Sostre at 100: A Legacy of Action
March 23, 2023, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

GARRETT FELBER:
Good evening. How's everybody doing? My name is Garrett Felber. [APPLAUSE] Thank you. What an honor it is to be here this evening at the Schomburg Center with you all. We had a beautiful celebration of Martin Sostre last night at the Harry Belafonte [Library]. Thank you to everyone who came out for that event, or tuned in, and welcome tonight to our new friends and comrades. I'm so happy that we're here again for more. So, last night we celebrated a revolutionary life and I have to say despite living an incredible life, Martin is in some ways not easily celebrated. He was humble, uninterested in celebrity, and he was fiercely critical of rhetoric without action. I briefly corresponded with Martin during the final years of his life, and in 2013 he wrote his last letter to me.

Included in it were a handful of original primary sources. One of them was a revolutionary Black newsletter that he produced in 1971 from solitary confinement, and it outlined the key objectives for revolutionary Black Vanguard, which would engage in guerilla warfare to free liberated territories and ultimately form a Black socialist nation. The other was a news article from 20 years later with a photo of Martin and Sandy Shevack seated with children at a daycare graduation. In the article Sostre is quoted, "People dream. Sandy and I objectify that dream." "The enclosed documents contained more information that I could possibly convey to you via email or phone," he wrote. I was trying to interview him and he was saying he was too busy. So, part of what struck me was his reluctance to narrate his life and his preference to let his actions speak for him. I came to understand this gesture more and more as I learned about him. As he wrote once to the Puerto Rican freedom fighter and prisoner of war Lolita Lebrón, "The best way to say, is to do."

So tonight we honor Martin's legacy of action. He believed deeply, and practiced, two anarchist principles that are centered around action. The first of those is propaganda the deed: that a single action could serve as a catalyst for mass revolutionary struggle. Sostre defined his anarchism as this: "a code based on deed and not on rhetoric." The second is a belief in pre-configuration. The idea we must practice in our politics, and build within our movements and our own material world, the future that we are imagining and fighting for. He had a phrase that he was fond of using that I think captured this very succinctly: "If we do it right, it will end up right."

So tonight we will use Martin's legacy of action to think about the various ways that his ideas and work continue to expand abolitionists and antiauthoritarian struggles today. The importance of zines and accessible political education on both sides of the walls. How crucial community spaces are for radical political development and care in our movements. Why young people were and remain so crucial to revolutionary organizing and are, to use Martin's words, the "detonators of the revolution."

And we will talk about the Black radical organizing tradition from which Martin came, and from which he developed, deepened, and extended. I want to give a brief explanation of the Afro-Asian Bookshop in Exile that you may have seen as you came in. This exhibit came together through the vision of my comrade Safear Ness. Safear, are you out there? Can we give Safear some love for that idea? [APPLAUSE] So, we are very lucky to have Safear with us here tonight. When he came up with this idea he was still inside, and I told him about this event that I was planning and he said, “Well, it would be great if you could recreate Martin's bookstore so people could really experience it.”

And I was like, yeah, that’s a great idea, we should do that. The problem is that there’s no photo that I have ever been able to find of Martin's bookstore. So I have people's recollections of it, but no visual material evidence of what it looked like. But I do have a lot of photographs of the Afro-Asian Bookstore in Exile, and for those who may not know, when Martin and Geraldine [Robinson] were framed in the Buffalo uprising of ‘67, a defense committee sprang into action. And it was Martin's wish they should continue the bookstore, quote, “ in exile”.

So for three years, which was as long as the original brick and mortar bookstore on Jefferson Avenue, students and supporters at the University of Buffalo made the Afro-Asian Bookstore in Exile a base for spreading awareness about his case, raising legal funds, and spreading revolutionary ideas. It also spread to other campuses in Boston, New York, Milwaukee, and Cleveland. So the version of the AABE that you saw in the lobby is a recreation of that original vision by Martin, Jerry [Ross], Bob [McCubbin], Geraldine [Robinson], and the members of the Martin Sostre Defense Committee.

And I want to thank Safear for that beautiful idea as well as Zach, Sarah, and Tom for being able to pull it off. Because I just said, this is a great idea, we should do this, and then I left it to them. So thank you all. [APPLAUSE] I’m also thrilled that the recreation of the AABE will be donated to the CUNY People’s Pantry, where it will live a new active life as part of the efforts there to reclaim the commons. Finally, I want to give a shout out to the comrades in Milwaukee who just opened the Martin Sostre Solidarity House this week. It's a radical learning space and resource library where people can just, as they were originally able to at the Afro-Asian Bookstore, sit and read and learn and just be. So if you’re in the area in Milwaukee definitely look them up and find them on Facebook, so you can figure out how to donate to the Martin Sostre Solidarity House and support their efforts.

So a quick word about our program this evening, so you know what you’re in for. Our first conversation was meant to be a live conversation between Steve Wilson, who’s incarcerated in Pennsylvania, and Mariame Kaba. Unfortunately, Stevie was transferred a couple weeks ago to a prison that has visitations that end at 5:00 pm. So we pre-recorded his remarks and Mariame will be in conversation with those pre-recorded remarks.

