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Interview with Anarchist Former BLA-Member Ashanti Alston

Treyf Podcast

July 28, 2020

Ashanti Alston is a father, an anarchist, a prison abolitionist, and a former member of the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army. He was a political prisoner for over a decade and continues to work with the Jericho Movement to free all political prisoners. Treyf Podcast talked with Ashanti about his life, his political work with the BPP & BLA, state repression, prison abolition, and his thoughts on the current political moment.

Ashanti Alston: My name is Michael Ashanti Alston and I'm sixty six years old, father of five. The two young ones here are seven and ten. I'm a former member of the Black Panther Party in Plainfield, New Jersey. I went through a lot of repression from the state so I went underground and was captured. Did a total of 12 years in prison. But in the course of that, I continued to evolve towards a more anarchist perspective and a more abolitionist perspective. And so from years and years in New York, I moved to Providence, Rhode Island, got married, and that's our ten and seven year old.

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I am a guy with a sense of humour. I am also a guy that likes to reach out to those in our community who have been silenced, because I know that we all need to figure out ways to participate in this struggle to change the world. And that's pretty much me. If people know me, they know that I still believe in revolution, I'm still an anarchist, I'm still doing what I can to change this empire that we live in right now so that people can be free in the many different ways that we deserve. And that's me. And I'll leave it at that for now.

You grew up in Plainfield, New Jersey, what what was it like growing up in New Jersey?

Plainfield is a small town in New Jersey but there was a demarcation, a clear demarcation where the Black community resided and the white, the larger white community. And I think that what was important about being small is how there was a lot of community. We knew everybody in the neighbourhood, the kids, we could hang out, you know, go around the corner, visit people, play with the other kids and be regulated by parents, other parents, and all that stuff there. But what began to happen as I got older was realizing that there's this thing called racism, you know. Police who were always telling you what to do. And then being able to watch the news. That on the news was the Civil Rights Movement, and people fighting back. People marching, people doing sit ins, all this stuff here. And for me, trying to understand that as this kid was profound. Because we knew that this was for us and it just didn't seem right that it was getting attacked, you know. Well even in Plainfield, a very racist town, there was a rebellion in Plainfield in conjunction with other major cities like Detroit and Newark, places like that. But Plainfield's was significant in the sense that in the area that it jumped off was the area that I had formerly lived in, and still had deep connection with people there. But the police was harassing someone and people just came to the aid of this person that was harassed. And it got violent. Folks found this gun manufacturing place close by and they went in there and they just ripped off

that may be more of an incentive to just keep on pushing forward because you don't want to let them win and that you really believe in this cause that you're fighting for. So when you are involved in struggle and it is so different now because of all the ways that they can hear you, see you, know what you're communicating through, all the social medias, you know, there's a lot that they can do with that information and it can be frightening. It's a challenge all the time, to say that you're going to continue on in the face of surveillance and repression. That you're still going to go on, and you're still going to try to figure out how to move forward, how to stay connected with people. I mean, even if you think of Martin Luther King, Martin Luther King is like, yo, I'm a break law. The law is unjust, I'm a break the law. People need to get that in their head. Like Eldridge would say, it's just a piece of paper and it will burn, you know. Break out of the mindset that there is something about this system that is overwhelming and we can't do anything about it. Yes, you can. Yes, you can.

So, before we wrap up, we talked about this a bit earlier, but looking back now with different eyes, do you have reflections on how organizing was done in the Black Panther Party or the Black Liberation Army that you think young people today should know about or be thinking about?

Well, the Black Panther Party aboveground is basically what I just said about face to face. In that you go in that community, that was the thing, when we went to community as these teenagers, it's like we're meeting people. I mean not so much meeting because if it's in your own neighbourhood, you already know the people. But you're meeting them from a different perspective now, you are this person that aspires to be a revolutionary, that wants to change the world and want to do it with others, you know? But you have got to meet people and meet people where they're at. And they're going to meet you where you're at. People who come to understand that there's a need for other things to happen off the grid, if you will, you still need to be face to face. You still need to develop relationships that are authentic, you still need to do it with the mindset that all the legalities in the world do not hold you back. By that I mean you don't allow the mystery of the system, the Big Brother thing of the system, to prevent you from being daring, from moving forward. That part becomes very important. We always knew because veterans in the Panther Party had said that you know, man, they're going to tap your phones, they're going to follow you, and Jihad, at some point, got his FBI files. And then you began to see the little things that they were doing, from mail, to surveillance of people who we knew, harassing employers of other folks who was involved with us to maybe get them fired. But I think what is important for folks today is to know that a lot of that is done also to scare you. To make you believe that Big Brother is everywhere, Big Brother sees what you can do and can stop whatever you want to do. And it makes you very paranoid. And for some, you know, the paranoia can be so great they're like, I can't take this, I'm out. And they drop out and they go back to their lives. Others, you know,

crates of M1 rifles. And so the police, when they tried to get control of this area, they was run out. And then the state troopers came, and they were run out. And then when the National Guard came it was a stand off. But I lived about maybe half a mile away and everybody was on their porches, or in the streets, you know, listening to the gunfire or trying to stay up on the radio news what was going on. But they had blocked off certain streets right at the intersection from where we lived. And at some point there's tanks there, there are soldiers there, and they're stopping all the black cars, but they're letting all white cars go. When they stopped the black cars, they are harassing the drivers and the passengers. Then I could see the rage building up in my older brothers and his crew and others. And then folks was taking off, going to join this rebellion. But for me, as just becoming a teenager, it was profound in the sense that I see my people fighting back. So not only on television, but here in my very neighborhood. It was my entry into what I wanted to do with my life. I want to be someone who fights back. I want to be someone who organizes. I want to be someone who's conscious. And it's similar stuff that goes on even today. And one never knows how those circumstances is going to shape anybody. But oppression breeds resistance for real. It is very true.

For sure. And so you joined the Black Panther Party as a young 17 year old and you started a chapter while you were still in high school. What was it like doing that when you were so young? And what did the BPP work look like at this time?

