

# ASHANTI- PANTHERJETA

*interviews / speeches / writings*

❖ **ASHANTI ALSTON** ❖

black panther party / black liberation army /  
ex-political prisoner / black anarchist



I smile when I say revolution because I love the word revolution. I just learned to change "Big R" Revolution to "small r" revolution, and 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 called it 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 has 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 figured out. You just got to follow me, you just got to follow our organization. You just got to see our vision." So for me, this Zapatista revolution becomes what we could've done in the 1960s, at our height, that is what I see the Zapatistas doing now. Their vision, their style of working with people, how they draw from their own cultures, how they're open to pulling knowledge and information from other areas of the world and all of this stuff they do. And so I look at the things we did in the Panther Party and say, "Man, I wish I could've done this, I wish we could've done that, maybe we wouldn't have lost," you know?

– Ashanti Alston

From a speech at AK Press in Oakland, CA (2006)

# **“Black Anarchism”**

*Note: Following is a transcript of a speech given at Hunter College, NYC, on October 24th, 2003, sponsored by the Institute for Anarchist Studies and the Student Liberation Action Movement. Transcribed and introduced by Chuck Morse.*

Although the Black Panther Party was very hierarchical, I learned a lot from my experience in the organization. Above all, the Panthers impressed upon me the need to learn from other peoples' struggles. I think I have done that and that is one of the reasons why I am an anarchist today. After all, when old strategies don't work, you need to look for other ways of doing things to see if you can get yourself unstuck and move forward again. In the Panthers we drew a lot from nationalists, Marxist-Leninists, and others like them, but their approaches to social change had significant problems and I delved into anarchism to see if there are other ways to think about making a revolution.

I learned about anarchism from letters and literature sent to me while in various prisons around the country. At first I didn't want to read any of the material I received—it seemed like anarchism was just about chaos and everybody doing their own thing—and for the longest time I just ignored it. But there were times—when I was in segregation—that I didn't have anything else to read and, out of boredom, finally dug in (despite everything I had heard about anarchism up to the time). I was actually quite surprised to find analyses of peoples' struggles, peoples' cultures, and peoples' organizational formations—that made a lot of sense to me.

These analyses helped me see important things about my experience in the Panthers that had not been clear to me before. For example, I realized that there was a problem with my love for people like Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seal, and Eldridge Cleaver and the fact that I had put them on a pedestal. After all, what does it say about you, if you allow someone to set themselves up as your leader and make all your decisions for you? What anarchism helped me see was that you, as an individual, should be respected and that no one is important enough to do your thinking for you. Even if we thought of Huey P. Newton or Eldridge Cleaver as the baddest revolutionaries in the world, I should see myself as the baddest revolutionary, just like them. Even if I am young, I have a brain. I can think. I can make decisions.

I thought about all this while in prison and found myself saying, “Man, we really set ourselves up in a way that was bound to create problems and produce schisms. We were bound to follow programs without thinking.” The history of the Black Panther Party, as great as it is, has those skeletons. The smallest person on the totem pole was supposed to be a worker and the one on the top was the one with the brains. But in prison I learned that I could have made some of these decisions myself and that people around me could have made these decisions themselves. Although I appreciated everything that the leaders of the Black Panther Party did, I began to see that we can do things differently and thus draw more fully on our own potentials and move even further towards real self-determination. Although it wasn’t easy at first, I stuck with the anarchist material and found that I couldn’t put it down once it started giving me insights. I wrote to people in Detroit and Canada who had been sending me literature and asked them to send more.

However, none of what I received dealt with Black folks or Latinos. Maybe there were occasional discussions of the Mexican revolution, but nothing dealt with us, here, in the United States. There was an overwhelming emphasis on those who became the anarchist founding fathers—Bakunin, Kropotkin, and some others—but these European figures, who were addressing European struggles, didn’t really speak to me.

I tried to figure out how this applies to me. I began to look at Black history again, at African history, and at the histories and struggles of other people of color. I found many examples of anarchist practices in non-European societies, from the most ancient times to the present. This was very important to me: I needed to know that it is not just European people who can function in an anti-authoritarian way, but that we all can.

I was encouraged by things I found in Africa—not so much by the ancient forms that we call tribes—but by modern struggles that occurred in Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau. Even though they were led by vanguardist organizations, I saw that people were building radical, democratic communities on the ground. For the first time, in these colonial situations, African peoples were creating what was the Angolans called “popular power.” This popular power took a very anti-authoritarian form: people were not only conducting their lives, but also transforming them while fighting whatever foreign power was oppressing them. However, in every one of these liberation struggles new repressive structures were imposed as soon as people got close to liberation: the leadership was obsessed with ideas of government, of raising a standing

army, of controlling the people when the oppressors were expelled. Once the so-called victory was accomplished, the people—who had fought for years against their oppressors—were disarmed and instead of having real popular power, a new party was installed at the helm of the state. So, there were no real revolutions or true liberation in Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe because they simply replaced a foreign oppressor with an indigenous oppressor.

So, here I am, in the United States fighting for Black liberation, and wondering: how can we avoid situations like that? Anarchism gave me a way to respond to this question by insisting that we put into place, as we struggle now, structures of decision-making and doing things that continually bring more people into the process, and not just let the most “enlightened” folks make decisions for everyone else. The people themselves have to create structures in which they articulate their own voice and make their own decisions. I didn’t get that from other ideologies: I got that from anarchism.

I also began to see, in practice, that anarchistic structures of decision-making are possible. For example, at the protests against the Republican National Convention in August 2000 I saw normally excluded groups—people of color, women, and queers—participate actively in every aspect of the mobilization. We did not allow small groups to make decisions for others and although people had differences, they were seen as good and beneficial. It was new for me, after my experience in the Panthers, to be in a situation where people are not trying to be on the same page and truly embraced the attempt to work out our sometimes conflicting interests. This gave me some ideas about how anarchism can be applied. It also made me wonder: if it can be applied to the diverse groups at the convention protest, could I, as a Black activist, apply these things in the Black community?