If you have trouble hearing it, because it won't be live captioned online, if you could raise your hand right now, we have printed remarks. If you anticipate having difficulty hearing it, we can pass out some of Stevie's responses that are printed out. Before our second panel, we're very lucky to have Vikki Law here tonight to speak briefly on another.. yeah, give Vikki some love. [APPLAUSE] Feel free to give love to anyone whose name I say. You can even stop me and applaud and lift them up, please. So, Vikki is going to speak about another important and underrecognized revolutionary jailhouse lawyer, Carol Crooks, and another prison uprising that [Carol Crooks] was part of, the August Rebellion.

Like Martin, Crooksie, as she was known, played a prominent role in the revolutionary prison struggles of the 1970s, and has yet to be widely and appropriately recognized. So we are lucky to have Vikki talk about that struggle. And finally, we're going to have a conversation about the Black radical tradition inside New York prisons with Orisanmi Burton, and our panelists Laura Whitehorn, Masia Mugmuk, and Jose Saldana.

[APPLAUSE]

So as you can see we are very, very fortunate tonight in many ways. Speaking of fortunate, I'm gonna talk about funders right now. Julie and Alexis at the Mellon Foundation, thank you so much for your support of this event, it absolutely would not have happened without that. Nadia Ben-Youssef at the Center for Constitutional Rights, Mariame Kaba and Project NIA, Moira Marquis and Saxapahaw Prison Books, Derecka Purnell, Lisa Lowe, all of these folks I kept going back to saying I need more money, I need more money and they came through. So thank you, to all of you, so much for putting up with me.

I got a lot of people to thank here as well, cuz you saw what happened out there, right? So, Burning Books, our comrades in Buffalo carrying on the tradition of Martin in Buffalo, they printed out all the zines and the buttons. If you didn't get a chance to get a button, I think there might be some still out there. Minh and Minali for tabling for the Martin Sostre Institute. There's also some ways to get in touch with the Martin Sostre Institute and help us build that project. The Schomburg Center for hosting us and just being in the space is incredible, thank you especially to Novella Ford and Khalilah Bates and everyone at the Schomburg Staff, give it up for them please. [APPLAUSE]

Also, if you had a chance to connect with our comrades out of Chicago, with the Real Youth Initiative, Destine, Denzel, and Tommy. [APPLAUSE] Yup, in the house. They're working on this incredible project with me to create zines relating to Martin Sostre's life with young revolutionary folk in Illinois prisons. And it's just been incredible to work with them so I'm so glad they could be out here. If you didn't get a chance to stop by on the way out, I think you probably can as well, we have these beautiful cards that were made by my dear friend Ursula. They're these watercolors with quotes from Martin Sostre, and you can write a letter to one of these young revolutionaries inside, which would be really great. So please take an opportunity to do that.

Cameron Rasmussen, thank you for getting some books. [APPLAUSE] I hit up Cameron, I was like you're not doing anything, right, with Beyond the Bars this week, I'm sure you have time to go get some books from the library for me. So, Cameron came through. Thank you for all you do Cameron.

Kris and Kevin and the whole Park Boulevard staff, for our AV. Our live captionist, Sarita Noel. And finally, I already embarrassed Sarah last night so I'm not gonna do that again, but Sarah and I would both like to express just how much we are so grateful to the incredible team at the New York Public Library Jail and Prison Services. They have stepped up. Please, please thank them. [APPLAUSE] They have just gone above and beyond for this two night event while still keeping library services running at Rikers Island, answering hundreds of research letters from people inside, producing the city's most exhaustive community resource book, which I think you can find out there as well, supporting people coming home from incarceration, and so much more. So huge round of applause for Emily, Gabriel, Kate, Omar, Rabia, Ryan, Sarah, Yanela, thank you. [APPLAUSE]

So, I'm so excited to say with that, I will invite Mariame Kaba on stage. [APPLAUSE]

MARIAME KABA:
Hi everybody. Hello, hello, hello. [APPLAUSE] All right, hello New York and Schomburg. I'm so happy to be here and appreciate being invited. I don't know why you can hear this weird feedback. All right, great. So thanks to Garrett and to Sarah for organizing this and for inviting me to be here tonight. And also thanks to William [C. Anderson] and to others who are keeping Martin Sostre's legacy alive. And that's just so much of my gratitude for that. Thanks to Schomburg also for hosting.

I'm also really grateful to all of the wonderful speakers from last night, those of you who were at that particular panel. It was so moving and really poignant to hear the stories and to see the way that folks are being honored today who weren't honored at the time. So I was really happy to see that. Also, just thank you to all of you who came out tonight to be here with us.

I had really hoped that Stevie would be here with us in person. That was the goal. And it's crushing that that's not the case for many reasons, but mainly for Stevie's sake. We had hoped that he would've been paroled when he went up for parole last time and he was denied his parole. And I have a lot to say about that, but I'm not going to go there. I'm furious, along with many others around this. I think the cruelty and capriciousness of prison really knows no bounds. The prison's whole purpose is to break relationships and to isolate people behind bars. And sometimes it succeeds, but many times it fails. And it failed this time because we are still going to be able to hear from Stevie tonight from behind the wall, but they can't stop us from being able to continue to connect with our folks on a daily basis. So you are going to hear from Stevie in his own words this evening. I'm gonna be asking questions that I would have asked him

if he were here and then you're gonna hear his responses. Then, when that's over I'm gonna just share a little bit of my reflections on his responses. So that's the way that this is going to work tonight.