Oh man. Actually I think that, I'm going to mention one of my comrades, Jihad. Because it was me and him, high school students, who wanted to do this thing. In my memory, how we even came to know the Black Panther Party was that we was going past a store that had a news magazine rack outside, and I think we saw one of them news magazines with a picture on the front cover with these Black Panthers, someone with that traditional, you know, the iconic black beret, black leather jacket, and we wanted to know

more about it, and we asked his father. So his father would take us, without my parents knowing, to the local offices, Panther offices in Jersey City, Newark, and in Harlem. And so we would go to the office and we could ask the questions, we could pick up literature, all this stuff. And then sometimes be able to come back and attend political education classes and stuff. It got to the point where they felt that it was okay for us to sell the newspapers. And Panthers would come from New York and other places, and kind of walk us through what it was to be a Panther, how to sell the newspapers, you know, how to organize and things like that. And it was very, very helpful because it was teaching you, while you're right there, like you're in the community, you're going to watch them, they're going to go up to someone and start to have a conversation. And it was all around how they talked, and the respect they gave people, which we were later to find out that a lot of it came from the Red Book, how to be respectful to the people. That it was very important to have a relationship with respect with people in the community so that you could have these conversations and hopefully move people towards organizing. So once we was kind of on our own, then we were active in the high schools. I actually ran for vice president of the student council on a very Eldridge Cleaver influenced speech, and got elected. Jihad was one of the leaders of the Black Student Union. Now, you're talking high school, you're talking about Black Student Unions in the high schools already, which was really kind of rare, but this was this growing movement. And even for people to accept my speech, it surprised both of us. But then as people started getting interested in it, from friends to others who wanted to be a part of this, we was able to at a certain point get an office and start a free lunch program, because we started in the summer. We had another storefront where we had a free clothing program, we continued to sell the newspapers, we continued to be in the streets, we continued to help people confront everything from police brutality to rent strikes and participate in the anti-war movement. And that was our high school regimen. And

recovery, I'm working on it because it is so deep. But I want to be a part of that too because I constantly deal with my own stuff and I want to be better on that. I want to be a role model if I can, in the best way I can. So it's very important for me.

What what do you most want to communicate to young people who are getting involved in the struggle today?

Oh, man, it is to dream and envision. To be ready to connect with other people in ways that builds the power of the people. And I mean, I'm just really keeping it simple like that. Because right now, you know, for a long time before this COVID stuff, we was all very critical of how too much social media, too much, you know, we ain't doing nothing face to face. That's my anarchism, face to face. So, once this thing is over, that has got to be the thing. We have got to come together, see each other's faces and figure out how to transfer all the stuff we've been doing on social media now and when we get in the streets, how to put it into movements in our communities now, and see each other. Do not just go back to just social media. These young people are courageous, man. And I admire them. It blows my mind seeing what they're doing. And I know they're doing it on a lot of different levels other than what we see on television. And that goes from land projects that people are doing to food sovereignty folks, to folks who are working on healing in times of this crisis. So, on many levels, as you go to figure it out, just know that the power of the people can change this world. Mind that we're on Turtle Island and like, man, we got to figure out how to do this in a way that gets this Empire off the back of the turtle. You know, it's like, whatever you do, you think about those most impacted: First Nations, Black folks, brown folks, poor folks, trans folks. Check in, let's be there for each other so that we're just not doing things off of the top. That is our strength, that is our power, transformation is there. But that's the very thing that the system will work against, to keep us like at each other's wits end, to keep us not caring. We can pull this off, and man, our children, we got these children, we got to do it for them.

pared for that and you don't have ways to deal with this thing in this world, who you are, you can sink. You need community, you need ways of reaching those parts of yourself that you may not have even done. And I say spiritual, but if people have secular ways of doing it, right on. But just know that we are in this world, you got to figure out how to hold it together. And keep this movement building.

And and I imagine you're also in a different role now than than you've been in the past.

How do you think your relationship to struggle has changed since organizing with the Black Panther Party in the BLA when you were younger?

I'm an at home dad (laughs). I am an at home dad, my son is ten my daughter is seven. Whole different reality. My wife is a professor, like I said before, an abolitionist. So, I was used to being more mobile and more engaged with other people, but now I'm 66 years old. I'm still learning to get used to struggling, being a part of this movement, from a different location. Realizing the importance of parenting, good parenting, realizing the importance of having good relations, good communications with your children, with your wife, with your community. And being able to even, in a sense, be an elder to others in the movement that may want advice on things or my participation on things. I was just invited last week from a young brother who I know, who wanted to know if I will be a part of their men against patriarchy group. And I've been a part of groups before. And man, it's so difficult because I always feel like if you're going to be a part of this, you gotta be willing to open up and share some things. And a lot of times when men are together, we get real theoretical instead of just getting real deep, you know? And so, I'm like, yeah, I'll be a part of this because I feel like not only do I need, and I think men need things like that all the time, because it's just like racism, you know, it's not something that you get rid of. I think it's almost like being in Narcotics Anonymous or Alcoholics Anonymous, man, you just gotta say, you know, I'm in

because we started in the summer, we was up early opening that office. I, at some point, was pretty much the first person you would meet when you came into office and I would give you my spiel on, you know, what the Black Panther Party was about and some of the things you could get involved with. And other folks did other things, from the cooking to the serving kids and the free clothing program where people would donate clothes. And this was basically 80 or 90 percent high school students, and several adults, including Jihad's father. But we understood what it meant to be this Panther at a very dangerous time. Because this is like 1970, '71, so you're really talking about sixteen going into seventeen. And me and Jihad walked the streets; sometimes, we had encounters, police want to harass us about something and we would just stand up to them like nope, you're not going to do this, you're not going to do that. Sometimes they may lock us up. And there was counter-intelligence program that was very effective even at the time with creating dissension within the ranks, causing loss of fundings that we were getting because there was court cases, there was bails that had to be raised. Everything that was really affecting, you know, what the Panthers was trying to do with the survival programs. In fact, some of the chapters, like in Jersey City and Newark was really doing bad, they didn't have enough fundings to maintain the buildings a lot of times.