Some of our ideas about who we are as a people hamper our struggles. For example, the Black community is often considered a monolithic group, but it is actually a community of communities with many different interests. 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. So, when I speak of a Black anarchism, it is not so tied to the color of my skin but who I am as a person, as someone who can resist, who can see differently when I am stuck, and thus live differently.



What is important to me about anarchism is its 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. In my case, I first applied anarchism in the early 1990s in a collective we created to put out the Black Panther newspaper again. I was still a closet anarchist at this point. I wasn't ready yet to come out and declare myself an anarchist, because I already knew what folks were going to say and how they were going to look at me. Who would they see when I say anarchist? They would see the white anarchists, with all the funny hair etc, and say "how the heck are you going to hook up with that?"

There was a divide in this collective: on the one side there were older comrades who were trying to reinvent the wheel and, on the other, myself and a few others who were saying, "Let's see what we can learn from the Panther experience and build upon and improve it. We can't do things the same way." We emphasized the importance of an anti-sexist perspective—an old issue within the Panthers—but the other side was like, "I don't want to hear all that feminist stuff." And we said, "That's fine if you don't want to hear it, but we want the young folks to hear it, so they know about some of the things that did not work in the Panthers, so they know that we had some internal contradictions that we could not overcome." We tried to press the issue, but it became a battle and the discussions got so difficult that a split occurred. As this point, I left the collective and began working with anarchist and anti-authoritarian groups, who have really been the only ones to consistently try to deal with these dynamics thus far.

One of the most important lessons I also learned from anarchism is that you need to look for the radical things that we already do and try to encourage them. This is why I think there is so much potential for anarchism in the Black community: so much of what we already do is anarchistic and doesn't involve the state, the police, or the politicians. We look out for each other, we care for each other's kids, we go to the store for each other, we find ways to protect our communities. Even churches still do things in a very communal way to some extent. I learned that there are ways to be radical without always passing out literature and telling people, "Here is the picture, if you read this you will automatically follow our organization and join the revolution." For example, participation is a very important theme for anarchism and it is also very important in the Black community. Consider jazz: it is one of the best illustrations of an existing radical practice because it assumes a participatory connection between the individual and the collective and allows for the expression of who you are, within a collective setting, based on the enjoyment and pleasure of the music itself. Our communities

can be the same way. We can bring together all kinds of diverse perspectives to make music, to make revolution.

How can we nurture every act of freedom? Whether it is with people on the job or the folks that hang out on the corner, how can we plan and work together? We need to learn from the different struggles around the world that are not based on vanguards. There are examples in Bolivia. There are the Zapatistas. There are groups in Senegal building social centers. You really have to look at people who are trying to live and not necessarily trying to come up with the most advanced ideas. We need to de-emphasize the abstract and focus what is happening on the ground.

How can we bring all these different strands together? How can we bring in the Rastas? How can we bring in the people on the west coast who are still fighting the government strip-mining of indigenous land? How can we bring together all of these peoples to begin to create a vision of America that is for all of us?

Oppositional thinking and oppositional risks are necessary. I think that is very important right now and one of the reasons why I think anarchism has so much potential to help us move forward. It is not asking of us to dogmatically adhere to the founders of the tradition, but to be open to whatever increases our democratic participation, our creativity, and our happiness.

We just had an Anarchist People of Color conference in Detroit on October 3rd to the 5th. One hundred thirty people came from all over the country. It was great to just see ourselves and the interest of people of color from around the United States in finding ways of thinking outside of the norm. We saw that we could become that voice in our communities that says, "Wait, maybe we don't need to organize like that. Wait, the way that you are treating people within the organization is oppressive. Wait, what is your vision? Would you like to hear mine?" There is a need for those kinds of voices within our different communities. Not just our communities of color, but in every community there is a need to stop advancing ready-made plans and to trust that people can collectively figure out what to do with this world. I think we have the opportunity to put aside what we thought would be the answer and fight together to explore different visions of the future. We can work on that. And there is no one answer: we've got to work it out as we go.

Although we want to struggle, it is going to be very difficult because of the problems that we have inherited from this empire. For example, I saw some very hard, emotional struggles at the protests against the

Republican National Convention. But people stuck to it, even if they broke down crying in the process. We are not going to get through some of our internal dynamics that have kept us divided unless we are willing to go through some really tough struggles. This is one of the other reasons why I say there is no answer: we've just got to go through this. Our struggles here in the United States affect everybody in the world. People on the bottom are going to play a key role and the way we relate to people on the bottom is going to be very important. Many of us are privileged enough to be able to avoid some of the most difficult challenges and we will need to give up some of this privilege in order to build a new movement. The potential is there. We can still win—and redefine what it means to win—but we have the opportunity to advance a richer vision of freedom than we have ever had before. We have to be willing to try.

As a Panther, and as someone who went underground as an urban guerrilla, I have put my life on the line. I have watched my comrades die and spent most of my adult life in prison. But I still believe that we can win. Struggle is very tough and when you cross that line, you risk going to jail, getting seriously hurt, killed, and watching your comrades getting seriously hurt and killed. That is not a pretty picture, but that is what happens when you fight an entrenched oppressor. We are struggling and will make it rough for them, but struggle is also going to be rough for us too.

This is why we have to find ways to love and support each other through tough times. It is more than just believing that we can win: we need to have structures in place that can carry us through when we feel like we cannot go another step. I think we can move again if we can figure out some of those things. This system has got to come down. It hurts us every day and we can't give up. We have to get there. We have to find new ways.

Anarchism, if it means anything, means being open to whatever it takes in thinking, living, and in our relationships—to live fully and win. In some ways, I think they are both the same: living to the fullest is to win. Of course we will and must clash with our oppressors and we need to find good ways of doing it. Remember those on the bottom who are most impacted by this. They might have different perspectives on how this fight is supposed to go. If we can't find ways for meeting face-to-face to work that stuff out, old ghosts will re-appear and we will be back in the same old situation that we have been in before. You all can do this. You have the vision. You have the creativity. Do not allow anyone to lock that down.



