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# What is Black Anarchism?

Saint Andrew

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2021

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colonial, and national domination. The contributions of non-anarchist yet highly influential thinkers like Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, and bell hooks have significantly developed contemporary anarchism's intersectional approach, but their influence is not widespread or widely-recognized enough. That needs to change.

In her interview with Northeastern Federation of Anarchist Communists, bell hooks challenges us to: "Dare to look at the intersectionalities. Dare to be holistic. Part of the heart of anarchy is [to] dare to go against the grain of the conventional ways of thinking about our realities. Anarchists have always gone against the grain, and that's been a place of hope." Learn from our ancestors. From the precolonial African communalists to the elders who are still with us today. As for praxis, Ervin advocated a strategy of survival programmes, mutual aid, housing coops, rent strikes, labour strikes, the construction of local community councils, and the seizure of food systems, workplaces, and educational institutions. See where you can get started.

To my Black siblings, my famalay, all over the world, from right here in Trinidad, to wherever you find yourself, struggling against anti-Blackness, patriarchy, capitalism, and the State: don't wait to be led. Don't negotiate your freedom. Alston had a word for you: "You all can do this. You have the vision. You have the creativity. Do not allow anyone to lock that down." Ella Baker also spoke on it: "Strong people don't need strong leaders." Zoé Samudzi and William C Anderson remind us in *The Anarchism of Blackness* that "This burning house cannot be reformed to appropriately include us, nor should we want to share a painful death perishing in the flames. A better society has to be written through our inalienable self-determinations, and that will only happen when we realize we are holding the pen."

League derived all of its lifeblood from that resistance, joining forces with other anti-military groups and growing in popularity. However, with the coming of civilian rule in 1999, the Awareness League, along with virtually all leftist organizations, practically evaporated, or in some cases gravitated to electoral politics. They no longer had a common enemy, and were not prepared for the consequences of civilian rule. The most recent invocation of anarchism in Nigeria has come from the former military junta leader, now President of Nigeria, who warned young Nigerians that anarchists were attempting to hijack the 2020 EndSARS movement.

Nigerian anarchist and co-author of African Anarchism Sam Mbah said in 2012 that “anarchism is not dead in Africa.” However, it is important to understand that anarchism, as a political movement, is going to take time to develop in Africa, to agitate the people and spread the awareness of what it is. Mbah believed that African Anarchists could build a movement on the continent by finding common ground with those who seek to hold the government accountable, fight for the environment, fight for gender equality, and fight for human rights. Sam Mbah passed in 2014, may he rest in power. However, the work of Horn Anarchists and Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Front prove that his efforts to develop anarchism in Africa were not in vain. They continue to carry the torch. Solidarity forever.

## Conclusion

Thanks to the effort of Black Anarchics, alongside the influence of the prison abolition movement and the various Indigenous struggles of the past few decades, the anarchist movement has broadened significantly. It still has a ways to go, but it has made progress. The Classical Anarchist devotion almost solely to capitalism and the State has been superseded by a growing recognition of struggles around patriarchal, racial,

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from 'struggle' in Xhosa. The organization is involved in theoretical development, anarchist agitation and propaganda, and participation within the class struggle. Their strategy is simple. They participate in and help create mass, heterogeneous social movements with the objective of spreading the influence of anarchist principles and practices, even if they aren't recognized as such, like: direct democracy, mutual aid, horizontalism, class combativeness, direct action, and independence from electoral politics and parties. The ZACF has faced death threats, repression, and arrest, especially of its Black members.

### **Horn of Africa**

Horn Anarchists, founded in 2020, is a collective project developed in the Horn of Africa to organize and disseminate anarchist ideas, values, and politics. The collective is united by values of equality, kindness, mutual aid, solidarity, and voluntarism. Prior to the collective, anarchist was a label that various Marxist-Leninist parties would hurl at their opponents in order to smear them. There is little consciousness of anarchism on the Horn, or awareness of class struggle. Highly hierarchical Orthodox Christianity dominates politics and society in Ethiopia, and the expansionist and assimilationist Ethiopian empire has aimed to melt all the diverse religions, ethnicities, and identities into one Orthodox Christian Ethiopian identity. In the midst of the Tigray genocide, the Horn Anarchists collective plans to meet in Sudan to work with refugees who have been forced to flee their homes.