And did your parents ever get involved? How did they feel about you being part of the party?

So, my family, I'm the baby of the family. I got two brothers and two sisters. There was my mother, father and my grandmother. And though they were very worried about their baby boy, they knew that I was fighting for something important that they also agreed with. We all loved the Civil Rights Movement. You know, everybody loved Martin Luther King and everything being done. And I'm very grateful that family, though worried about me, never left my side, that their love was always there. And I know that that helped make me who I am today. But my parents, I kind of took

it as they wasn't supporting me, they wasn't with me. It wasn't until later sitting in prison that I like, they were so worried about what was going to happen to me that I was misreading it as they were against me. But they didn't want to see their baby boy getting killed, you know, or at least getting seriously hurt.

In your last year of high school, you and Jihad were targeted for your organizing, you were put in jail for over a year. Can you talk a bit about what happened?

Yeah. So some of the things that we did as Young Panthers that was not necessarily appropriate Panther behavior was burglaries. Sometimes, some of us would do burglaries, the young folks, because if the adults knew they would have shut that stuff down. But we would go into the white communities, the kind of middle upper class communities and do these burglaries, and we would get merchandise, take it to the fence, get money, and then go do some shopping for the lunch program. And it just happened that on one occasion where we got caught, we were going to court, this is our first month in senior year in high school, and it was at that point that this cop had got killed. And so when we went in to the court for the burglaries, they grab us as soon as we walked in the door and charged us with the killing of this cop. We were the first teenagers in New Jersey to be tried as adults and we were also the first, I believe, teenagers who were facing the death penalty. And it was obvious that it was me and Jihad that they chose because we were the main organizers, we were the main force behind that chapter coming together and the activities going on. So, our families was able, somehow, to get decent lawyers. Our family, my family particularly, was able to get one of the top notch lawyers in New Jersey, who I believe, just saw the facts of the case and he knew this was a classic frame up. How my family was able to pull it off, I don't know. But when we had these lawyers, they were able to show that this was a classic frame up. And this was a fourteen month thing, the last four months was the trial. But all white jury. We said classic frame up or not, we need to get out of here. And that jury surpris-

they've got to co-opt it. So I'm watching, you know, like, okay, there's defund, then there's dismantle. And I'm like, okay, is that within the system you're going to defund? Is that within the system that you're going to dismantle? It makes me nervous. When newscasters and politicians and wannabe politicians can start using that same language, I'm nervous because I know they're going to take them same terms and they're going to redefine them. So, it's the hope that these folks who are in the street who are really in the forefront of all of this, can be cognizant of techniques to co-opt, take over, and keep it within the system. And that's my fear, that may happen. And if it happens, you know, it may possibly be a setback, but it also may just lay the foundation for the next phase that will go even further after people kind of sit back and learn from mistakes. Because that's what we did and we tried to do too. So, even here in Providence, I mean, they're on it, man. And you can see from the police reactions and stuff that they are nervous, they're scrambling. And you look around the country, the government, police departments, they are nervous and they're scrambling. But then there's other things they know to put in place to regain control. And we have to be smart enough to know how to block their efforts. And if we can't do that, how do we still put ourselves in a better position to recover and be able to go further forward as the future comes? So, this is really, listen, I've never seen anything like this in my life. And sometimes, people, they ask me because I'm an elder now and I've been through the '60s rebellion and all that stuff. But it's like, there's been nothing like this. This COVID thing is keeping us locked down, yet people are still going to the streets. They are risking not only their lives from this virus but from these vicious police and armed citizen militia folks and other things like that. It is an exciting time, but with it is the dangerousness of it all. And it's the hope that they can have multi-dimensional ways of holding themselves together. And I say multi-dimensional because there's that spiritual part, you know. This is a hurtful thing, it harms you with what this system does. And if you're not pre-

going to die inside. Which is the reality that our movements were destroyed and stuff like that. And it takes many different strategies and you hope that you hit on something that will start to garner attention to their plight and help to get them out. But the reality is it's not there right now. So those who are in and kind of accept that they're going to die, they just want to know, will you continue the struggle? They know the deal, they know how powerful this system is. They also still deep down believe in the power of the people and that there is what keeps him going a lot of times. How folks can be decades in segregation or isolation and still holding firm to their beliefs, still being able to believe that victory is possible. And it holds them together. Like the Angola 3 and folks like that. So we want them out. We want Jalil Muntaqim out. We want David Gilbert out. We want Chip Fitzgerald out. We want all those folks out, whether the animal liberation movement, the Earth First! movement folks, folks that are in there for hacking for political reasons, whatever. Jericho has a long list of folks. And then there's the Anarchist Black Cross, you know. There's folks and we've got to figure out how to get them back where they need to be.

So, in addition to the broad struggle to free political prisoners, you've also been involved in the fight for prison abolition.

You were part of Critical Resistance. I believe you were their Northeast regional coordinator at one point.

A long time ago! (laughs)

What has it been like to see the concept of prison abolition mainstreaming right now, being demanded by the current uprising?

It is exciting! And like I said, my wife who is an abolitionist and teaches from that perspective, her abolition deepened my understanding of abolition, even from Critical Resistance days. But for me, there is another part that is like nervous about it. Because you listen to the language that people are using around it and you know that the government, their objective if they can't crush it,

ingly came back with a not guilty verdict. And so we were free. But what they did to me and Jihad did make a lot of people back up. And that kind of was the end of that phase and another phase would come after me and Jihad kind of left Plainfield and then I came back.

Right. And so before we get to that next phase, I just want to talk a little bit more about the repression that was going on at that time. I've read things about how the police were poisoning the food in the free breakfast program, I think it was the New York chapter?

Yes, the Harlem office.