# **“Anarcho-Pantherista”**

1995

In the Black Panther Party, when someone said, “Power to the People!” the response would be “ALL Power to the People!” After many years of political imprisonment, employing the easy-to-use Malcolm-Eldridge Educational Supercharger, that call/response would take on more anarchistic meaning. This is about my experience in the now as an anarchist (a baby one) within a generally hierarchical Panther formation.

It was just this year, Jan. 1995, that I decided to publicly identify myself as anarchist. In playing around I came up with a term to identify me fully: @narcho-pantherista (thinking about the word Sandinista, ha!). Though, just in fun, I decided to keep it. It’s me. Silly, anarchistic, for real.

As a politically active teen in the ‘60s, making it through that magnificent and turbulent time, I was ready when me and my Comrade (Jihad Abdul Mumit, now a POW in Lewisburg Stalag, Penn.) were first attracted to that image of Huey and Bobby. Black-bereted, black-jacketed, black on down to the boots. And strapped! Panthers. Yeah, let’s check them out.

Our nationalist and rebel politics began to evolve into something more revolutionary and focused. We learned ideology, organization, preparation, comradeship, daring. Once I began to get the picture, I was convinced: Panther revolution, lumpen-proletariat, urban guerrilla warfare, Serve the People survival programs, Wretched of the Earth, “L’il Red Book,” Panther sistas in leading functions, Victory...

In short, the Panthers helped me into “the process of becoming,” as to what a revolutionary dedicated to freedom, freedom, and more freedom was all about. One must never stop learning and growing and working for the People.

My 12+ years on the Malcolm-Eldridge Supercharger led me, in prison, to further my learning and understanding of so many things: Wilhelm Reich and the Frankfurt School of psychology, various schools of radical feminist thought and critique, and Paulo Freire’s methodology of community education and empowerment. And James Boggs kept me grounded in the power of the Black underclass in Babylon. In all, I was not only learning some heavy shit, but I was being challenged to give up certain old ways, beliefs, and mind-sets that were backwards and anti-

revolutionary.

At some point, while in the Marion stalag, a Panther and a stone-cold Sicilian revolutionary threw some anarchist literature on me. Got to tell the truth though, my Marxist-Leninist-Maoist teachings had already biased me against the shit. So I was quite reluctant to really check it out. But it helped that I loved them Brothers. Funny thing is, when you locked down in segregation for months and done read every muthafuckin' thing else, you get bored. After a while, you'll pick up and read toilet paper! What happened was that I did read the shit and regardless of what my Marxist-Leninist-Maoist authorities had said against it, this anarchism was raising some good points.

As I relaxed my mind-set, I learned more. Combined with the insights of the more progressive and radical psychologies and feminist critiques, things that I had experienced in the past and my understanding of movement history began to look different. Structure, sexism, authoritarian peer pressure against individuality, spontaneity, creativity and love. Come to find out that this guy named Bakunin had some valid criticisms of the god Marx, and Kropotkin was deep in Lenin's shit and Marxist revolution wasn't the only way to go.

Years before (before my kapture in 74), another Panther, Frankie Ziths had given me a mimeographed thing on the anarchist Makhno and his forces and their foul treatment by the Bolsheviks. Couldn't handle it then, but now 15 years later I read it again and again. Frankie was like that—very, very critical thinker. No respecter of titles. Practice counts. My Comrade passed before I could say thanks.

Anarchism came to mean the same long-range objective held by my revolutionary nationalist movement and the general radical movement as far as evolving or creating a communist society. The anarchist differed in terms of how to do it. Anarchism said, "Let's promote the People's self-directing and self-governing capacities now." Don't need no authoritarian political parties acting like parental control-freaks. People got brains. Remember, that's where we come from. "Have Faith in the People, Have Faith in the Party," say the Marxist-Leninist-Maoists. No! "Have Faith in the People" and let it stand. If any individual or group got something to offer from their experiences, expertise or "higher" learnings, then let the relationship to the People in struggle be one of facilitation, and not this arrogant leadership.

Mind-set from the old school is a muthafucka. There are times when new

knowledge can be so powerful that the learner experiences a sense of being overwhelmed. How do I convey all this so that it can be of help to others individually and organizationally. My concern? We gotta win. But only the People's full participation can bring true victory. And the People are real individual human beings, like me—with brains, desires, fears, angers, dreams, etc. Before coming out of prison in '85 I made a personal vow to never ignore this. I was coming out bringing my learnings in psychology, feminism, and anarchism. They were now a part of me.

The Black Panther Collective was formed about a year ago as a result of people in the slave quarters seeing the Black Panther newspaper. Many expressed an interest in the activities of the Black Panther Newspaper Committee, a formation of former members of the BPP. These mainly young brothas and sistas expressed a desire to wanna work Revolution in their respective slave quarters and do it in the spirit of the Panther as they understood it. So, BPNC/NY decided to call up them numbers and set the process going. I am proud to say that most of the ones who first stepped forward are still with the process. They're baaad and are revolutionaries after our own hearts, as indicated by the fact that we fight all the time (because they got minds of their own!). They wanted two things from us: (1) to be involved in community work, including political prisoner work, and (2) P.E., political education, including BP history and style of practice. We were more than happy to provide both. But this was, and still is, no easy process, because they demanded Leadership! Anarchism has taught me to pay particular attention to this concept and its political dangers to individuality, spontaneity, creativity, and the overall health and welfare of the Revolution for a truly free society.

Revolution is learning how to bring a large variety of personalities together into a powerful harmony. This harmony must lay down some general direction and get work done. It's never easy. It's struggle. It takes a lot of skill. The BP Collective was gonna learn this. We started off without a formal structure. We just called it and got it together. The Old Guard of BPNC too already had responsibilities to put out the newspaper and work to raise consciousness of our comrades who are STILL political prisoners. An informal structure, more or less leaderless, developed around this work with the BPNC encouraging others to join in. And they did!