I came of age here in New York City. I was born in New York and raised here. I came of age in terms of somebody who was active in politics and in organizing in the city in the 80s. And I learned about Martin Sostre because I found a book called the Crime of Martin Sostre, it's a book that's now out of print. Someone should reprint it, it's a useful tool. I was in my early 20s when I learned about Martin and the case against him.

I became really curious and I wanted to know more. There wasn't that much more, at the time, that I could find. I wasn't that skilled at archival research at the time or anything like that, but I found the book at a bookstore here in New York called Liberation Bookstore. And it's here in Harlem, and it was Una Mulzac's bookstore, and I was educated by Una's choices of books that she had in her bookstore. That's kind of how I got some of my initial political education as a young person. I would go to Liberation Books, I would look on the shelves and she would have all these books from people I did not know. Watler Rodney. She would have all these books by, you know, she had Malcolm's book there. She had books by DuBois. She had books by African writers, you know, [Aimé] Césaire and [Léopold] Senghor and all these people. She had pamphlets that you could get that were the equivalent, of basically, what we think of as zines today. And I was enraptured, I was enraptured as a young person by Martin's defiance and his audaciousness.

And I loved the fact that he did not shy away from the "by any means necessary" way of doing work for liberation. And as a young Black Muslim person growing up in New York City, I found a sense of connection in his embrace of Islam as well. Then as I got older I kind of got a different idea about Martin. I noticed that he was kind of a builder of containers for collective action in all these different ways and all of these different spaces, and ultimately that is really what stuck with me the most about him and his life and his legacy. Martin the builder, Martin the maker, Martin the revolutionary architect of liberation.

So for me those are the connections that I'd made from his work, and tried in my own work to embody some of that in different kinds of iterations. Certainly not to his extent, but definitely as an inspiration and as a goal of trying to be in the world in a way that allows you to create things that other people can join in on as well.

I'm a collector. People who know me know this. I collect lots of different kinds of things and I have been collecting documents and artifacts about his defense campaign in particular for many years now. And I brought some of those with me today and showed them to some folks here. What those items do for me, in terms of what I have, is that they let me see, in real time, kind of the mechanics of how defense campaigns work, you know. So like you know, you have

posters, and you have all these other kinds of means of telling stories and narrating stories and kind of asking people to come join you for a protest outside the court, and all those other things.

And it kind of fuels me for our current fights, you know. There's the Stop Cop City campaign that's currently happening. We've got a bunch of folks who are political prisoners right now being denied bail for just protesting, being repressed in real time, using fictitious tactics against these people. Telling them they can't have bail because they were wearing Black or because they had a jail support number on their hand, which is what the ACLU tells people to actually do in order to make sure you know who to call should you be arrested during a protest and dissent.

So it's not, you know… this stuff is going on in real time and looking at those artifacts reminds me of why it's needed to create defense campaigns, and I have worked on many over my lifetime so far. Campaigns to help free our people, campaigns to make sure that our people don't go in in the first place. And, to me, defense campaigns are instantiations of collective care and also of collective action. And we need both in our struggles, right. As I was listening yesterday remotely to the people who joined Martin's defense campaign, I was grateful that they, along with Martin himself, helped to save his life so that we had a whole amount of time, almost 50 years after he got out, of him working in community and being able to live a life with his family and his friends and his comrades.

There's a quote that's attributed to a security agent who is speaking to a political prisoner, and the security agent says to the political prisoner, "You are not dead because too many people are concerned about you." "You are not dead because too many people are concerned about you." So, I feel like we all need to be part of the concerned group, right? When it comes to our folks who are being criminalized. So that we can ensure and interrupt, and ultimately abolish the death making institutions of the carceral state that are grinding on a consistent basis and trying to grind us under, the grinding of the death making.

So it seems to me that part of living a purposeful life, is a life lived in the legacy of Martin Sostre. A life that we can all be engaged in as the concerned people who step up and fight for people who need us in the moment, but also fight for ourselves too because our fates are so interconnected and interlinked. So, I'm gonna stop there and I'm just going to say, again, this is a moment that necessitates every single one of us to be taking concrete steps and actions in the service of freedom and liberation.

That hasn't changed from 1967. That hasn't changed from 1937. It hasn't changed from 1837 or 1737 or 1637, right? [APPLAUSE] We are in that lineage. We are in that lineage. And it's really, really important for us to see ourselves stepping into that work that our ancestors did that we are now doing as current people who will be ancestors for others. So, I hope that that's really what you take away from these experiences and these spaces that we're all in together. And that you remember that it's really, really important that you fight, above all, that you fight, and that you do not allow yourself to be crushed without a fight.

[APPLAUSE]

I'm going to be asking questions and I will start off with these things. So let's start for the folks in tech. I'm going to ask the question which is: Stevie, how did you learn about Martin Sostre and what struck you or made you want to learn more?

STEVIE WILSON:
Okay, well I first read about Martin through a zine sent to me by Casey Goonan at True Leap Press. It was a thick zine, so I kinda put it on the shelf for a minute but when I finally got to it I was just really impressed. I was angry because I never heard of it before and I felt that, as someone who was in prison, who had been a jailhouse lawyer, who had benefited from this work around censorship and religious freedom and things like that, I was kind of upset that I had not heard of him and I felt that many'd be glad to hear about him that I was studying so many other people inside had never heard of him.