Yeah and things like the infiltration and the assassinations that were happening, could you talk a bit to this? Just to give people a sense of the conditions that an underground was growing out of at that time.

Right. And I'm glad you asked that question. For people to understand why someone goes underground. Like an Assata Shakur. And even from Assata's story, she'll tell you that, you know, she didn't have any intentions of going underground, she wanted to do the community work in the Panthers. But all around you, you start seeing your comrades fall, from your local base to nationally and sometimes internationally, you see these things happening. You see what happens to Bobby Seale, Huey P. Newton, the leadership. You done read the papers about what happened to Fred Hampton. But there's all these, even those, as more nationally known ones, there's all these local battles on too. Like Jersey City, the chapter in Jersey City, was virtually at war with the local police department to the point that there was shootouts between the two. But, you know, like as a parent with kids that may be involved with the programs, especially like the free lunch program, free breakfast programs, and stuff like that, or political education classes, at some point, the parents got to decide that they can't have themselves or their children in this dangerous, growing dangerous environment. So, for Panthers, there was also the feeling like we need

to have some kind of organized response to the militarization of the police, using that militarization to actually start advancing on community organizing from Panthers and other groups. That their thing is that they want control back, that they want that fear back in place over the community. So, Huey Newton and others from the beginning of the Black Panther Party understood that there was a need for an underground, which came to be known as the Black Liberation Army. It was felt that there was a need to be able to actually defend our community. People understood that if one is going to make revolution, if one is going to create self-determining areas in their neighborhoods, then one must be willing to defend it by any means necessary. So, folks were already establishing places to train people in the proper use of weapons, from the respect of weapons to how to actually use and defend their communities and offices around the country. So, the repression, from the Panther 21 trial, to the situation in Jersey City, and Newark, and Plainfield, there was this growing need to advance that development of an underground. And people close to us in Plainfield were a part of that. There's this one comrade, in particular, his name was Kimu, his struggle name is Kimu Olugbala. And he had got captured, and he escaped. And when he escaped, he was back on the ground in the Black Liberation Army. And him and another comrade was in this bar, this nightclub, somebody had tipped off the police that they were there. And the police just went in there and they shot them, shot them both dead. So, for me and Jihad, it was not something that was going to scare us away, it was something that was going to bring us further into the underground space because we knew that they sacrificed for us. And that was just a part of the picture coming from the folks we knew personally. In other places, in New York and New Jersey and Philadelphia, there was always this effort to build an infrastructure. Fake IDs, to weapons procurements, to safe houses, to securing land in different places in the South that people could be trained. Because we knew that the state, the local police departments all up to the US government, were going to continue

bly doing more so anarchist stuff and whatnot. But people knew who I was and I was able to travel and go see people, see political prisoners. And it eventually became, me and Kazi Toure became co-chairs of Jericho. But Safiya laid the groundwork for so much. She lived it, she breathed it, she slept it and she woke up, that's what she did. And Herman Ferguson as well, with his reputation as one of the early progressive Black nationalists, had a deep relationship with Malcolm X. He had to go into exile, came back, did his prison time. And him and his wife, I worked closely with after Safiya died. And so, I'm not co-chair anymore, I'm just the finance person. But Jihad, my comrade who I grew up with, he's the chair, he's been the chair now for a good number of years. And it's always a constant struggle. Money is weird, we're not a group that gets grants and stuff like that. But we try to be in forums where we can raise the issue of political prisoners. If anything, we try to make sure that we have a battery of lawyers and doctors and stuff, so that if there's folks inside that need medical care, we can figure out ways to put pressure on the prison administration to get them medical care and to be able to provide our own doctors if they allow it. Sometimes, it takes legal action from the lawyers to stop certain specific repressions that a prisoner may be facing. And also, we try to keep money on their commissary books. But anyhow, I think Jericho is one of the main organizations that is a link for political prisoners inside with the outside world. Our goal is always to get them out. And like I said, Jericho is, I would think it's the largest in the United States, political prisoner organization, and we have a lot of respect. The goal is always to get them out. We need them out. And so here comes COVID, here comes all the resistance in the street. And in some ways, man, this may be the best time that we can try to capture some of this attention and put it on political prisoners. To get these groups to, like, put them on your agenda. Just let folks inside know that you appreciate what they tried to do, you want them free also. And I have said this to others, as well, there are those inside who have pretty much accepted that they're

see anti-authoritarian practices and tendencies within our communities that just need to be fed, you know, and they're there. So, I say that, you know, beyond Black nationalism, but not without it.

Right. And fast forwarding a bit, by 1985, you're released from prison after over a decade.

And by the 1990s, Safiya Bukhari, your partner at the time, co-founded the Jericho Movement with Jalil Muntaqim, which you became involved in as well. What do you remember about the start of Jericho and working with Safiya at that time?

Oh, well, Jericho was, there have been efforts before to pull together folks to deal with political prisoners and sometimes the internal differences just gave them very short lives. So, in the '90s, Safiya, Jalil Muntaqim, Herman Ferguson and others decided on this Jericho Movement, which I think the initial idea came from Jalil, to deal with raising awareness around political prisoners in the United States, in the face of a government that refuses to even say they have political prisoners, to be able to build movements that would help fight for their release through either the courts, or help to influence the parole boards, or even getting the government or the president to give a pardon or all that other stuff. But also as a way to show the prisoners that there is support for them, that people appreciate what they tried to do. And they were able to pull together a really great group of people that was very multiracial, different perspectives, from the nationalist community, from the women's movement, from the anarchist movement, etc. And Safiya was always that person who had a reputation, especially out of New York, for her coming out of prison and hitting the road, just, you know, speaking out for political prisoners. Like I said, she recruited me into the Black Liberation Army, she had did like eight years or so in Virginia. She got out, and at a certain point, you know, our relationship got closer. And a year before I was released in Connecticut, we had gotten married. So, I come out, I'm back in New York and so, at first, I wasn't a part of Jericho, I was proba-