The initial crew was baaad! Yeah. Sold the Black Panther like they owned it, and with spirit. Wasn't afraid to talk with people and engage them. Or challenge them for that matter. "Well, why don't you wanna buy the

paper? It's for you, Sista. Don't be afraid, Brotha. Don't wait for them to kick down your door..." Mm-m. Panther spirit.

So much work to be done. "There's a Political Prisoner meeting on blah-blah, at 7:00 PM. Those of you who are interested in working..." That's all. They were there. You should see them now with the FREE MUMIA work! We worked so much that we never got around to structure or structuring our activities and decision and direction-making processes. It was gonna cost us, and it did. But it had to happen.

Revolution, after defeat and years gone by, is as much psychological as it is formally political. Panthers, automatic members of the BPNC, came together after years in the absence of the intense, disciplined struggle that we once knew. We been through changes. We were still trying to gel our different personalities. But now it's structure time. The Collective is calling for leadership. It is time for the essential struggle to begin: one for clarity, uniformity of will, formal organization of BPC with ideology, a chain of command and rules. Oh god!

In the Collective, everyone is encouraged to speak one's mind. In the BPP, we practiced Mao's Combat Liberalism as best we could. It is still a good thing and not a bad thing. As an anarchist now, with other groundings in psychology and Feminism, I offer, when appropriate, my 2 cents on matters of structure, taking initiative to do things on one's own, and against sexism. A big part of the difficulty I have working my 2 cents is that People raised on hierarchy, authoritarian beliefs truly see such as natural. There's always gotta be leadership. I say why? Who says? What kind? Why assume that there's only one form of organizational structure? And what does it mean when our structure resembles the enemy's? As a member of this Collective body, I accept its general direction even if I am the minority member in my views. Because it is democratic enough to allow input, I can still raise my views, as can anyone. Oh yeah, I get frustrated and angry. But that's normal stuff in any grouping. I think that the BPC who are young-in-experience understand at this point that frustration and anger are part of the process. As we'd say in the Party, "It's a good thing not a bad thing." It's the only way we can pull a diverse group of people together. As one BPNC member said in referring to the Collective, "They are a bunch of crazy-ass muthafuckas," the kind of good human beings who make Revolution.

It's hard to feel comfortable if you truly believe that you see internal dangers in your group. I am one person. I guess I believe like anybody else that my critique is on-point, that my warning-signs should be heeded. But this is a body of people and though it may not be anarchist, it's democratic enough for me to feel that my 2 cents is valued.

My collective knows that I raise my voice against sexism. I talk revolutionary sexuality and lay out condoms on meeting tables. I'm always bringing reading material because I believe we must be encouraged to read, read, read. But I don't want to just get stuck off into Marxist stuff—"Lil' Red Book," etc. No matter how valuable they are. I've shared Lorenzo Komboa Ervin's (Black anarchist, former Black Panther, and now member of the Federation of Black Community Partisans) writings with them. Exposure to diverse views and critiques is what is needed. I am one of these diverse "elders," as they call us of BPNC. As the @narcho-pantherista I can only be me and give my best and hope that others see that my main concern is Revolution, ALL Power to the People, and victory over all our enemies, from people who oppose freedom to mind-sets that continue to hold on to anti-freedom, anti-revolutionary ideas.

The BPC is a spirited group of hard-ass revolutionaries. Already, on their own, tired of waiting for us (the leadership), they put a food program into motion on 116th St, and Adam Clayton Powell Blvd. in Harlem, the capital of this "captive nation" (I'm a revolutionary intercommunalist, personally, to add fuel to the fire). I say Right On! It's about initiative and I like theirs. The People are their own leaders, their own Liberators. I see myself as participant-facilitator. @narcho-pantherista, the highest stage of pantherism. ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE!

## **"Building a Non-Eurocentric Anarchism in Our Communities"**

Dialogue with Ashanti Alston

*The following is an interview with Ashanti Alston Omowali, an African descent anarchist activist, who started his political militancy back in the '60s in the Black Panther Party. He was also a member of the Black Liberation Army, and because of his revolutionary activities spent more than a decade in prison. In prison he moved forward to anarchism and after his release he has participated with numerous libertarian initiatives and publications, and is one of the founders of Anarchist People of Color (APOC), a network that brings together anarchists of colour in the remarkably racist US. Ashanti also participates in a number of initiatives ranging from solidarity with political prisoners in the US to the Institute for Anarchist Studies.*

*This interview was done on March 9th, 2009, during the time he spent in Ireland when he came as a speaker for the 2009 Dublin Anarchist Bookfair.*

## **How and why the idea of Anarchist People of Colour came about?**

In the US the anarchist movement I would say since the '90s it grew a lot and a lot of people wanted to know what it was about, including many people of colour, because the traditional revolutionary groups that were Marxist-Leninist or nationalists were not appealing to them for being so rigid in their ideology and the loyalty they wanted you to adhere to, it was something that a lot of folks did not want. But folks that were moving into anarchism from Black, Latino and Asian communities, and even indigenous communities, found that their experiences within anarchist groups were racist.

It may have been good in the sense that they were practicing direct democracy, or they would be active in the street demonstrations, but they thought themselves to be "exoticised" within these predominant white groups, because they were from African, Asian, Latino or Indigenous descent that they were treated as if they were so special, that wasn't a good experience. Or the racism of white anarchists was just too much to put up with, and people weren't fighting racism.

So at some point towards the late '90s, the call went out to have a conference that would be for anarchist of colour, anti-authoritarians of colour, or people who were interested in something beyond traditional ways of organisations, so in 2003 it was the first APOC conference. And I said about 300 people came to Detroit, Michigan, in the US, to a university called Wayne State University. And that was a great conference which allowed many of us to see each other for the first time, and we realized we had so much in common, but we needed to work from foundation where we knew that we would respect each other, and we'd have a way to work in our communities in a more wholesome way.

