So that means that, yeah, the banks we rolled into their banks yeah, and we went in there and we made withdrawals, right?

We did not call what we did robberies, so we didn't say bank robbers, we we had a fancy term, and I think it was a Marxist term too, we called it expropriations, right?

And feeling that banks were just those institutions that sucked the blood of people and that's how they got their money.

So we was just getting money that came from us some other way.

Anyhow, the whole thing was to put it back into the movement. And that's what we did.

Dope dealers got the same thing we was that forced, like especially in Harlem and Harlem and and in parts of Newark where we hit the dope dealers.

And I'm gonna.

I don't want to get too far into this, but the the.

Point I want to show is that.

Don't deal is felt our sting because we took their drugs, we destroyed their drugs, we took their money and the money also went into programs in their communities.

We understood that even as gorillas urban guerrillas in in America, in the United States, we had to help fund ourselves. We were not waiting for OSI right? And that guy, what's the guy's name? Oh, Soros, George Soros to fund our revolution. There was not a movement that was had any kind of success that did not find ways of funding themselves, but you had to have a certain daringness to do that, and I think one of the successes of black men, the part is that it reached into our societies and got those groups of people who had that kind of daringness, that was that lumpenproletariat, as we called it, right?

That was people who had already been in a kind of combative relationship with society. That gave the Black Panther Party so many advantages because you had people who didn't work or didn't do any work that had any meaningful part in production, but who were willing to learn because it was on the bottom. They were willing to, like, break out of old role models.

That said, we couldn't do anything, and into the organizational arms of the Black Panther Party, we found ourselves doing stuff that we never thought we could do. People started coming to us wanting to join, wanting to support created such a concern for the FBI that they declared as Public Enemy #1.

But that's what it's supposed to do when people are effectively organizing, but it's got to be as a result of the work that we do, when people start pulling others out of the system, out of the system's ways of thinking, of course the system is going to get con-

And they're not scientific.

That they need to be changed and our goal is to change them.

You know.

This Zapatista revolution was something that was pulling together so many strings for me, around so many questions that I had to why we could not carry hours in the 60s and the 70s.

They was giving me ways to go and then to be able to find others, you know, and the first time I went was was with the 22 white women from the ABC Bronx. The second time I found out about Estacion Leary.

And then stops and leave.

It was a group that two individuals went down there and they're experienced down it.

It met with some racism in terms of a lot of the folks going was white folks, white activists and some of the same things they experienced here there was experiencing down there.

And so they wanted to get away.

From that space.

And at the same time, create a space where folks of color could like go and be able to interact on their own without having to deal with the racism of the group that's taking you, you know, so they got together 2 individual individuals, just like the Black Panther Party.

You repeat Newton and Bobby Seale, 2 individuals get together.

And create something.

And the reason I'm pointing out the two individuals goes, that's how things start.

Some there's always the question of how can we do this today or how do we do that two individuals get together, talk.

Figure out what you can do, but you got to come together.

There's nobody who's gonna come and laid the answers down in your lap.

Figure that **** out, you know?

That's what they did because to this day.

You know, they don't want to be preached to, they don't want to hear about no Marxist.

Leninist Maoist revolution?

You're organizing the workers.

They had their own ideas, so it was like sitting all of them folks down from Marcos and others and saying, yo.

Chill with that stuff, you know?

It's not that we oppose, but we've been living here for generations.

We've been sizing up our world and our world for generations.

We know how to do this.

We know how the.

Size of that.

If you've got something to offer, let's sit down as equals, but don't talk to us like.

We're idiot.

You know, which is what we tended to do even in the 60s, seventies, and groups still do, believe it or not.

To this day is unbelievable that a group have come today with a whole revolutionary thing worked out in their head and they just stand around.

You and like.

Join my organization, you know this is the plan.

This is the way to do it.

Organize the workers.

You know.

Zapatistas is like a coming together of folks of different knowledges that figured out a way to pull from the strength of both.

So now they can understand this post modern world that has aspects of pre post, modern, modern, postmodern, all that stuff, right?

I'm excited by this stuff, but I can't talk it that good, right?

So it's it's difficult, but it helped me to understand that we should not be trying to destroy other folks who we feel like because they think different.

cerned and it's going to throw all its forces into disrupting that, and it did that with us, but I think that partly not only because of the rigidness of some of the ideas that we took, but because we were young and inexperienced and they were very experienced in what they did.

So, we were amongst other groups that were destroyed. After that a lot of us went to prison. Some had to leave the country and go into exile. Many were killed, but even more, just their lives were destroyed who even to this day some who are still alive are just like Walking Dead because they don't lost their minds, you know, or or they went to drugs or alcohol to just dull the pain, all of that stuff.