their efforts to destroy us. Us, not only the Black Panther Party, but so many of the groups. The American Indian movement, the Puerto Rican independence movement, the Women's movement, the anti-War movement was still going on. So it was like how do we build a foundation to survive that. But there was never enough time. And the lesson that we learned from that was that one must always build a capacity to survive, you know, which should not always be looked at as being led by the gun. But it should be thought of as all the different ways that we can take care of each other, keep each other safe, even when we are doing stuff on the down low or secretly to be able to put people in a better position. But for those struggling today, it is so important to grasp that you're facing a system that is totally dedicated to stopping you from winning. This is a system built on white supremacy, vicious, vicious capitalism, imperialism, all these other negative 'isms.' If you want to learn from us, know that they will try to hurt you, they'll kill you, they will imprison you, they'll make you lose your job, your homes, they will terrorize you. So you need to know what you need to do to be able to face that and overcome that. And I think that is one of the biggest challenges that I see for what's going on today. If one wants to learn from some of the things we faced back then. And though we did the best we could, we did not win. And that's a very important recognition. We did not win because they did their job good enough to crush us.

Yeah. I mean, this is something that we should certainly keep in mind. And getting back to Plainfield, Ashanti you got out of jail in 1972 and a few months later, you're asked to join the Black Liberation Army.

Right.

What did the BLA mean to you at the time? What what did it mean for you to make that decision to go underground?

Okay, well, when we got out, when we were acquitted, my family sent me to North Carolina, Greensboro, North Carolina, which is where my family, my mother's side is from. Jihad's family sent him

to Rochester, New York. So, he's operating actually with a different group, a revolutionary group called KNOW, Knowledge Needed to Organize Workers. Very sophisticated group, he's working out of that perspective and I'm in North Carolina. But at some point, I come back to Plainfield. And then me and others, we're going to get that chapter going again. Me and Jihad always stay in touch. At a certain point, and I guess this would have been '73, Safiya Bukhari, who was the head of the Harlem office at the time, communications secretary, the face of the Black Panther Party out of the Harlem office at the time, they got to speak to the media and do other things. And also a key link between aboveground and underground. The aboveground being the organizing that the Panthers does, underground being with this development of the Black Liberation Army. She asked me if I would be able to help in the Harlem office, and I'm like sure. As we're doing the work, we're doing political prisoner work, we're keeping that office going, keeping the programs going. Which a lot of people don't understand, the community organizing was always key, the survival programs are always key because we needed a connection with the community and we needed that kind of relationship with the community that allowed us both to raise our political consciousness and our ability to take back our lives. Whether it was through rent strikes or feeding ourselves or the free health clinics or whatever. But at a certain point, there was comrades getting captured, from Panthers to BLA folks. And so, a lot of our work was keeping support going, raising consciousness around it, developing defence committees. But in New York, there was several comrades who were captured, who were facing the death penalty in California, but they were on trial in New York. And it was from that that Safiya had approached me and asked me would I become part of a cell of the Black Liberation Army. And, you know, when you're confronted with a question like that, it's not an easy thing to respond to. So, I said, listen, let me sleep on it and I'm going to get back with you. So, I had to do a lot of thinking. Man, I'm like, oh, my God. I'm honoured that I'm even asked. The

Yeah, and another thing that Kuwasi wrote about was the ways that he saw Black nationalism and anarchism being complementary to each other.

I know that is something that you've written about too. Could you maybe talk a bit about your thinking on this question?

Oh okay. Well coming into the anarchism allowed me to look at my Black nationalism different. It allowed me to see some inherent hierarchy in there because the main developers of Black nationalism had always been men. And it always put forth, you know, the Black man, the Black man, to the exclusion of women, to the exclusion of children, of anybody else. You know, the Black man was going to do this because we come from the great kings of Africa and stuff. For me, the anarchism allowed me to see a Black nationalism that was more collective, that was more horizontal, not beholden to some old ideas about man or being locked into European concepts of nationalism. So, I didn't feel like I had to let go of my nationalism because my experience of nationalism brought me into a love of who I am and who my people are, contrary to the degradation that has been put upon us for so many hundreds of years. And it also allowed me to see how we could actually create institutions that did not have to be hierarchical. Many of which were already horizontal in our community, we just had look. And so, for me, the anarchism also helped me to see what in one's life experience already had anarchist or anti-authoritarian practices or tendencies. So, when I look at Black nationalism, I know that I will, or people who are anarchists who hold to a Black nationalism, we know we're going to confront the male leadership thing. We know that we're going to confront the people who seem like they're locked into a European concept of nationalism. But we're also going to confront other anarchists who tend to be white, who can only see nationalism as this European thing, and that there's no other possible definitions of this nationalism and are not even looking at what is the lived experience of Black folks in our movement who already

vision. And that's why I think that things like that, whether it was in prison or outside, that has to keep going on.

Right. I also want to talk about Kuwasi Balagoon.

You know, he was a member of the Black Panther Party and the BLA in New York.

He was also an anarchist and he was also queer. And you sometimes talk about yourself as a Balagoonist, when talking about your anarchist politics.

Did you know that Kuwasi was queer at the time? Like did that part of who he was also influence your thinking?