**You talk about having to face discriminatory or racist practices within the anarchist movement, which was often not explicit practices but part of a culture, we could say... how do you think that this racism that is entrenched in people's culture can be fought within the movement and within society at large?**

In the anarchist movement we were basically asking to white anarchists to deal with racism within anarchist organisation. Many of them were not understanding that being born in a racist society, and if you were born white in that society, you were not only being raised with a sense of superiority but that you have privileges, and we wanted them to face that fact in their interactions with us, because most of them from the anarchist movement come from privileged background. So deal with the fact that you have some behaviours that come up very offensively to us, that are very insulting to us, since they have never lived the type of circumstances in which we've had to live in, and we want us just to be with you and not recognize that when we go back to our



communities we are with our backs against the wall, but when we are with you things are pretty nice and you just want everything to always be pretty nice. We want to tell you that in the US you pretty much got communities of colour that are locked down. So we need to fight racism not only in the institutions, whether it is schools, around jobs or police brutality in communities of colour, but fight it within anarchist institutions, as a way to fight racism in the US in general, what's all still one struggle.

**Women found the same experience within the movement, and they were pushed to form women only groups. How do you feel that this relates to the fact that there are other types of oppression that interact with class struggle, but in which class struggle alone does not explain everything... I feel some sectors within the anarchist movement seem to be blind to these other forms of oppression, what do you think about it?**

Something I've learnt, and that I'm still learning by reading and listening to other people, is that we have to look at the fact that most of our understanding of anarchism comes from Europe. And I don't think that we realize that it may have taught us a lot, in terms of another way to live and organise, or how to be open to differences, but we don't really get that coming out of Europe it will also bring us a perspective on class struggle that they pretty much want to adhere to as if it was something Biblical, that if other struggles are anarchistic and they don't come out of working class struggles that does not make them any less anarchists because it is not workers taking it on. It may be peasants taking it on, it may be people tied to the land in other ways. So for me one cannot just read the anarchist classics coming out of Europe, but one has to learn from other people's living experiences and writings on their experiences. Even if those experiences and writings are not from people that say "I am an anarchist". But you can tell pretty much from their writings and experiences that these are anarchistic struggles, you know, that play a big part even today in being at the forefront of some of the most challenging struggles against the Empire.

**You have mentioned Chiapas as being a big influence to you. How do you think the struggle of the people of Chiapas relates to the type of anarchism you defend?**

I think the struggle of the Zapatistas played a big part because it made you realize that revolutionary thinking can come from many social categories... for instance, in Chiapas you are talking about the South East of Mexico, which is one of the poorest regions of Mexico, predominantly Mayan people that have been written off by capitalism and imperialism. And yet here there's a struggle that is producing the most cutting edge thinking on revolution today. To me the Zapatista struggle really made important, for example, not only ethnic community struggles, but the struggle of women, struggle in the universities, struggles in the cultural field of life, and how all of these are part of a larger picture. But when they say that we can create a world where many worlds exist, they also want you to recognize

that you are in a world where many worlds do exist and that no one world can come along and predominate over all the other ones, "I have the only solution, I have the only revolutionary way to go".

**You mention other important point, and it is that classic socialist thought has been a struggle for a hegemonic thought for a uniform culture, and yet your views come from the opposite view, that is diversity. How do you think the anarchist movement can shape this view of diversity with the need for unity of struggle, so we can talk of a movement that while having unity preserves this diversity?**

Well, it is interesting that some of the things that have allowed me to look at struggles around the world and even struggles in my own community differently, was me reading a lot of revolutionary thought that came out of some of the older liberation struggles and some of the most recent university struggles that may have taken place in France and Germany, so we are dealing with people like Michel Foucault, or we are dealing with German thinkers who were talking for example of hegemony and some other different concepts on the intersection of different oppressions and how we have to look at the world in a more complex way. What it tells me is that if anarchism wants to be vibrant, if anarchism is to remain vibrant it must be open to difference, it must be open to be enriched by other people's struggles, other people's thought, other people's practices which challenge even some of the core beliefs of anarchism proper.

So for me again the Zapatistas the thing around difference becomes so important, because you have to have struggles from people from different worlds, from different realities, yet we can figure out a way within the same space and push our commonalities forward but in a way that respects the individuality of the struggles. So if I'm an African in America, if I'm of African descent in New York, I want to be involved with the Mapuche, I want to be involved with the struggles in Africa, Asia, the Irish Republican movement, in a way that they all see me in the way I am, and I see them, and we realize that we can still move in a common way that brings down the Empires that affect all of our lives.

But we've to do it in a way that we don't have to submit any part of our identity that makes us who we are. We are not all workers, we are very much multifaceted people wherever we come from, but our specific histories and specific space in time, makes us who we are, and with that comes out our richness and it has to be respected. We don't have to submit who we are like the Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution and even I would say the Cuban Revolution, and all the major so called revolutions wanted people to submit to a mass line, and if you did not fit there, if you were still living in traditional

ways or what they may call the jungle, tribal ways, some State power is going to say no, you are coming to the modern world or we will wipe you out. Today we see that that's not the way we want to go.

**What you say makes a lot of sense in terms of learning from other people's experiences. Anarchism was a very strong movement earlier in the XXth Century, then it declined and now it is certainly coming back with great strength at potentials. But somehow it seems that we largely ignore what happened in terms of struggles in the middle... Yes, we are going back to the Spanish Revolution, to the Russian Revolution but we forget that in the meantime the whole of the African Continent was in revolution. Yes, they did not lead to anarchist socialism, as neither Russia nor Spain did, but something came out of it in terms of experience, lessons, and a lot of other stuff... do you think there are experiences such as this that could actually enrich anarchist thought today?**

It's like you say. When you can get away from all of the classic struggles that are pushed over and over for you to learn about, whether is China, Russia or Spain, we forget that there are struggles that are right around you most likely, or in local areas all around the world that provide examples. So for example in the US those of us in the Black nationalist movement, in the Black liberation movement, we studied the examples of the Maroon communities from the North American to the South American continent, of Africans who broke away from slavery, who were in many cases able to hook up with indigenous communities and formed free communities, communities in resistance, of resistance. They are worth studying. For instance, in Africa you also have the Igbo women's war in 1929. If one wants to see an anti-authoritarian struggle led by women against British colonialism, you have to start studying the Igbo women's war of 1929 in Nigeria.