Prison Reading

But those also went to prison we kept on reading and kept on reading, and we kept on analyzing, kept on looking at our struggles from different lenses.

Like for me, for example, when I went to prison, I started reading radical psychology. I started reading, uh, feminism. I started reading Erich Fromm and Marcuse and people from the Frankfurt School. People I ain't never even heard of before.

But they were giving me different ways to look at what had just happened with our struggle.

All of that was leading me to try to find different forms that we might struggle that.

May give us.

A better chance at developing that?

Maybe we wouldn't create the same problems that we had made in the past.

How do we get away from hierarchy?

How do we create organizations that don't silence women?

You know that ain't shutting out those who are queer, right? Or the ages, stuff that goes on. Because we was all young, we didn't

even want to deal with nobody over 3035, you know, even today it seems like it's just it reverses that the older ones don't want to deal with young people, you know?

But it was like, how can we create an organizations that somehow reflect the kind of society that we want?

And continually build, continually find ways to sustain ourselves so that we can eventually take back.

Chunks and chunks and chunks of our lives.

Coming out of prison, you come out with all these ideas, but one of the things about coming out of prison is that you're coming back into like a vacuum. I was in from 8074 to 86 in that time period.

It seemed like people didn't even know about the Panthers, didn't know about the Weather Underground, didn't know about the antiwar movement, the women's movement, the Native Americans, the Chicano struggles. The Puerto Rican independence movement didn't know.

And and you get a sense that this system was very effective and seemingly erasing all of this knowledge.

So we walk around, we're out here now and there's a lot, much organizing going.

What can we do for the political prisoners, those who are still in? Not much going on.

My spirits would be up, sometimes down up, sometimes down through the 80s. The rest of the 80s I did things for political prisoners with just the few handful that was also doing it.

All right, here comes the 90s. People from the Panthers from the West Coast Panthers from The East Coast finally started talking again and we came across an idea that we want to put out the newspaper.

So the early 90s was this effort of Panthers from East and West Coast getting together and we got a newspaper.

Young people see the newspaper and they want to know about the Panthers. Now we got a Black Panther collective and other people was forming other organizations.

Which is basically we want people to stop dealing dialing 911, right. If there's an issue in the community of fight, you know, domestic violence.

Women feeling that their, you know, their bodies are endangered, you know, there may be high incidence of rape.

Where can we set up things where they feel the safety they can go in case they feel like that?

We want people to see that.

Even something simple like that.

Kids are fighting in the street, intervene.

And if the intervention is scary, then figure out how to do it in community with other people so that even though scary, you'll take this step anyhow and you'll see that it gets easier.

Just like learning to swim.

Or any other thing.

You might be afraid at first, but you know, we can still do it.

The fear doesn't have to stop us.

And it made me also ask in these opportunistic communities of folks who I, who I sense were veterans, how was it in the beginning?

How was it when you first started?

And it's usually the same stories people are afraid.

People are scared.

And the only way they was able to help people to overcome was to be a continuing presence there and working with people around particular issues that affected their lives.

And their issues are going to be different, right?

But the whole key was you start with their issues and we all know the story.

Like, you know, like now, like when when the intellectuals who helped to form the Zapatistas came from the universities with all their highfalutin ideas, you know?

And they go to indigenous folks indigenous folks ain't having. In it.

It made me think of groups that are already exercising that kind of autonomy in the different communities I've been in, but it also showed me that we could bring lessons like that back home.

How could I bring that to a Harlem that's being gentrified?

My first thing would be just to look for those folks in.

The community who?

Are already practicing some form of autonomy?

Don't even.

Know the word.

Don't even care about the word, but already in their communities, whether it's how to protect their neighborhood, how to take care of each other, children, you know how they're feeding, it's how they making ends meet.

When the money runs out from the public assistance, they just need to see that that is it.

That is at a beginning.

And to make this thing work to liberate all your lives, just think about how it can begin to expand.

You know.

And that's the things that I would learn when we went to the different communities, Zapatista communities, is that you start simple.

You start small.

You start with what you know and what you already do.

You don't really even have to, from people coming from the outside, create something different.

There's a lot of stuff going on right now.

Right.

In peoples lives and you're just trying to get them to see that you already got control, figure out how to get more.

And in critical resistance in New York we we're we're pushing this thing called a harm free zone.

Sometimes it did well, sometimes it didn't. Spirits go up, spirits go down. For several years, my spirits was like, oh man, I wonder if we're gonna do this, you know?