### **Nigeria**

In Nigeria, The Awareness League flourished in the 1990s, but has declined since then. Born out of the collapse of state "communism" in Europe, anarchism became increasingly popular in the struggle against military rule in Nigeria. In fact, the

Anarkata is inspired by the rich history of Black resistance. From the communal nomads of Africa, to the stateless Africans who defied African empires, to the refugees who fled Saharan and Atlantic Slave Trades, to the Black captives who found queer love despite all odds, to the Black pirates who bled empire of its stolen wealth, to the Maroons of the Americas, to the slave uprisings and race riots that would threaten the white power structure, to the Black guerillas who resisted European colonialism, to the Black women who challenged white supremacist patriarchy, to the Black trans people who transgress the impositions of colonial gender binaries, to the Pan-Africanist struggle to connect the freedom of the entire diaspora, to the fight for disability justice, to the prison abolitionist struggle.

At the root of the Anarkata tradition is the Black tendency to defy rigidity, borders, hierarchy, and enclosure. To emphasize freedom through grassroots organizing, mutual aid, and revolutionary struggle. To quote the Anarkata statement, “Through countless moments of defiance and flexibility, our ancestors made a way for us to imagine an anarchic radicalism that is unmistakably Black.”

## **African Anarchism**

Although I’ve been focused on the work of BARs in the Americas, I don’t want to ignore the distinct yet related struggle of anarchists in Africa. Let’s discuss the particular anarchist struggles in South Africa, the Horn of Africa, and Nigeria.

### **South Africa**

The Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Front, founded in 2003, is an anarchist communist platformist and especifista organization active in Johannesburg, South Africa. The name is derived

## **Introduction**

I want us to be free. Despite the denial of our humanity, we will be free. Despite the constant war waged against us, we will be free. Despite the relentless genocide against our people, across the world, we will be free. Despite. Despite. Despite. We have lived in defiance of the violence of capitalism and the State. This is our intergenerational legacy. Undeterred. It is my aim to carry the torch to the finish line. I want us to explore the less well-known aspects and lessons of our history. The hidden subversives and unseen uprisings that constitute an unknown revolutionary tradition. It’s time we threw off the burdens of the ideologies and systems built in opposition to our freedom. It’s time we recognize the history of the Black anarchics and understand what Black Anarchism truly is.

## **Pre-Colonial African “Anarchism”**

Africa. The Motherland. The Cradle of Humanity. The home we were stolen from. Prior to the violence of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, Africa hosted a variety of nations, all with their own unique outlooks on the world and means of organizing society. There were many precolonial kingdoms and states that constituted Africa: Ghana. Mali. Songhai. Aksum. Zimbabwe. Kongo. Besides those and other complex civilizations, we often glaze over the societies we’ve been taught to view as primitive. But there are lessons these societies can teach us.

Nomadic, gatherer-hunter societies for instance, have shunned wealth as a burden. And not only a burden, but also a potential source of rupture to an otherwise egalitarian existence. Real wealth is acquired not through want and property, but through the free time to enjoy leisure and creativity. It’s what cultural anthropologist Marshall Sahlins called “original affluence”: having enough of whatever is

required to satisfy consumption needs, and plenty of free time to enjoy life. Take for instance, the Ju/wasi people, one of the San ethnic groups of South Africa. They, like other nomadic groups, have been pushed to the fringes, away from the plentiful environments they once enjoyed. Nevertheless, they've enjoyed a life without hierarchy, private property, or division of labour, for hundreds of years. Work and play are practically synonymous, and they're free to enjoy their lives without devotion to toil.

I'm not trying to argue that we return to nomadic life, by the way. Although the introduction of farming did bring surplus, inequality, population density, new diseases, and war, a pattern that has repeated itself across the world, nomadic life was not perfect, let's not romanticize. They definitely suffered high rates of infant mortality and there were issues of infectious disease, periods of hunger, and the pressure of conformity. Still, we need to have a clearer picture of our history. I want us to understand that peaceful, sustainable living is not antithetical to human nature.