These are just examples of how people dealt with their economic needs, the needs to feed themselves. In places in Africa where you have borders, you have folks that out of necessity, who say, well, fuck the borders. We want to trade with folks across the border because we were connected with them until the Europeans put up an artificial borderline to our lands. But in them defying the borders they are creating new anti-authoritarian experiences where they say, we don't need borders. Borders are oppression. The Chicanos say all the time about the border between Mexico and the US that it is not them crossing the border it is the border crossing them. Because that border was artificially border was put there to oppress them and now the US has the balls to say that Mexicans coming over into the US is illegal, when they are really coming to what is historically their own land.

So there are many things we need to re look and study, and not just confine ourselves to certain areas that we feel can only give us an example of some kind of proper anarchist struggle or anarchist revolution.

**In the US Anarchist Tradition you have some remarkable anarchists who were also people of colour... I'm thinking of people like Ben Fletcher, Lucy Parsons, who also was a woman... do you think that they made a sensitive contribution to the movement as such, what would you take from their experience and teachings?**

Ben Fletcher you know is someone like workers in the US still don't know anything about him, neither do they don't know about Lucy Parsons. But Ben Fletcher was part of the IWW, the Industrial Workers of the World, an organisation which was so powerful in the US like in the 1910s, '20s and probably up to the 30s... and they were very effective because here there was a revolutionary movement that also fought to include many different ethnic groups, you know. So they had indigenous folks who were members of the IWW, they had folks of African descent, they had folks who spoke Spanish, the Italians were coming, everybody was making their way to the IWW. But a lot of people don't know that this movement waged a fierce battle against what can be called the labour aristocracy up to the government and the corporations at the time, who were brutally ruthless in their repression.

One of the things about Lucy Parsons that many people don't know is that she was a woman of mixed heritage... I mean, she was Mexican, African and Indigenous, and although at a time in her life she denied to have an African ancestry, to many people at the time it was obvious that she did. Yet, she was a woman who was extraordinary and played an extraordinary part in the growth of the anarchist movement within the US. She did things so outrageous as to marry Albert Parsons, who was a white man who was a part of the Confederacy, that was on the side of the racist who wanted to enslave Black folks, but at some point, like the soldiers who went to Vietnam, he came into a consciousness that it was the US and the capitalists who were the enemy, so he and Lucy Parsons married and they moved to Chicago. Both of them become outspoken proponents of anarchism for working class people. Lucy Parsons even though she may have had her problems with people calling her Black, she still spoke against lynching and for the rights of people of African descent in the US. So she goes down history in the anarchist movement as being a key figure, but few people to this day know about Lucy Parsons. But she was a courageous woman up to the day she day.

But it's like for her, Ben Fletcher, all these other people... there was also a very important Native American that was assassinated, but there's a lot of other heroes and heroines we need to know about, especially folks of colour, to see that there were many people that were inspired by anarchist ideas, what it basically is "we don't need bosses even though they should be considered themselves as revolutionary bosses; we need to be collective, we need to be communal, we need to be as they say today horizontal in all that we do". So I

am looking for ways today to spread information about people like Ben Fletcher and Lucy Parsons.

**You know better than me, but the two key figures of the African-American movement seem to be Malcolm X and Martin Luther Kin... what would you get from them and learn from them? And what would you reject from them?**

They were definitely two very key leaders. I would also include among them people like Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer and a few others... Ella Baker was key in the early Civil Rights Movement where she pushed for the students and the young folks to reject the older Black leadership that were pretty much held by the Black ministers, the preachers, you know, because they kept holding the students back. And Ella Baker, who was an old woman at the time, told the students: "you must become your own leadership" and she pushed for a kind of leadership that was community based. She wanted people to get away from the charismatic preachers or the leadership of the educated ones. Fannie Lou Hamer because she was just this poor Black woman who got involved with the Civil Rights Movement and became such a dynamic leader, because she brought everything she learned from being just a regular community person, a church person, in to the movement, what meant that she cared about people.

Malcolm X and Martin Luther King had a relationship with them. One of the preachers that Ella Baker criticized was actually Martin Luther King! Because he was part of that preacher leadership, no matter how great he was in many other ways. And here you have Ella Baker telling the students "be your own leaders, no matter how brilliant and charismatic they are, be your own". But Martin Luther King was great in other ways too. Because, just like Malcolm, they both showed that when they were challenged by a reality that they found hard to accept, they were willing to look at it and change their thinking and change their ways on it. So when Martin kept confronting the failure of the non-violent movement, he had a key thinking about the role of violence. When he was challenged to stop being so local and to start looking at the international scene, he began to look at the Vietnam war. When he was challenged to look at the role of workers, or the activity of workers, he began to support workers. And those three things, how he began to oppose the Vietnam war, how he began to support workers, and it was obvious even to the FBI that he was rethinking his position on non-violence, a lot of us believe that it was then when the system had him killed.

Similarly, Malcolm challenged us even like not to confine ourselves to thinking about civil rights. Malcolm said civil rights is when you keep everything in the hands of the enemy, we got to get out of that, we need to get our own thinking. Malcolm X also challenged us to think that if you want to be free, you must be willing to do it by any means necessary. This "any means necessary" part became so popular, because it gave us a way to really think that if we want to be free, even if that means bring down the American system, we got to be willing to



engage our life in that direction. But Malcolm's life too was one where when he saw that he was wrong, he had the courage to face it, admit it and move on. So many of us look at Malcolm as someone who's not that egotistical to keep on going on one path, even when it is clear that this path don't work. When his mentor, Elijah Muhammad of the Nation of Islam, started to obviously betray his own teachings, it took Malcolm a way, but when finally he had to face it, he had to reject the practices of his mentor and move on his own as it was necessary. But Malcolm was so important with moving people towards revolutionary thinking that when he went to Africa and other parts of the world, he came back talking about socialistic revolutions. He brought back messages saying that people were moving more towards socialism and getting away from capitalism. And that was important for us to know, because most of us did not think about that. We just wanted to get rid of racism, but he got us to see that there was a connection between racism and capitalism, that you can't get rid of one, without getting rid of the other. So Malcolm was really important.