So I wondered why. I was just amazed that he was doing this work in the time period that he was doing the work. It reminded me of Robin D.G. Kelly, Hammer & Hoe, and I was thinking like, wow they were organizing in Alabama in the 1930s. These Black folks were organizing communists and if they could do that I could do this. Right? So I was thinking the same thing. If Martin was 1950s and 60s, organizing people and fighting, when the courts had a hands-off policy around prisons. If he could do this work and make it through, I could do this work and make it through also.

That was the first thing that really kind of stuck out for me. It was inspiration. Here was someone who was inside, because oftentimes, I'm reading about people who are outside doing the work. Here's someone who was inside organizing and that was amazing to me.

MARIAME KABA:
Sostre talks about how his bookstore in Buffalo was more like a community center where he allowed people to sit and read, engaged with them in conversation, or watched their kids while they ran errands. Can you discuss similar community spaces that you experienced that meant something to your political development, love of books, or ideas about organizing?

STEVIE WILSON:
In my written response, I mentioned Giovanni's Room, which is where Joe Beam had worked and I sought that space out when I came to Philadelphia, but I want to tell you that every space in Philadelphia that I consider more of our community frequented, whether it was the ballroom, whether it was Colours Incorporated, whether it was the Attic, whether it was Unity, whether it was Penguin Place, these were all spaces that had a drop-in aspect to it. It was like a place where you could just go and drop in. And you would meet other people there. And you could talk about things. And there were actually formal groups that we would discuss things, but it was

more of a drop-in place. It was like you could just go there and you could meet people who were part of your tribe, you know?

This was the place where you could go and feel affirmed, this is a space where you felt safe. This is a space where you could ask questions and learn together, and so when I think about those places like I said, Colours and Unity and the Attic and Penguin Place and the ballroom itself, the ballroom itself. In every function that we throw. These are spaces where and what we were doing in those spaces is actually political because we weren't supposed to be doing those things. We weren't supposed to be coming together. We weren't supposed to be building with each other. So what we were doing- and we were taking care of each other's needs also, we were doing with mutual aid work.

So I think for me that aspect, kind of, drop in aspect, where you could go and you could just feel at home and you could feel safe and you could ask questions and you could learn that's always been a part of those spaces that I've been at. Going all the way back to BAGLY in Boston it was the same thing. So the drop in aspect, a place where people could just go and be. You didn't have to do anything, just be, was important to my own political development.

MARIAME KABA:
One of the things Martin focused on throughout his long life was the revolutionary potential of young people. He called them the detonators of the revolution. How has that impacted or been reflected in your own work? What is the importance of engaging and centering young folks in the work that you do?

STEVIE WILSON:
I think I shared an anecdote from when I was younger and how as a young-- fifth-grader-- coming together with my peers, we made things happen. And I shared that because I wanted people to know that ever since I was younger I felt that my age, our age, should not stop us from trying to change the world or change our condition. When I was in Boston, at BAGLY, the Boston Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Youth, we were youth-run and adult advised and we were firm with that. We also had, our whole mantra was we were not the future, we're here now. And so I've always thought when I was a young person I didn't have to wait for grown-ups to do anything, to start something, we could do it ourselves.

It is something I wrestle with inside, behind these walls because too often the young people behind the walls are expecting the older people to do something or to lead the way and too often those older people fail in that. But what I tell the young people, I remind them, I said look, Fred Hampton was 21 when he was murdered. I tell them that Martin was 26. Martin filed B v. G [Browder v. Gayle] when he was 26. When he took over leadership of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. I talk about Malcolm being young. I talk about the fact that the youth have always led the revolutionary action. I talk about the Black Panthers, they were like college-age kids, you know? I mean, some of them are like high school-aged kids, you know?

And I said, so explained to them that you don't have to wait. That it's always been the youth at the forefront. That change comes through- your grandfather is not going to change the world, ok? He's not going to wake up and say "oh the world needs to change." It's going to be from the young people. So I've always thought, we need to invest in our youth. We need to spend time developing and empowering them. And so, that was always an important part, that was a part of my own development, it was a part of my youth growing up and being a youth advocate, and we encourage that way so I try to pass that on to people because they are not the future, they're here now and there is so much they can do. There's so much the young people can do now.

MARIAME KABA:
We've talked before about how prisons don't just destroy lives, they also destroy the records of those lives, especially those deemed subversive and deviant ones. Can you talk about some of the reasons that Sostre may not be as well-known today and how that relates to conditions of imprisonment and archives, and how has imprisonment impacted your own archiving?

STEVIE WILSON:
I think one is that I said before, I think that Martin spent a lot more time. He did write. He did write. He did a lot of writing, but it was mainly letters and notes to people and it was through his newsletters and newspapers and articles, things like that. But he didn't take the time to write a book, not like George Jackson who wrote two books, you know. It wasn't like James Yaki Sayles, who has a whole book out. You know, people. He didn't have that, he didn't do that. He spent more time, in my opinion, acting and doing. And the thing about the state is that they do have an archive of us, but it looks so different from what is really going on.

So you look at the records, the official record of Martin, he was, you know, this incorrigible prisoner. You know. Same thing with me. You know. So if you look at my record it looks so crazy. And it's really funny because recently at the last prison I was at, my unit manager and counselor were fighting to get my level lowered because they knew me as a person they saw every day, and they were seeing with the record the DOC was saying it didn't match. And they were like, "What are you talking about?" You know. And so it was so funny finding myself fighting the archive, the official archive which was saying this is a guy who has to be the highest custody level and, you know, and he's a danger and a threat and my counselor was like no he's not, he's doing good work, and my unit manager's like no, he's not. I see him every day. He does great work.