Nor is it exclusive to nomads. Egalitarian, communal societies have also been found amongst settled peoples in Africa too, some numbering in the millions, yet enjoying direct democracy, consensus, and gift economies. Free of the harsh social stratifications we know all too well, with all enjoying equal access to land and other elements of production, so that everyone's needs were met. While there was an element of ageism, as elders were seen as possessors of wisdom and justice, generally their position was not one of superiority or imposition, but of common consensus. They shared work with the rest of the community and received more or less the same share as everyone else.

While feudalism has developed out of some of these societies, many have maintained their commitment to non-authoritarian organization, proving that such societies are not only possible, but have existed on Africa and other continents

funds and offered to provide security for the event in the face of Nazi threats of violence. As Alston said in an interview with Black Ink, "the conference allowed many anarchists of colour to see each other for the first time, recognize our commonalities, and understand the need to work from a foundation where we could respect each other and work in our communities." It allowed them to share their experience and articulate their vision to fellow anarchists of colour, advocate for a stronger analysis of race and ethnicity within the anarchist movement, and develop a conscious project of self-determination for people of colour.

As Aguilar and Alston have both articulated, people of colour are working through our own internalized racism, and need an organizing space, without the input or approval of white people, to deconstruct racism and its impact on our psyches and self esteem. Members of the APOC movement published a two-volume edited collection called *Our Culture, Our Resistance*. [Linked below](#).

## **Anarkata**

And what about Anarkata? As a political tendency, developed out of Black Anarchisms and defined by the Afrofuturist Abolitionists of the Americas in 2019, it incorporates elements of not only Anarchism, but also Black Marxism, Maoism, Pan-Africanism, Black feminism, Queer liberation, etc etc. Thus, it stands opposed to not only the Western and capitalist forces oppressing Black people, but all axes of oppression that work against us. The term Anarkata is short for 'anarchic akata,' a reclamation of the Yoruba word for 'housecat' or 'wild animal', considered a slur by some. Just to make this clear, Anarkata is not a term nonBlack people should be applying to any old Black Anarchic. It is an in-house term. Relax yuhself.

cal of the anarcho-syndicalist union Industrial Workers of the World and the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, as they were resistant to Ervin's attempts to create autonomous groups for Black workers and other workers of colour. He was chastised for advocating "separatism." Their unwillingness to incorporate people of colour on their own terms, condescension, pandering, and in some cases outright racism would alienate Ervin and other anarchists of colour. Read about it in "Speaking of Anarchism, Racism, and Black Liberation" by Ervin himself. [Linked below](#). Ervin also criticized groups like Anti-Racist Action, because while they focused on opposing fascists, neo-Nazis, skinheads, and the Klan, they neglected the struggle against systemic racism. Other critics highlighted issues with their "anti-racist colour-blindness."

Ernesto Aguilar criticized the lack of confrontation on internalized racism. Quote: "In essence, equal power is talked about, but many white people aren't actually prepared to share it with the world majority. Why should they? Giving up the intoxicating power and influence over others and history is not easy." Alston also criticized the blindness of white anarchists to their own racism and privilege. He expressed the need for white anarchists to fight racism not only in the world's institutions, but also within the movement itself. They need to deepen their understanding of oppression.

Black Anarchics should be credited for the much-needed broadening of the anarchist struggle, especially with regard to race. The efforts of BARs like Ernesto Aguilar, Pedro Ribeiro, Ashanti Alston, and others, to create the decentralized Anarchist People Of Colour or APOC movement, were crucial for the wider recognition of intersectional analysis within anarchism. There's still a lot of work to do, but at least they've carved a space for anarchists of colour.

In 2003, Ernesto Aguilar organized the first APOC conference, with around 300 attendees, in Detroit, Michigan. The conference even got support from white anarchists, who raised

for much longer than the recent phenomenon of tyranny, the state, and capitalism.