The Zapatista Uprising

Then, 1994 January 1st happens, it's like a blast from out of nowhere. Some people, some brown people in southeastern mountains of Mexico. Just had an uprising. They just took over all this land it. Just kicked out the Mexican police kept out the military and did it in such a flamboyant way, it was like whoa, if these people can do this and not have all the resources and technologies that we have here and always claiming we ain't got no money.

We can't do this, can't do that, and they have found a way to take back their lives, then revolution is back on the agenda you know, and then the more you find out about them, you get into more of their thinking's find out, well, yeah, you find out more about Marcos, but you get more into their thinking and how they're viewing things.

Why is this guerrilla organization not fighting to capture state power? Why is this guerrilla organization armed, doing things that don't seem to focus so much on their guns? But it's clear that they're not putting their guns down.

Different from the two models, different from a lot of the other guerrilla organizations, whether it's the Red Brigades or whatever.

For me it was exciting because I know that our attempts to use guerrilla warfare to aid the Community movements wasn't really effective.

I know also that groups efforts to come up with the grand solutions wasn't really the way to go.

So now hear the Zapatistas saying it ain't really about the grand solutions, it's not really about the gun.

But we had, we knew that in the in the, in the days of the 60s, to 'cause we always said politics and command, but I think we kind of lost sight of that.

So here was a group saying we have a vision that comes from our sense of dignity and they put this thing about dignity in the core of their thinking.

And it made me think back to like the 60s, like the early 60s, in the up to the late 60s, a lot of the black groups would talk about dignity, and maybe we got away from something.

When that started changing, we then we started talking about the more scientific concepts, right?

But to believe that all you need to be free should be grounded in your sense of dignity, what makes for a dignified life. It was simple but it was like, fantastic.

So we read more and all the stuff we could get. I went the first time with a couple of anarchists from ABC Anarchist, Black Cross, Bronx, the Bronx, and they were taking medical supplies to the Zapatistas, and they knew I was excited about the Zapatistas.

So it's like a shanty. Do you want to go to Mexico with us?

I'm like, yo, I ain't got no money. I'd like to go, but you know, they say, OK, don't worry about it, we'll raise some money.

Now at first I'm like, oh, OK. But when they finally got the tickets, I was actually scared 'cause I didn't really think this was going to happen then. It's going to be the first time I'm I'm going to be outside of the country. But I'm like, ain't no way I'm turning this down.

So we go. And we go to San Cristobal. And then from there we most of our time was in LA Rally died.

Even the name was like blowing my mind, the reality, this is their territory. they have named it and claimed it.

And who could not come in? The police, the army, the corporations. My mind would go immediately back to the United States. Right, and I'm like, why can't we do that?

Except that they all have notebooks.

And pens, and they're taking copious notes of everything that we're saying, the whole conversation. And the reason they're doing that is because during this two week term, two or three-week term, that they're going to be on the junta.

They want to make sure they understand what is being communicated, they're making sure that they jot down any decisions.

That's made so that when their term is over and the next crew. Comes on.

They can look at the notes and see what went on before, and this was this thing they was calling his rotating leadership.

And I'm like, man, that's all the stuff I would read in anarchism.

Damn, they don't even call themselves anarchists, but they're doing this stuff in practice.

They do not get caught up in the terms I'm like right on.

Because their lives is in this position where they must figure out ways of making decisions.

Of sustaining themselves.

Of being a part of participating, and the Zapatistas want everyone to participate.

So people come on here who have never been in a leadership position before, and now here they are trying their hands.

It's got to be not only scary for them in a way, but it's got to be a wonderful experience for them too, to see that it wasn't always the leadership thing.

That terrifying anyhow.

Participation is really doable, but the more people who participate and get this experience, the less likely it is that this particular struggle can be reversed.

Because to get a feeling of what autonomy is like, what it means to have that power in your hands for communities.

For yourselves, that's some really.

It's some really great stuff.

I come right back to my thinking of the United States.

The ways that we thought about raising consciousness, that stuff didn't work no more handing a flyer to somebody, you know, saying, come to this meeting, come to this rally, come to this talk, you know?

The struggle takes more than that, 'cause you're talking to real human beings, and that was that thing again that brought me back to what these officers were saying about dignity, us realizing that we're all human being.

And what does that mean? That means that human beings can think they feel, they have dreams, they have desires, they have fears.

Let's figure out ways to deal with this whole person now, and not just this political actor who just supposed to come to the organization, unite with you and all this other stuff.

So in these Zapatista communities when we would go you get to see and practice how people are living their autonomy.

You get to see how they're living this new kind of small art revolution.

This last time we went UM, we would go to say, oh, vintique, which is one of the autonomous municipalities, is like kind of like the administrative area and it's regular folks.