And so, it just tells you the difference between what the archive, the official archive says and what's happening on the ground and the reason why that happens. So, I think what's important is that we do more work to archive inside organizer's lives and work. We talk about the cache of letters we found from Martin, right? Recently, so that stuff like that. Going through those letters, making sure they are preserved, for people to read. And my own personal situation, we know that in 2021 the DOC destroyed my property, everything, you know.

They destroyed all my work. Obviously, I've not gotten over that yet. It was 10 years of journals, manuscripts, works in progress, poetry, letters, pictures, everything. And I haven't found the strength to try to rewrite a lot of that stuff. And how I get through it is trying not to even think about it, but I wish at that time I had taken the opportunity to send some of that out to people. So what I ask people out there to do is be available for that, knowing that the state will destroy the record of our lives in here, the work that we're doing. To be available to store these materials and to help them pay for postage and things like that.

Now I send things out frequently to my family, to friends, and say "hold this, hold this" because I never thought that would happen to me, you know. I never thought that they would do something like that. But I learned, I learned a hard lesson, but I learned. The other thing is that something that came up from this that they never anticipated was that they have these tablets and the tablets actually hold everything that I sent out and received, so I had everything that I had ever sent out and everything I received from 2015.

So I had eight years of that on my tablet. And I'm actually able to take the tablet home, and the company will give me all of that. I can get access to it, and I can print it out and everything. So that's something the state never anticipated. They destroyed the physical record but they didn't know that he has all this in his tablet now. So I have emails going back to two thousand fifteen, from 2015, everything I ever sent out to people, anything I ever received from people is there. And, so that is preserved and I intend to, upon my release, get all that printed out.

I really intend to get all of it printed out and stored, you know, but it's something to speak, didn't anticipate, cause they were just thinking about how much money they could make off of us with the email. I think that one of the things, a plus to this that they didn't know, you know, they left me with 8 years of emails, and I sent most of that work out. But I don't even have my own work got published but some of it was there in the final form. I've sent out some I've sent out in my tablet, so that is a good thing. But just people being available because they want to transfer our property, they want to destroy our cells, they want to lose our property, I'm waiting right now for two boxes of paperwork. So they'll lose stuff. They'll destroy things, they destroyed my typewriter before. And so we need to be ready to say this, and let me maybe store this, find someplace I can put this, and offer that to somebody.

MARIAME KABA:
That segues into this conversation about censorship. Sostre was unable to receive journals and subscriptions or talk about political organizing with his lawyer while in solitary confinement. He wins a victory in Constance Baker Motley's court and another victory later in Sostre versus Otis and we are 50 years later and censorship remains a daily struggle for you. Why is censorship so central to the prison and how is it related to book bans, the banning of Black history, and other censorship happening outside prisons?

STEVIE WILSON:
I think one of the things, and I've said in the written response, you know, paraphrasing Frederick Douglass, what education and literacy does, it makes the person unfit to be a slave, unfit to be a prisoner. Once people begin to study and when they begin to understand what is going on, what has happened and what it is all about, it changes them. It really changes them. They're no longer docile. They're no longer an inmate. They're no longer an inmate, okay. They become that incorrigible prisoner. And so, the state doesn't want that. The state actually wants us to believe that they're doing us a favor. They're healing us, they're helping us.

And so, if you begin to read and study, right, that contradicts that. So, they have to keep materials out of our hands. And so, it's not that they don't want to ban any books, we just can't have certain books. So when we talk about when I was at Camp Hill (prison), anything that said Black was already flagged. If it said Black Panther it was considered part of a security threat group. If it said revolution it was flagged, if it said freedom it was flagged. So they didn't even read the books. It's just the fact that the titles themselves threw them off.

Like they were like, no, he can't have this. I did a lot of work-- I just received paperwork last night from Camp Hill upholding "yes, the prisoner's right. Give him the material." I don't know if I'll receive it cause even after I win, just like Martin, even after I win, I still don't get the materials. That's what happens. So, it's a process they set up and I'll tell you something else that they set the process up. Because, at Camp Hill, if I had not appealed that meant that everyone there would forever be prohibited from receiving that material. So, and, it's costly. It's costly emotionally, you know, financially, you know it's just a lot. I must have filed at least 500 grievances there and it was over censorship and over them not allowing certain books.

And they used not just content, sometimes they used formats. Sometimes it was just like, copyrights or it wasn't published. "You can't have it cause it wasn't published." They wouldn't even let me have my own material. So it really, what I realized is that, it's not about books in general, it's about certain books that they don't want. And why these books? Because these are the lives they don't want us to know about, these are the people they don't want us to know about, these are the actions and events they don't want us to know about. These are the ideas they don't want us to know about. And then you have to ask why? Why is the book so dangerous? They spend more time fighting so that books don't get in, right? Drugs get in, you can do all type of nonsense. I'm at another prison that, on paper, says you cannot bring a book to the yard.