## What is Anarchism?

Anarchism is a political philosophy and movement of movements that arose in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, though it has a precedent that dates as far back as the rise of hierarchy itself, across the world. It has been frequently, and sometimes purposefully, misunderstood and misrepresented by people of all corners of the political spectrum, but allow me to clarify. Anarchism aims to create a society without political, economic or social hierarchies. Historically, the focus of anarchism was as my favourite non-Mario Italian Errico Malatesta described: the abolition of capitalism and government. However, as anarchism has developed over the past century, anarchists have come to recognize the co-equal importance of struggle against patriarchy, white supremacy, and other systems of domination as well. Anarchists oppose all forms of domination and exploitation.

I've linked a hefty resource on anarchism in the description, but it really is simple. Anarchism is an expression of our innate capacity to organize ourselves and run society without rulers. It is a recognition that the oppressed peoples of this world must become conscious of our collective power, defend our immediate interests, and fight to revolutionize society as a whole, so that we can prefigure a world fit for human beings to live in, fully.

Errico Malatesta, Emma Goldman, Peter Kropotkin, Mikhail Bakunin, and Alexander Berkman are very well known for their contributions to anarchist theory. But even in the early years, Black folks have been involved in the anarchist movement. Ben Fletcher and the other Black workers and organizers of the Industrial Workers of the World, which was co-founded by anarchist and labour organizer Lucy

Parsons in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Or who could forget the smooth oration and militant struggle of the notorious early 20<sup>th</sup> century Brazilian anarchist, Domingos Passos, and the many others who struggled for freedom in the Rio de Janeiro Workers' Federation? And of course, let's not neglect the 90 African Americans, including this man, who went with the Lincoln Brigade to fight fascists alongside anarchists during the Spanish Civil War. However, Black Anarchism, as we understand it today, would not develop until much later.

Black Anarchism is a term that has been applied to a very loose grouping of diverse perspectives. There are many Black Anarchisms in truth. Perhaps a better umbrella term would be Black Anarchic Radicals, or BARs for short, as coined by the Afrofuturist Abolitionists of the Americas. BAR would be inclusive of Black Anarchists, New Afrikan Anarchists, Quilombists, Anarkatas, Anarchist Panthers, Black Autonomists, African Anarchists, and others. For now though, I'll keep using Black Anarchism to refer to the broader movement. Where did it come from?

## **The Rise of Black Power**

The Black Power movement of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century arose with the awareness of the shortcomings of mainstream liberal civil rights movements, and especially their emphasis on integration into the capitalist US state. Ojore Lutalo, a New Afrikan anarchist, would describe both the modern and historic civil rights movement as "corrupt" and "opportunist", with leaders "open for a price" and seeking a place at the table. Instead, Black Power groups like the Black Panther Party, the Republic of New Afrika, Revolutionary Action Movement, League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and the Black Liberation Army, would uphold Revolutionary Black nationalism, emphasizing the need for economic, political, and cultural autonomy and

or Zimbabwe, still failed. The people lost popular power, and the foreign oppressor was replaced with a local oppressor. He became resistant to the influence and intervention of so-called leaders, wanting instead for "power to the people where it stays with the people."

He was released from prison in 1985 and became heavily involved in organizing as a Black Anarchist. He published critiques of top down organizing, explored the influence of childhood on our psychology, and, although he saw the shortcomings of Black nationalism, he still saw it as a force for unity and a direction for social change, with the potential to be anti-State.

As for why he calls himself a Black Anarchist, he says that, "I think of being Black not so much as an ethnic category but as an oppositional force or touchstone for looking at situations differently. Black culture has always been oppositional and is all about finding ways to creatively resist oppression here, in the most racist country in the world."

To Alston, anarchy's insistence that you should never be stuck in old, obsolete approaches and always try to find new ways of looking at things, feeling, and organizing is important and inspiring. He's still out here, still organizing, still part of the struggle. Remember his story.

## **Anarchist People Of Colour**

One of the first white majority anarchist organizations in the US to discuss and prioritize the issue of race was the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation in the 1990s. Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin eventually joined the group, and Ashanti Alston wrote for their paper. The organization would advocate for the abolition of whiteness. It had seemed as though white anarchists were finally grappling with race, not so?