Oh right, right. Not in the beginning, not in the beginning. It's like, we knew that Kuwasi and Martin Sostre, right, Martin Sostre is a political prisoner that was in various upstate New York prisons. He was like the George Jackson of the East Coast. Martin Sostre also moved towards anarchism in the prisons. Well, Kuwasi, you know, he was writing about it and it was definitely an encouragement. But then when we understood he was gay, a gay man, I was already at that point, where like, oh, right on. But knowing that comrades, other comrades of his in our circles was not okay with that. And after Kuwasi died and there's the funerals and the memorials, ain't nobody mentioned then that he was gay! You know? Maybe me and a few others. And it was important to do that. And people, especially anarchists of color, because there's a lot of queer folks in APOC, they really needed to hear that. That Kuwasi was not this one dimensional person and that we embraced Kuwasi in his wholeness. Because it's the same things that go on now, and it's going to be one of the challenges now. I mean, right now, I mean, you got so many Black trans folks who are getting killed. And you got the old school Black nationalist folks who will not give one damn about it, and will not embrace it. So, Kuwasi is going to be even more important as time goes on. And I'm happy about that, that folks want to know.

other thing is that I also understand that when one goes under, one cuts their connections with family, friends, and even above-ground comrades. And so, when I came back to her, I said yes, but I'm bringing another comrade with me. This was another brother from Plainfield. And so, we let her know, and then she directed us towards a cell that was being put together for a specific purpose. And that specific purpose was to try to get these comrades out of the Manhattan House of Detention, the Tombs. So, at that point, I'm recruited. And at that point, we are preparing ourselves, preparing to do whatever we need to do to get them out.

Right. And, you know, I know there's only so much you can talk about, but can you tell us how that action actually went?

Yes. So in the BLA, there was this whole concept around Bogarts and Brodies. Bogarts was like coming from Humphrey Bogart, he's the gangster. And Brodies is the more sophisticated, soft. So if you're going to do a Bogart, like break someone out of prison, you've got to do a lot of Brodies, you've got to do a lot of small expropriations and other things, liberations and stuff, to be able to work up to where you have the capacity now to break someone out of prison. So like other cells in the Black Liberation Army, everyone did with what they had. We are like without resources. And it was, I thought it was such a unique thing about the Black Liberation Army. So anyhow, so we did the things, it was a lot of Brodies, it was a lot of small expropriations to get money together or to get equipments that we needed. And it led to us having plans to get these folks out of the Tombs, the Manhattan House Detention. And there was two main plans. And one was through the sewer, because there was some information that the comrades inside the Tombs had that there was a sewer in the area that led right up under the Tombs. And if we could get in there, then they could be in a certain position where we could get them out.

And who was it that was inside?

At the time, they were called the New York Five. Albert Nuh Washington, Jalil Muntaqim, Herman Bell, and Cisco and Gabriel Torres. And there was also Henry Sha-Sha Brown. So you had a handful of comrades in there. And it's like well okay, let's do it. So, the sewer thing didn't work. We actually went one night around the area and they had a comrade actually go down, but it was late at night, early in the morning, because we were like, this is the best time. But somewhere some John Q citizen saw some Black people look like they was tampering with the sewer, someone coming out, and the police rolls up and they arrest us. And we were in Rikers Island for a few days and then we actually get released on our own recognizance. The charges are tampering with city property. But the newspaper article that came out in probably The New York Post or something, stated that we was trying to break in to this building right outside where the sewer was that someone went in because it was a building of the Bureau of Prisons, like New York State Prisons. And in there, one of the offices, I guess, they had files of all the prisons in New York State. So, they thought that that's what our objective was. I read that and like, man, I wish that was our objective and we knew! But anyhow, as soon as we were out, we are right back on our mission. Time is of the essence. These comrades are getting ready to get sent back to California, they're going to face the death penalty, we got to move. And what happened was that we'd go every day to support them at the trial. So, after the court day, we could walk over to the visiting area of the jail and bring food and then visit them. So, going up there doing that every day, we noticed that there was maybe one or two guards downstairs, and the visiting rooms you got to go up a flight of stairs, there's a metal wall with glass and you can talk through the phone. And so, it hits us that, well maybe, maybe we can cut through this metal wall. And we kind of signal that information to them and they go back with it, and this is the plan that we're going to work on. We're going to actually cut through this metal wall. So now with this plan we need someone, none of us have the skills to use an acetylene torch.

young sister, who she's gay. And so, we have a really good relationship, but I think at some point I said something that was really heterosexist. And she got on me about it. And the next day brought me a book called Queer Theory and demanded that I read it. So, I take the subway, I'm a New Yorker. And so, you know, I'm in New York, I take the subway everywhere. And it's interesting, and I've told this story before, too, how me reading the book, because I read everywhere, I'm on the Subway everyday. But when I got the Queer Theory book, I find that when I'm sitting down, if I can get a seat on the subway, I don't hold the book in a way that the title becomes obvious. I don't want nobody to see I'm reading something that says Queer Theory. And so, at first I'm like hiding it, and then as the days go on, I'm like, wait a minute, what am I doing? So at some point, man, I'm like, no, I'll read the book like I usually do and if somebody sees the title, they see the title. When I finish the book, I am able to see how deep, sometimes, one's heterosexism is. And it took an incident to happen, and somebody to point it out to you to see that something that you might have said or something that you might have did reflects that heterosexism within you, as something that you need to deal with. And so, with this sister, I was able to say thank you. And let that be the continuing point where, you know, I would try to learn more and do better. And for me, if I see it, I also want to be able to share it with others. So, like, for me from that there, you know, like for me being part of the anarchist movement and the Anarchist People of Color (APOC), and there's a lot of queer folks in there, but I also know that even with my comrades, I have a responsibility to help them also see some of the things that they may say. And so, it's my responsibility now to help them get it. But I think that the biggest part out of there was that I devote so many friendships, real loving friendships with all kinds of folks who's straight, queer, folks with different abilities. And I'm like, that's the world, that's the world that I envision. And I've had help, you know, with others enriching and expanding this

where we are, you know, what does this new world mean? What does it mean to hold on to this macho, you know? Don't open up, don't speak. So, inside, I found myself, in whatever prison I was in, I feel like it allowed me to be a better person and a more available person to other men. And in my correspondences, like writing to others in prison, I found myself sharing it more. And I found that my relationship with these young brothers inside Somers prison was such a close, personal, qualitatively different relationship than I'd had with other comrades. Because we developed a space where we could really talk. Like there was one brother, also a boxer, inside, having problems with his girlfriend. But he was being real harsh, because the phone is right there and you can hear everybody's conversations. I talked to him afterwards about, you know, sexism in a way he would understand. He actually broke down and cried. And I'm like, wow, you know. So, for me, I mean, I knew that relationships were really important, that old ideologies and stuff we can have, and all like that, yeah, yeah, yeah. But how do you treat yourself and how do you treat those around you? Let that be a demonstration of what your vision is for this world to come. Let that be a sign of what you should be working on as well as maybe building up for the march, the demo, or the community garden, the community education classes or whatever, what goes on inside of you and how that is expressed to the world. I felt like if that's not there, we can win that physical battle and then recreate another kind of oppressive society because we never dealt with those issues within us. And I felt like even with reading certain people like Amilcar Cabral that you begin to understand that it's what we do with each other that becomes really important. How we treat each other.