You can bring a tablet and listen to music. You can bring a ball, a game. You know what I mean. You can bring a jump rope, you can do everything but you can't read in the yard. They don't allow you to read in the main yard. The same thing happened at Fayette [prison]. So why is reading such a dangerous thing? Why is the state so against people reading and sharing, you know, reading materials? You know, who benefits from this? And then we go back to what are they actually prohibiting? And so when you look outside and you see what's being erased, what's

being taken off the shelves, you see it's about Black people, you see it's queer and trans folk. Those are the same people being erased behind the walls. These are the same people whose lives are considered a threat to the security of the institution. Ok? These are the same people whose histories and aspirations create a danger in the institution and so therefore I try to get people to see the link between who is being erased, who is being othered, erased, and disregarded out there and how it's happening in here.

It's been happening there. So we need to fight this on both sides of the walls. And so people out there need to ask, why are you not allowing people to read in prison? If you're such a-- their purported purpose is rehabilitation, why are you not allowing people to read in a prison? You can get all type of balls. You can get a basketball, handball, a football, a soccer ball, a tennis ball, but you can't get a book. Something wrong-- something is very wrong with that. And so I challenge people out there to challenge the state. Say, "why are books so dangerous? Why do you consider books so dangerous?

You know, why? And I also say when people are out there partnering with the state, all these book programs, I get upset because the state is the largest, biggest purveyor of censorship. And so we have people who are actually partnering with the state in the name of creating more access and it's like, you're not. You really aren't. If you knew what was happening on the ground... I don't need more Shakespeare in prison. They have that already. I can get all the Shakespeare I want.

I don't need the classics from the canon of Western civilization because they have those books, we have them all. But I can't get certain authors. I'm not gonna get Robin DG Kelley. I'm not gonna get that. Not at all. I'm not going to get Cedric Robinson behind the walls. I'm not gonna get Walter Rodney behind the walls. They're not gonna allow them. They're not ever gonna buy that and put that in their library. Sylvia Wynter will never be in their library, it's not gonna happen, ok? So the thing is, the books that I need to get *Captive Genders* will never be behind the walls, you know. *Queer (In)justice* will not be behind the walls. They're not going to provide these books. So the books that I need, you know, they don't buy and they prohibit me from having them, by having someone send them to me. Why is that?

And remember, the other thing I wanted to say is that, this goes back to the State claims of caring about the people. Remember, the state is saying "we're protecting children, you know out there, protecting children and their young minds." You know, I'm like, why doesn't your care extends to education itself? Funding education. Why doesn't your care extend to the environment and making sure the environment is sound so your children have an earth to be on. Right? Why don't you, why doesn't your care extend to food insecurity? Making sure all the children eat. Or affordable housing? Make sure they have a place-- or healthcare, you know? Or just recreation itself. So why is it your care so truncated? If you care so much about children, and they're the future and them being safe, let's talk about the things that really make them safe.

And so, we see the state is fraudulent with these claims. The same thing inside the prison. They say that they are concerned about our rehabilitation and keeping this place safe. Prison is inherently violent. It's never going to be safe. Alright, and if you're really concerned about our rehabilitation then why are you stopping us from reading? It doesn't make any sense, know what I mean? So the thing is, the claims the state are making I think we need to challenge them on. Say, "Ok, if you care about, you know, children and the future, let's do more. Let's fund these things that really keep the community safe." And you'll find that they're not going to do that.

If you really care about rehabilitation of prisoners, then let's fund the things that're about it. Because in every prison everywhere across DOCs you will find that the therapeutic, the vocational, educational programs are gutted. They're the first thing to leave, go. So why're you gutting their programs if you care so much about rehabilitation and safety? So just, the state is fraudulent in their claims and we need to call them out on those claims. Why is censorship actually, you know, being enacted? Let's really get to the bottom of that question.

[APPLAUSE]

MARIAME KABA:
One of the things that struck me when I was going through archives seized from D yard after the Attica rebellion was that, some of the things in the yard, despite being banned throughout New York's prison system, were pamphlets of Sostre's writings. What is the revolutionary potential and possibility for zines and pamphlets and other forms of political education that are not published books?

STEVIE WILSON:
Well I think that, obviously I've always used zines in my work inside. I found them to be... first of all, they're cheaper. They're either low or no cost, and people in prison don't have expendable income like that. So, they're easier to get and they're easier to disseminate because if I get one copy and I can actually go to the library and make many, many copies. So all I need is one copy versus someone sending me 10 books or 20 books. That doesn't happen too often. You can't send me, particularly in Pennsylvania, you can only be sending me one copy of a book at a time and so... but what I can do is get one copy of a zine and disseminate it to 30 or 40 people if I want to. So I find that, that also happens. That's good. The other thing about space limitations, most prisons have space limitations. You can only have a certain amount of written material. Well, ten books take up a lot of space, ok. But zines are smaller and because they're smaller, we're able to-- you have more of them, you know, and so I think when we talk about getting around the DOC, whether it's cost, whether it's space limitations, whether it's being the way they disseminate material, zines are much more, have a greater advantage than books.

Also, when I'm dealing with people, it's just easier for me to give them a zine that's 10 pages long, right, and they'll take that and read that. If I gave them a book that was 300 pages long, they'll be like, okay, yeah, they'll take it but they won't read it, you know? It would take them a

whole year to read it cause they'll dibble and dab in it. So I think that it's important that the zines were honored as far as an introduction to this material. And so I think we need to invest more in zines and pamphlets. And pamphlets used to be a major part of radical movements. And I think we need to get back to that. Rinaldo Walcott's new book, "On Property," is actually a pamphlet. It's actually a larger pamphlet. And he talked about, in the introduction, going back to that, using his format in our movements. And I think that was a great point that we need to get back to pamphlets and zines. Making those a part of our movement because if we're going to create a mass movement, we're going to need to have those type of materials. I can see someone coming home from work on public transportation and reading a zine, you know, and taking their time to read the zine. It's easier than having this big old tome, this book I gotta carry with me. You know, and so I think that even, not just inside but outside, if we had zines and pamphlets that we could pass out to people and we could actually get more people to be interested in the work that we're doing. So I just think that they work wonders. Zines have been my go to and I encourage people... Inside we are starting a study to go with zines first to do that.