Slow yuh roll. Black anarchists and their emphasis on racism was not always accepted by white anarchists. Ervin was criti-



More false charges were brought against him after that interview. Just a year before his release from prison in 2009, he was denied release from the MCU, specifically because the prison thought he might influence other prisoners ideologically. Eventually though, he was released. And in 2021, in an interview with MoMA PS1 curator Josephine Graf, Lutalo continued to advocate for revolution. Read the full interview. Remember his story.

## **Ashanti Alston**

Ashanti Alston joined the Panthers and the Black Liberation Army in 1971, but before then, he'd been attending Nation of Islam meetings. He was imprisoned in 1974 for taking part in a robbery meant to raise funds for the BLA. While in prison, a fellow Panther named Frankie Ziths would first introduce Alston to anarchist texts. He was being sent a lot of letters and literature that he dismissed at first, because he thought anarchism was just about chaos. Eventually though, while in solitary, he finally dug into anarchism, and was surprised to find analyses of peoples' struggles, peoples' cultures, and peoples' organizational formations.

But he wasn't seeing anything that touched on the struggles of Black folks. There was a lot of emphasis on European struggles and European writings by European figures. It didn't fully speak to him. He had to seek out the anarchic practices of non-European societies, from the most ancient to the most contemporary. He realized that all of us can function in an anti-authoritarian society. He began to see that we should not allow anyone to set themselves up as our leader or make decisions for us. He began to realize that "I, as an individual, should be respected, and that no one was important enough to do my thinking for me."

He realized that the anti-colonial struggles of his time and of the past, whether in Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique,

understanding that racial inequality and domination were built into the system of White supremacy and capitalism. Many of these groups would also promote armed struggle, arguing that violence was necessary for self defense and social change.

An intersectional analysis of race, class, gender, and state domination would also arise in the Black Power movement, especially thanks to the efforts of Black feminists, and would help illuminate the divergent interests among Black people that would need to be accounted for. They came to recognize the close interplay between a white supremacist system intent on destroying and dominating Black people, an exploitative capitalist economic system that drained Black communities of labor and wealth, a patriarchal system that pervaded both Black movements and the wider society, and a settler colonial government intent upon political suppression.

So, what happened? The US government had no interest in tolerating the assertive demands of the Black freedom struggle, and deployed both local police forces and the FBI to destroy these movements. The full weight of the State was upon them. As the Black Panther Party disintegrated under state assault, many of its members were either killed, exiled, absorbed, or imprisoned. Many former Panthers would later get involved with cultural nationalism, community organizing, the Revolutionary Communist Party, or the Democratic Party. But not all of them.

Within the movement itself, there were divisions that were not resolved. Some of the incarcerated rank-and-file Panthers would express discomfort with the organizational structure of the Party. Their geographic and spatial distance from outside movements while in prison allowed them time to reflect on previous strategies, and would lead them to develop Black Anarchisms. But before I dive into their distinct journeys, visions, focuses, and perspectives, what were some of their criticisms of the Panthers?

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin believed that “[the Party] partially failed because of the authoritarian leadership style of Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale and others on the Central Committee [...] Many errors were made because the national leadership was so divorced from the chapters in cities all over the country, and therefore engaged in “commandism” or forced work dictated by leaders [...] There was not a lot of inner-party democracy, and when contradictions came up, it was the leaders who decided on their resolution, not the members.” Kuwasi Balagoon characterized the Party as a “hierarchy that had undeserved pretensions of grandeur” and “ turned away from its purposes of liberation of the Black colony to fundraising.”

Ashanti Alston realized that “there was a problem with [his] love for people like Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, and Eldridge Cleaver and the fact that he had put them on a pedestal.” Ollie A. Johnson III, while never a member of the Panthers, published a hefty critique of the internal issues with the Panther Party in Chapter Sixteen of Charles E. Jones’ book *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*. I’ve linked it below. There he argues that the Party changed from a large, decentralized, revolutionary organization to a small, highly centralized, reformist group. And he laments the recurrence of “Great Men” gaining too much power in revolutionary movements.

The story of Black Anarchisms really begins with the critiques of the incarcerated radicals which I’ve decided to dub the Post-Panther milieu: Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, Kuwasi Balagoon, and Ashanti Alston. As well as the non-Panthers who were nonetheless influential: Ojore Lutalo and Martin Sostre.