If the two of them had come together in some kind of unity, we don't know how it may have changed the course of our struggle, but we can't live with that now, we just got to learn from them and just keep moving and learn from our own mistakes and go forward and figure out how we are going to win. They are dead, everything is on us now, the future is on us, but their lives they still are here, close to us.

**If there's something you think was a crucial learning in your period in the Panthers, what is it?**

Ok, then that would be sitting in prison as I did. This is the long stretching prison, this is like 12 years. And all that time you are turning that prison into a university; you got to think, you got to reflect on the past. It helped me to see the strengths and the weaknesses of the Black Panther Party (BPP). And I think that both of them are key to me to this day, because I think they are still relevant today.

The strength of the BPP was that we were willing to think about the revolution. We understood the role of criticism and struggle and we were willing to go into our communities with programmes. We were not the intellectual types that all we did was being intellectual towards each other, day in and day out. If you got something that you think is good, you put it into practice. Practice will tell you whether it works or not, if it doesn't, you go back to the drawing board.

I think the weaknesses of the BPP was that we were young, that our enemy was very experienced and that we did not have a strong enough what may be



called a “decolonisation programme” whereas while we are doing this work in our communities, while we are combating our enemies, that we are consciously trying to work this system out of our bodies and out of our minds, and out of our most intimate relationships. Because I think those are the areas that our enemies use to bring us down: the sexism, the authoritarianism, the fears of freedom, the fears of death, all those things. We didn’t have ways to deal with those areas and I think it weakened us a lot.

**You are talking about the intimate relationship between capitalism and racism, sexism and other types of oppression... I think it’s a tough one, because they are not necessarily linked in very obvious ways at all times. So do you think there is any single main link between them? How do they interact within a capitalist framework? How can you bring together a programme to end exploitation while at the same time finish all kinds of oppression what is the main purpose of anarchism?**

Now, going back to prison, I did a lot of reading into revolutionary and feminist psychology, on Critical Theory that gave a lot of understanding on authoritarianism and a lot of the writers had been Jews who were put away in concentration camps. But what it helped me to understand, and this goes back to Franz Fanon, is that oppression gets internalized, that you are not just fighting a system out there, outside of you, is like when the anarchist say “you have to kill the cop inside your head”. The capitalist system is also inside of you. So I think one of the most important lessons while in prison was thinking and reflecting on the movement, was that we have to find ways to combat the system inside of us, the enemy inside of us, as it comes out in our relationships. And I’m talking of relationships very broadly, because it is not only family, personal, intimate, friend relationships, but is also your relationships with your comrades, and what ways do you act out oppressions within your relationships.

So it is important, of course, to be anti-sexist, but we can’t just take an anti-sexist verbal position; we got to really understand what is it about us men and the way we act that shuts down women, and shuts down people who are less powerful, because it also shuts down children and it gets into an ageist thing as well. If we say that we want to end white supremacist society and a lot of times you look at all the ethnic groups which are not part of the white race as inferior to you, but you may not realize it, you are doing it in an unconscious way. So when we organise, even the most simple type of organisation, a mutual aid organisation, we need to be conscious what we do with each other within that organisation that axe out the system that we are trying to bring down.

So if I’m in an organisation with women, I want to be aware of my sexism. If I’m in an organisation that is mixed in terms of ethnic groups, I want to

be conscious of who has been historically silent within that group. If I'm in an organisation that has queer folks I want to be very mindful, if I'm not a queer person, what do I do that shuts that person down and make them feel unsafe. Because as an anarchist I want to be in organisation that in some way create the kind of world we want. So if I'm raising my kids, I don't want to raise them traditionally, the same way my parents raised me... I want to be very careful that I'm raising them in a manner as free as possible, no matter how insane that may be sometimes, but I want to make sure that their individuality and initiative is respected. I'm going to be careful, I'm the parent. But I'm going to make sure also that I don't make them just obey me, as an authoritarian preparation for the world we are going to release them into. We want to raise anti-authoritarian children, we want to raise children that have a deep love and respect for life. And at the same time we have to recover those same things within ourselves because we never realize how much we loss them.

**How do you think that Anarchist People of Colour can play a positive role to make this movement you talk about a living reality?**

I think APOC want to do two things: we want to push white anarchists and anarchists in general to deepen their understanding of oppression and liberatory practices. But also, within our communities, we know we got to deal with some oppressions that other folks don't necessary have to deal with: for example, in the Black community I have to deal with the low self-esteem of my community that has a history of four hundred years of being enslaved and having every American racist institution directed towards belittling us from the moment we are born. So it makes my struggle in many ways like a national struggle, you know, because there are certain things we need to do to help to raise our self-esteem and we need to see that we can self-organised without any white person involved at the same time we are always open to any kind of coalition work with any other groups, with white groups.

I think also in the US, anarchist of colour we can lead the way in terms of really being pretty good at being conscious on the oppressions that we act out on other people. So we try to be very conscious of shutting down women, shutting down queer folks, shutting down young folks. We seem to be more at to want to be very active in our communities, we seem to have more of a sense that our backs are up against the wall, so that we don't have all the safeguards to fall back on that many other groups may have. But we want other groups, especially white groups, to know that if our backs are against the wall, our tactics and strategy may be more aggressive at points. But whatever they be, we want our white comrades support. We don't want

intellectual privileged ones to be in a position that they say, "well we don't like what you are doing, so therefore we are not going to support you; we don't like that you are going to try to stop the police from shooting you down in the streets with guns by arming yourselves". We want them to understand that whatever we decide to do, we have brains, we are intelligent as anybody else and we can figure out our own way.