From these communities who may sit on the Junta?

And when we first heard the word junta, you automatically assume that this demote is like the military dictators.

But then somebody says no, just deal with the the definition of the word.

You know, the junta that we're used to is what the United States has always supported, and we thought that that was the definition.

But it's just an.

Assembly of people and you go ahead and use it before the Zapatista community, the junta particular.

And you're looking at the folk?

And their regular people.

Right.

All right, so we're not going to do it in no mountainous rural area 'cause, we don't have that, but it's about autonomy.

Autonomy is applicable anywhere.

It would be our responsibility to figure out how to apply it in the United States in a Brooklyn in a Harlem and in Oakland.

You know, that would be our responsibility.

So it's like I'm here, I'm going to learn as much as I can.

We had a chance.

I'm glad there was interpreters with my Spanish.

Very, very small, but it was such a great learning experience for me because it solidified so many things I have been questioning myself about.

Can a struggle happen?

In a way that makes itself open.

To different ideas.

That demands the respect of not only diversity, but everyone coming into this diversity.

Here are people that even spoke different languages, and different business people that spoke different languages but created a space where they could work that stuff out and come to some common visions.

It made me think about... I think it's 1970, the Revolutionary People Constitutional Convention with the that the Panthers kind of initiated, which brought together so many of the different groups within the United States with the objective of writing a new constitution.

The Zapatistas was like doing this and diversity became not a negative thing, but it became this really positive thing. Automatically, I'm thinking in the United States we got so many differences that we make negative. There are so many groups that just want to vie for leadership.

Here's the Zapatistas, the hottest thing going in the society that created space, and say this space is for all those who are oppressed

for us to come in to try to figure out what's the next step. That blew my mind.

Right, they said, walking, we ask, right? That blew my mind. It was almost like you know I don't even know how to say like this? You know, you go into the, uh, a Chinese restaurant, you get the fortune cookies and you open them up and it has this little saying sometimes it's very profound.

And they were saying this stuff that is like very profound but so fucking simple. We do not have a way of figuring out this revolution beforehand. Walking, we'll ask questions. We'll turn to each other for the first time, with some humility, and say, what do you know? What do you know? Let's put it on the table. Let's raise some questions.

With the Zapatistas, the questions become more important than whatever your so-called factual stuff is, right.

Create a world where many worlds can fit.

I'm like, oh ****

The United States how can we do it?

You got Indigenous nations right in the United States. You got black folks who identify with a concept called Black Nation. You got Chicanos who identify with Aslam. You got workers who want dignified lives that really come down to, meaning that they should be only controlling the means of their production or whatever they work in and trying to figure out how to fit that into a whole new social scheme that can serve everybody. You know, you got queer folks who trying to create a world that's for them, with them and involved with all other kind of worlds. I'm like, damn, and it meant for me getting involved with this that I had to interact with a lot of new people and every interaction was a new lesson.

But that seemed to be the whole idea of the Zapatistas. Everything should be a new lesson. Everything should be a way to, like, see another piece of the puzzle, to clear out some of the confusion or the smoke around here and there and try to create some kind

of mechanisms where you can get another piece of your life ack or you can take control of another piece of your life.

For me, it became one of the most important struggles that I just glad that being alive now, I thought the 60s was that period where I used to always say it was the greatest period that ever existed in this country.

But I'm convinced that now is that period because it's not only the Zapatistas you got all of the kind of struggles that's going on in the world, and even right here of people trying different ways of doing a different activities to take back their lives to think differently.

Coming up with new concepts like I'm one of them who like a lot of postmodernist stuff, but me trying to read that stuff, man was like, oh. I would go get the dictionary to standard Webster stuff and none of the words would even exist in the dictionary, you know? So, now the next thing I gotta do is Google 'cause. I love the fact that I love Googling. It's the only thing that probably keeps me on the computer. But now I'm understanding so many more concepts like 'hegemony', 'territorialization' and 'deterritorialization' and at first I'm like, why the fuck do they gotta use these big words when I'm sure there's some simple words to do it, but in trying and me pushing it, because that's the exciting thing for me.

If I don't know, I gotta do some digging, but a lot of the reasons why I'm trying to get this because I also was trying to understand more of the Zapatista struggle and a lot of these other struggles going on around the world and what the radical academics were saying about him and then what we were saying about him on the grassroots.

In some of the radical academics, the radical postmodernist was trying to make that bridge between them and us to make that stuff more understandable and that's tend to be the stuff that I would drift towards.

But it made me realize that the the concepts that we used in the 60s and the 70s starting work no more, right?