## **The Rise of Black Anarchisms**

### **Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin**

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin joined the Panthers in 1967 after being involved with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Commit-

and read his writings, in *Kuwasi Balagoon: A Solider's Story*. Unfortunately, he died in prison of pneumocystis pneumonia, an AIDS-related illness, in 1986. Rest in power. Remember his story.

### **Ojore Lutalo**

Ojore Lutalo was never a member of the Black Liberation Army or the Panthers, but he was involved in the struggle, as early as 1970. He and BLA member Kojo Bomani Sababu were arrested after they attempted to rob a bank to fund revolutionary projects, which ended in a shootout with the police.

He was harassed, isolated, and faced false charges throughout his incarceration in order to keep him from being paroled. However, upon befriending Kuwasi Balagoon and being exposed to critiques of Marxist-Leninism, he became a New Afrikan Anarchist in 1975. He would spend time creating collages while in prison, but in 1986, unprovoked, the prison moved him into the MCU, the sensory depriving Maximum Control Unit, where prisoners move in shackles and guards carry clubs they call “nigger beaters”.

In 2005, still in prison, Lutalo was interviewed for a film entitled *In My Own Words* where he spoke on everything from his own political beliefs, to life in the MCU, to the difficulty of being a vegetarian prisoner. In the film, he said that,

I just believe in the consensus process, I believe in the autonomous process. I believe that people are intelligent enough to govern their own lives and make their own decisions without somebody collecting untold billions of dollars of taxes and telling you what should and shouldn't be. Most organizations of the Left and the Right they want to repress, they have power ambitions, they power hungry, money hungry. And they'll do anything to retain that particular power. They don't consult with the lower class people, they make decisions for them and I feel that's wrong. So that's why I became an anarchist.

don, moving him to embrace Afrocentrism. Back in New York, Balagoon became active in rent strikes and other organizing efforts. Not long after, he joined the Panthers. Notably, he was openly bisexual, a reality that has often been erased. In 1969, he was arrested and indicted in what became known as the Trial of the Panther 21. And while most of the defendants were eventually released on bail, Balagoon was sentenced to 23–29 years in jail.

Balagoon became disillusioned with the Panthers. He could see the divisions between the West Coast and the East Coast Panthers more clearly. He became a heavy critic of bureaucracy and the repressiveness in Marxist-Leninism. He realized the Panthers had stopped being a party concerned with the daily struggle of Black people in America and instead one totally focused on defending its membership in court trials against the state. Soon, he had embraced what he described as New Afrikan Anarchism. Quote:

Of all ideologies, anarchy is the one that addresses liberty and equalitarian relations in a realistic and ultimate fashion. It is consistent with each individual having an opportunity to live a complete and total life. With anarchy, the society as a whole not only maintains itself at an equal expense to all, but progresses in a creative process unhindered by any class, caste or party. This is because the goals of anarchy don't include replacing one ruling class with another, neither in the guise of a fairer boss or as a party.

Balagoon emphasized the importance of not only anti-Statism, but specifically anti-imperialism. He spent some time criticizing the North American anarchists who did not understand the deep structures of white supremacy and the need for national liberation struggle. Former prison mate David Gilbert would describe Balagoon as a free spirit in many ways, often very creative and not one to boss people around. He had a lot of faith in people's ability to take charge of their own society. You can read more about Balagoon,

tee. In 1969, while on the run for attempting to kill a Ku Klux Klan member, he hijacked a plane and fled to Cuba. But instead of lending support, the Cuban authorities jailed him, then deported him to Czechoslovakia. He then escaped to East Germany before being captured, smuggled into Berlin, tortured for a week, and brought back to the States to be drugged through his trial and handed two life sentences by an all-white jury in a redneck town.

While in those so-called socialist countries, he became disillusioned with what was clearly a dictatorship, not some "dictatorship of the proletariat." And while in prison, although involved in prison struggles, he took time to reflect on his life and sought out an alternative method to Black revolution. Around 1973, he began receiving Anarchist literature, became inspired by Peter Kropotkin, and eventually became a Black Anarchist. His case was adopted by the Anarchist Black Cross and a Dutch Anarchist group called Help A Prisoner Oppose Torture Organizing Committee. They coordinated an international campaign petitioning for his release.