For sure. And you mentioned learning more about queer politics later on.

Do you remember what that process looked like for you?

Yeah. So, I got out and I'm working with an organization that helps former prisoners. And I have a relationship with this one

So, I end up being the one to, like, figure out how to do this myself. So I went somewhere and I purchased an acetylene torch, and I would find a place somewhere where I would get some metals and light this thing up and just try to work it and see what happens. And when I felt like I had it enough, we knew that we can now set a date, like, let's make this happen. And on that day, when we went to the court, when we went to the visiting room and brought food as usual, we had our bags. Every day, you know, bring the bag, bring the same thing every day, have the nice conversation, very relaxed. Except this time when we open up the bag is when we pull out our weapons. And so the two up front, they get taken to the bathroom and they get handcuffed to the toilets in the bathroom. So, from there, we proceed up to the visiting floor to get this other guard handcuffed somewhere and out of the way. And I proceed to cut. And I'm cutting and the comrades behind the wall, Nuh and them had did what they needed to do to secure their situation back there. I'm cutting and it's kind of going okay. It's taking a little longer than expected, but then, at a certain point, I'm cutting, I got almost like a square and I got three sides, and I'm working on the fourth side and with about two inches to go, there's no more flame. The tank ran out. And because the metal was hot, it was resealing in place. So we couldn't kick it and we couldn't shoot it. And so at a certain point, you know, we just have to turn to each other and turn to our comrades and say, it ain't gonna work. And then you have to make a decision. You've got to get out of there. So, we looked at them and we secured our position. And just as easy as we was able to take that place over, it was as easy to now exit out of there with our transportation waiting right outside. And then we're gone.

Hard thing about that is that those comrades that we were hoping to free from there, our team was also made up of their partners. Two of them at least. And so it was envisioned that we would get them out and they would be reunited, family, everything. And we would be underground and we're going to do what an underground

does. I say that with a certain sadness because when I looked at the faces of my comrades, and like, oh, you know, 'didn't work.' And I wish that it had... So there's two reasons I talk about the Tombs thing. One, there's a statute of limitations which passed years ago and I can talk about it, they can't do nothing. The other reason is that I want people to understand that to be a revolutionary requires a certain daringness, a certain sense of Harriet Tubman that goes in and out from North to South to keep freeing people. That you have to be willing to take a risk that might take your life, but it's going to free somebody. And the Tombs, if you ever even go, if you're in New York now, you go down to the Manhattan House of Detention and you look at that structure. All around it is court buildings, State, Federal, City. Police all around, all around. And one of the main reasons that worked for us, at least, to be able to get in and out without getting captured, is because their sense of security, that arrogance of imperialism that is like, no one would dare do anything in the heart of our area. We knew that we had that on our side. So, for folks today, even the things that they're doing now in the streets to shut cities down, to talk about defunding the police and dismantling and all like that, it's a sense of daringness that comes with that. And one must be willing to take kind of risks to create the world that we want, that we'd be willing to go way out of our comfort zone. You know?

Yeah. I mean just the image of you being there and the gas tank running out, it's just such a heartbreaking end to that story. I think the first time I heard that story was about 10 years ago, I was reading Love and Struggle by David Gilbert and he writes a shortened version of that story without any names. And since I've read it, I've always wondered, except for Jalil, what happened to the other folks who were inside at that time who you were trying to get out?

Well, Nuh has died. Nuh died in prison. Sha got out eventually after doing prison time. But Sha died maybe about ten years ago. The Torres brothers eventually got out also. If you know about San

began to see what sexism meant. Not only what it means for the movement to be anti-sexist, but now what does that mean for me? What am I able to understand, what I'm able to see when I first begin to understand sexism through feminist readings, and what do I understand now? I can look back then and say, oh, man, my first understandings, it was good because I'm breaking out of this confinement of thinking sexist. But then, today, I say, well, I've come some ways, but I've got a long ways to go. And I'm still able to look at this movement and listen to the women in my life and be able to see that I still got a long way to go. But this movement, you know, in some ways is beyond what we could do, but still must go even further.

For sure. And, you know, going through that experience of looking at things with these new queer and feminist lenses. How did that change things for you at the time?

Inside, well the understanding of queer came later. But the feminism inside helped me to get more into personal male behaviors that seemed like men, in general, had and I had to be able to see, oh, I'm part of that, you know. It also helped me to start to look at gay folks inside prison different. So, it made the readings more important. Also, when I was reading more stuff on relationships inside prisons made me realize the importance of relationships being a focal point of revolutionary activism. So that I felt like what I was learning, I was able to share with other comrades, who were maybe going through certain relationship problems with their significant others on the outside, to get them to kind of see what sexism meant, what that macho stuff meant in terms of not allowing them to have a healthy relationship. And I found myself in positions where I could have them kind on conversations inside. Sometimes, my comrades might look at me like, why are you reading that stuff? Because we were so used to reading the more, you know, the Marxist, the Leninist, the Maoist, or something on military or something on guerrilla warfare, and not looking at how important it is to demonstrate in our personal lives and our relationships right

And you've spoken a lot about the time that you were stuck in prison, you know, using it as a space for a self education and reflection.

How did that extended period of reading and reflecting change your thinking at that time?