Some of that they should have learnt from studying to liberation movements of the past and is that every person has a right to self-determination, every people has to be respected and can figure out their way forward, whether it fits other groups prescriptions or understandings or not. Every form of free society is not going to be the same, yet we hope that every free society is one that does not allow any small group to put the masses of folks in a position of being exploited or oppressed again. But I envisage a society that allows Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Bikers societies, whatever, to be able to create their own societies yet to be still part of the same community and that we'll use resources in a respectable way, that doesn't put anybody else at a disadvantage, because we may live over a field of uranium or oil... we can think about those things now, but we don't want to be in a position where those who feel they have all the intellectual readings on a particular thing can tell us what to do.

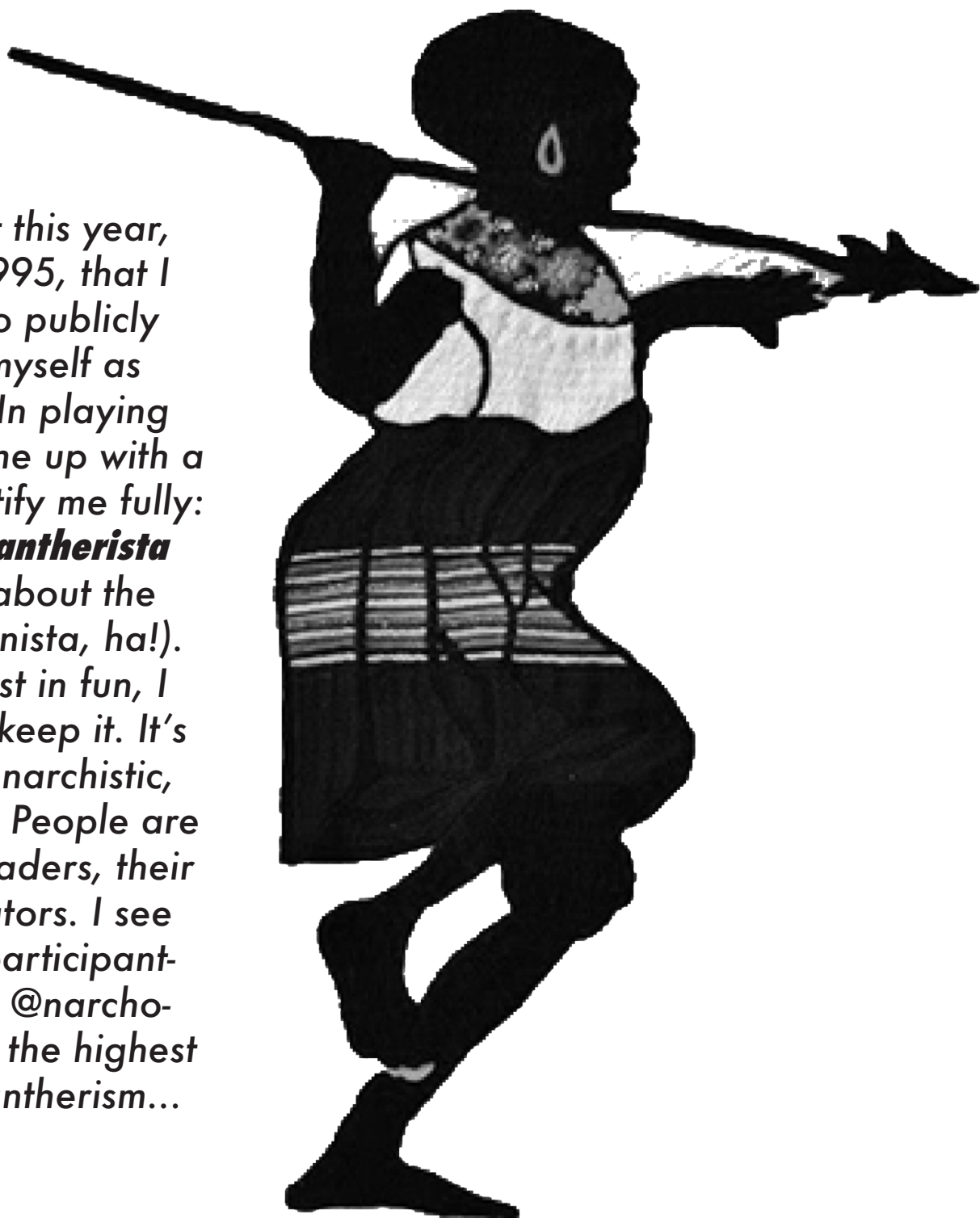
I think the important thing is that folks understand that anarchism has to be vibrant, open to change, if it is ever going to be relevant... it has to be like jazz, I speak of US jazz a lot. Jazz comes out of African communities that are on the bottom in the US, where we were able to take nothing and create something. Obviously, part of the European experience and part of the Black experience come together and create this thing called jazz, which is improvisation. You know, for me is nothing but anarchy. People in the anarchist movement need to understand that anarchism takes different forms all around the world and all throughout history, whether they use the name or not. If we get holed up on whether a group publicly identifies as anarchist or not, we are no different from the Christians and the nationalists, and others who we are so quick to put off. I come from a Baptist family and I tell people that I'm close to the church, even if I'm an atheist, because it is very communal and that is even with the minister. If people can't see anarchism in their daily lives, act it out in many different ways, how people live and treat each other, we will never see how we can seize the moment, you know. It will be what we need to do, as what Malatesta said: it ain't important that everybody joins your organisation, but is important that we raise consciousness among people that they have to be their own liberators, their own leaders, their own authority and create conditions where never, never again, some people, because of money, because of the military, or politics can control our lives again.

"It was just this year, January 1995, that I decided to publicly identify myself as anarchist. In playing around I came up with a term to identify me fully:

**@narcho-pantherista**

(thinking about the word Sandinista, ha!).

Though, just in fun, I decided to keep it. It's me. Silly, anarchistic, for real. The People are their own leaders, their own Liberators. I see myself as participant-facilitator. @narcho-pantherista, the highest stage of pantherism...



***ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE!"***