MARIAME KABA:
What are some of the legacies of Martin Sostre's work that you carry with you in your organizing today?

STEVIE WILSON:
Well I think, in the written response I actually listed four, right? And so I said one is: political education is important. I go back to Malcolm X's comment about the failure, the problem in the Civil Rights Movement was that they were trying to organize a sleeping people, that you have to wake the people up first. Then you can organize them. And so political education is that rousing. It is that waking people up. And people have questions. They want to know what happened, why, who's responsible? And I think that without those answers, what happens is that we begin to act and oftentimes not only will our goals be frustrated but we'll find our condition will be worse because we acted without knowledge.

We acted without understanding. And so I think that we say, I've said this, hear my comrade said, Safear say this: knowledge precedes speech and action, and so we have to have knowledge before we begin to speak and act on things. And so political education, that's what he taught, wherever he was, whether it-- first bid, second bid, in Buffalo or New Jersey, he was on political education. It's funny because even in New Jersey they were on his top because when he was teaching to the young people they were criticizing him about the political educational work he was doing. He just wasn't building, you know, this center here, he was teaching the kids at the same time. And that's what the work set was all about that.

So, we see that wherever he was, he was always involved in political education so I think that's a big takeaway for me. I think that what's important to me also is that we talk about meeting the people where they are. I think that I've mentioned about the other employee of his bookstore who wasn't connecting with the people, who knew the issues, but the way he was talking about

the issues to the people, he just wasn't resonating or really catching with them. And Martin was someone who knew how to meet people where they were and it made things easy for them. I'm reminded of the templates he made for the civil actions, the civil rights actions that he was-- and he made the templates himself.

But not only did he create the template, but then he created instructions that were very detailed and simplified for people. So it wasn't just like here, here just fill it out. This is how you fill it out. And then he'd go point by point. That must've been exhausting for him to do that, but he did it. He made things simple and easy for the people, that was very important. You know, in this work, people, the people that we're most often struggling alongside are struggling to survive, ok? They don't have hours and hours and hours to do this work. They have to steal time to do the work and so, if we make it easier for them, right? Then they can become more involved in the work. You know, and I think that he understood that. He understood that, you know. That you... If more people become involved we have to make things easier for them. We have to be concerned with their condition of their lives and we have to meet them right where they are. Not where we want them to be, but right where they are. And speak their language. And so, this is a big thing.

The other thing tied to that is mutual aid work, is that we found whether he was in on his first bid, you saw the community was really built around mutual aid. They ate together, they studied together, they were there together for each other.

You find that, and you see that when he went to Buffalo, the Center itself was a center of mutual aid. And mutual aid covers so many forms. Sometimes it's financially, sometimes it's child care, sometimes it's just providing materials. You know what I mean, they have books to read and things like that. But he was always involved in mutual aid. He understood the connection between mutual aid and community building. I've learned in here that the mutual aid is actually what enables us to be able to do the study groups. People are inside and they are trying to find something to eat, trying to find some hygiene products to keep clean, you know, trying to find a way to connect with their families, and these are the things that're preoccupying their mind.

So we are engaging in mutual aid, right, that helps them steal time to study. It helps them steal the time to study. And one young man who was at Camp Hill with me, he's home now, but he was actually working in the kitchen, he was sewing clothes, and another hustle he had-- he had three different hustles he had on the side, and he wanted to study. So what I did to him, I said, "listen, we can provide X amount of funds for each month so that you can knock two of those hustles off so you can study." And that's what we did. So we actually provided funds for him and he was just working in the kitchen and studying now. So that mutual aid helped him. The other thing about mutual aid is that it becomes a critique also. We explain why people have to steal time.

That was important, too. I think Martin did that at the same time when he built the center in New Jersey and he was giving political education to the young people, he wasn’t just gonna build this

center here, let's talk about why we have to build it, why we gotta do this, why we gotta provide for our own, and how the state is not gonna do this for us, and we shouldn't even be worried about them doing it. So mutual aid is not just the fact that we are providing something for someone's material need, but at the same time it's a critique, it's an intervention and a critique, and I think that was important and it showed up in his work.

The last thing he wanted to talk about was the role of cultural productions and I talk about the story where Martin's bookstore and how they got it poppin', and how he was like this is not how I wanted it to go and so he started with the artwork first and that brought some customers in and he said okay, but this is still not poppin' like I wanted it to be. And it was the music. When he saw the young people down the street and they were gathered around the record player and they were listening to the music. He went and bought a used record player and got some records and started blasting music. And the young people came. And that's how he got them into the bookstore and that is how the bookstore started popping in Buffalo.

He understood the power of cultural production and I ask where are our cultural productions? If we're going to create a mass movement, a popular mass movement, we have to be invested in cultural production, especially the visual and audio here in this culture because that's what's happening. This culture is so much about seeing things and hearing things and not as much about reading things.