I think in the sense that it helped me to evolve my thinking. So my nationalism, my Black nationalism, evolved from thinking about Black Power as just control of our communities and institutions in our communities, to seeing that there were other dynamics within this Black Power that was trapped in maybe heterosexism, or the European sense of nationalism. So, starting to look at them things critically, and anarchism was such a big help. It just allowed me to like rethink some things and see that we needed to go beyond some of the things that were important to us at a particular time. So, it's like, I get my hands on feminist materials and it's helpful because I have these other lenses to begin to look at things and to see this more recent past from Panther in the streets to, you know, BLA in prison, where did we make mistakes? Why did we make mistakes? What about this hierarchy thing? To look at what went on with the Huey P. Newton situation that led to the split in the Black Panther Party, why did it happen? Did it have to happen? What's this thing about cult leadership? And are there other ways that decision makings could have happened? So, these are things now, that I'm getting, that allows me to look at that more recent past and say, man, to move forward we are going to have to do things differently. And I wasn't the only one thinking like that. It was others doing similar things. Because even though it may have just been me and a few others who was on the more anarchist or anti-authoritarian tip, others was also trying to figure out what went wrong. Why did the people abandon us? How was it that the mass media was able to convince people to back off from us? So, now it's like, well, how do we recover? And to have some new thinkings on it, which means that you've got to have some different lenses also. Even then, I think in prison too was when I

Francisco Eight, Cisco Torres was one of the San Francisco 8. So all these years, they're still inside. Nuh, Jalil, Herman... Herman just got out maybe four years ago, but is under such restrictions that I can't even see him, none of his comrades can see him. But decades go by and we all made that commitment to each other that we're going to work get them out. So, I've been involved, you know, for a long time now with the National Jericho Movement, to get out all our political prisoners, with a main focus on those from David Gilbert, Jalil, Fitzgerald out there in California, others have been in there for now forty, fifty years. But it hurts on another level for me that we have not been able, in all these years, to get other movements to take up the issue of political prisoners. What happens is that we, you know, those who die inside, we got to bury them. Many get released, like Marilyn Buck dies not even after a year they're out, maybe a few months, a few weeks. You know, like Seth Hayes who just died earlier this year. To not be able to get the movement to embrace political prisoners is hurtful. Yet, you know, we keep on. And we're hoping that with all this resurgence of resistance now, that maybe people will see more, at least more people will see, the importance of fighting for our political prisoners. As a sign of our, even our integrity as a movement. That those who had sacrificed years ago, longer than many of these young folks was even born, it is important to see our folks as the Mandelas of our movement. And we work to get them out.

A few years after the action at the Tombs in New York City, you were involved in a bank expropriation that went awry in New Haven.

You and two other BLA members were captured and you spent over a decade in prison. And this is happening at the same time that the BLA was becoming increasingly isolated, and mass movements in the US were on the decline.

What kind of support, or lack of support, did you get as a political prisoner in those earlier years?

Well that would be under a lack of support because we didn't get a lot of support. Even with our action, our particular action, you had like this little core group of supporters who would always be there for you. The Yuri Kochiyamas, the Frankie Zitzens out of the Harlem Panther office. But in New Haven, there was a Trotskyist group that came to our defence, to draw up some support for us. But it wasn't a lot. When we went to them courtrooms, it was not packed courtrooms. There was not signs that people were interested or were willing to come and support you. And in other cases that were going on in New York and Atlanta or California, you could see the effects of repression. You could see the power of media, how they framed us as these criminals, murderers, bank robbers. And the effect was that it was only a small number of people that would come and support us. Through the trials and through the prison time, you know, we wasn't getting letters. And it made sense that even with the 12 years that I was in, when I got out, asking a high school student what did he know about the Black Panther Party and him asking me was it a martial arts group? It showed me the ability of this system to take back control and to erase things that actually happen. Informations that were available, so people don't know Panthers, the anti-war movement, they don't know the American Indian movement, they don't know about Puerto Rican independence movement, they don't know about workers' struggles, and all these other things because this system had that ability to shut that off. But having said that, there was certain groups that were really stellar in how they supported us. For example, in Brooklyn, there was this Afrocentric school or Afrocentric institution called The East. And The East was a place where folks could come and not only learn more about their culture, but to get involved with different programs that dealt with education or maybe feeding and stuff like that. They would always make sure that they came to the court. They would bring the children. Because to them, this Black Liberation Army was their army. They were proud of that fact, so they would always come to let us know, even if they were

the only people in that courtroom, we're here. And that meant a lot. There was other folks who will also come forward and support us in other ways, because there was many escape attempts. And when I look back on it, I am so proud of the fact that we did not settle for just being captured as an end. It just put us in another fighting terrain. And that's how we saw it. We educated folks around us, but at the same time we were always looking to get out. There was one that was called the BLA Navy, and somehow they had hacksaw blades, they'd cut the bars. And in a certain place on Rikers Island, someone had left makeshift rafts because the plan was they was going to get out in rafts and be able to get off of that island. And it didn't work. But the attempt was there. And then, in other places, like even with us in Connecticut, there was attempts to get out. We didn't settle, and I'm really proud of that, because for us, it meant that we were going to carry this on, I don't care how bad it looks, we'll do it to the end. Someone will hopefully pick it up. And interesting on what is going on now is how, even with my wife, my wife is a professor, an abolitionist professor, and students that she had taught 10 years ago and had not been in touch with, with all this stuff happening now, from COVID to the resistance in the street, they're getting in touch with her just to say thank you for all that she taught them. Because it took things like this for, allowing them to connect the dots and see. So, I see all these things that people are bringing up on Facebook that pulls from the past, from historical stuff to just resistance... they're looking at resistance, and I think that in some way, it's arming them to be able to fight the system. Because the system is such a mind game. And so it's in there that I hope that folks will also start looking at our comrades inside.

Yeah, I mean thinking about this moment, one thing that seems really central is that a lot of people are collectively engaging in this process of education in this moment, like discovering elements of this history of resistance, both in the streets and off the streets.