Of course, he took issue with middle class hyperindividualism of many white American anarchists at the time, but he still worked with anarchists around the world who continued to support him and write to him while in prison. He began writing *Anarchism and the Black Revolution* and published it in 1979. It remains one of the best and most widely read works on anarchism today. [Linked below](#). His prison writings garnered him a following in Europe, Africa, and among Australian Aborigines. He was finally released nearly 15 years after his sentence, in 1983.

In *The Black Revolution*, Ervin emphasized that Anarchism is "the most democratic, effective, and radical way to obtain our freedom, but that we must be free to design our own movements, whether it is understood or "approved" by North American Anarchists or not. We must fight for our freedom, no one else can free us, but they can help us." He firmly believed

that Black people, and other people of colour, would constitute the backbone of the American Anarchist movement of the future. He also takes a principled stance against the world capitalist system, white supremacy, imperialism, colonial oppression, patriarchy, queerphobia, and the state, including state “communism”, recognizing that government is one of the worst forms of modern oppression. His emphasis on intersectionality would play a strong role in the shift away from class-exclusive analysis in the American Anarchist movement. More on that shift later. He remains active today, and records a podcast called Black Autonomy with his wife and fellow former Panther JoNina. Remember his story.

### **Martin Sostre**

Ervin was actually first introduced to anarchism when he connected with the radical prison abolitionist and anarchist Martin Sostre in 1969 while in prison. Sostre was never a Panther. He grew up in Harlem during the Great Depression. He briefly joined the army, but was dishonourably discharged because of his run-ins with the law. Eventually, he was thrown into prison for trumped-up drug charges in 1952. At first, he turned to the Nation of Islam, and after being thrown into solitary for expressing his beliefs, he became a jailhouse lawyer. He was released in 1964 and opened a bookstore that sold radical books on black nationalism and communism, in Buffalo, New York. His bookstore would become a place where he cultivated resistance for an entire community. Eventually, he parted with the Nation of Islam.

In that time, Black uprisings were common across the States. When revolt hit Buffalo, Sostre was there doing the work he knew best: teaching, distributing radical literature, and providing context to the situation at hand. Eventually, the authorities would arrest him, gag him in court, and throw him into prison again. While in prison, he continued to educate himself and

other prisoners, and almost single-handedly won democratic rights for prisoners to receive and read revolutionary literature, write books, worship alternative religious faiths, to not be held indefinitely in solitary confinement, and to obtain legal rights to have access to legal rights at disciplinary proceedings.

In a 1967-letter from prison, Sostre wrote that “I will never submit. The employment of the massive coercive power of the state is not enough to make me give up; I am like a Viet Cong — a Black Viet Cong.” At some point, Sostre was introduced to anarchism. He may have been the first Black Anarchist of the post-1960s wave. Ervin wrote about Sostre’s anarchist lessons in jail: “He bounced a new word on me: ‘Anarchist Socialism.’ I had no idea what he was talking about at the time ... He explained to me about ‘self-governing socialism,’ which he described as free of state bureaucracy, any kind of party or leader dictatorship. Almost every day he regaled me about ‘direct democracy,’ ‘communitarianism,’ ‘radical autonomy,’ ‘general assemblies,’ and other stuff I knew nothing about. So I just listened for hours as he schooled me.”

Eventually, the witness that got Sostre locked up recanted, and he was freed in 1971. He had only read pamphlets and sketches of Kropotkin and Bakunin, but didn’t have access to any books on anarchism at the time. He did, however, extensively critique the Marxist-Leninist “party-line” and “whole structure”, which replaced ruling elites but did not further human freedom.

Sostre’s life story and his contributions to the struggle have remained largely unnoticed. Remember his story.

### **Kuwasi Balagoon**

Kuwasi Balagoon joined the Panthers in New York in 1967. Prior to then, he spent 3 years as a soldier in the US army, stationed in Europe, where he experienced racism in Germany, but also exposure to Black people of all backgrounds in Lon-