So how do we convey our message to the people. Where is our artwork? Where are our plays? Where are our stories? Where is our music, our poetry? Where are our films? I think we need to invest in cultural production because this is the way we tap into the masses. Martin showed us this and I think any movement that is really going to bring people in and become mass and become a real movement, not a moment, is going to have to invest in cultural production. Is gonna have to say listen, let's put something out there that touches millions of people and that can turn the heads of many people to say 'oh what's going on?' to catch their attention.

I would encourage people to support abolitionist artists and abolitionist cultural productions. They are out there, but we need to do more and we need to make sure that they're disseminated. The thing I have been doing lately is looking for abolitionist music or music with abolitionist themes and so I have actually been able to find some artists I have never heard of before. Many different genres. And I'm like "Wow." You have people from not only rap, like The Coup, and then you have Soul Glo which is a rock band, a heavy metal band, and they're abolitionists in what they're saying, so I think it is important for us to support abolitionist artists and big up them wherever we find them. Put somebody onto it like 'Did you hear this? You know, you see this? check this out.' If we going to ever grow as a mass movement we have to think about cultural production and the role that it plays in revolutionary work.

MARIAME KABA:

This is the last question which is, there will be people in the audience, his family, his comrades, people who work with him, supported him, and organized with him. Is there anything that you want to share with them?

STEVIE WILSON:
I had an opportunity a couple of years ago, to speak to his son and I really just want to reiterate that I am thankful to his family and wanted to express my gratitude and my love for them and for Martin. When I tell you that he has impacted my life tremendously, you know, like I said before, I wake up every day and I ask myself would this shit stand up to Martin's ghost. What would Martin say to me if he saw me doing this? Is it something he would approve of? And that really is important to me because this is a person who did the work inside and outside and so he set an example for me.

He was a role model for me and I so I thank everyone who supported him, wherever he was, they supported him. It doesn't seem like he might've been -- Martin knew what he wanted. And he didn't seem like the type of person who was gonna back down from that and he didn't really seem like a compromiser to me, that's another thing. But they supported him and they stayed by his side and I thank you for that. His family once again I have so much love in my heart for his family and his comrades, because this man means so much to me and I would love to meet them and see them and speak to them when I get home and I'm thinking to myself now, this is the first time I have said this, but if they make me max out which will be February of 2026, I will be the same age as Martin when he came home. Do you know that? I will be the same exact age that he was when he came home. It's just another coincidence to me like "Wow" and he lived a long life after he came home and he did a lot of good work so I intend to follow in his footsteps that way also. I thank everyone who's a part of this event and I thank everyone who's been a part of Martin's life and that we need to continue also in spreading his work, his legacy, and really picking up the tools that he used and keep going forward.

[APPLAUSE]

MARIAME KABA:
I am really just so happy that we got to hear from Stevie and I think you got a sense of who he is if you have never met him before or talked with him or been in an interaction with him. For a person who has been locked up as long as he has, he continues to fight on the inside in one of the most repressive institutions that ever has existed on the planet, the prison, and he is doing this work on a daily basis, mentoring and supporting younger people, keeping his sense of humor, refusing dehumanization, making sure everybody knows that he is a human being above all.

And keeping joy, keeping joy in the dungeon. And to me that is a lesson for all of us. That shit is hard on the outside, it's not as hard as it is on the inside and we have so much more that we can use towards our benefit and yet folks on the inside are constantly working, constantly living,

constantly building community doing mutual aid with each other. What is our excuse? What is our excuse? Yeah?

For me in the end, what I want to say, and I don't want to go over because Stevie said all the things he needed and wanted to say. I just want to pull a couple of things out from what he said and just speak for myself on those things. We are talking about censorship a lot right now in our culture and our communities and we are talking about them going after Black studies, but you know what y'all? They've always gone after Black studies.

Black studies came out of struggle to be able to tell our own stories and narrate our own stories and sometimes people in Black studies forgot that but that is where it came from. It came from community members saying this is what we need. We want our history to be told and we want our history to be shared with our kids. Why do we only learn about the histories of our oppressors? This is bullshit, right? So this frontlash has been continuous and will continue but you know who will be continuous and continue? It is us.

We are going nowhere. They will continue to have to fucking deal with us. And so if that is the case, what are we wringing our hands about? We gotta fight. And we are living in a city with a fascistic mayor who is right now attempting to cut dollars from the library. We are sitting in a jewel in Harlem, a public library like the Schomburg Center, that they want to cut resources from, give it to the goddamned cops, who are not keeping anybody safe, keep sucking away at all of the resources and the nutrients in our communities and give us shit in response and we are all sitting here? Supposedly going along with this bullshit? No, he is not cutting a dime and all of you in this room today should be killing him tomorrow on his phone, calling him, showing up at his house, whatever. One of his many… I don't even know if he lives in the city. Remember we don't know that for sure. Anyway, let me just step back. I just want to say we have it in our power to not allow these things to be happening in our name. We do not agree. We do not consent. We are going to fight back. We will win. That's the bottom line. Thank you all. [APPLAUSE]

I think I am supposed to stop now. Am I? Can somebody tell me what the timing situation is? We are at time? Yes. I think Vikki is supposed to come up here. And I'm also curating, by the way, an exhibition about prison and censorship. This fall. So come. It will be at the EFA Project Space. Come and check it out.

[APPLAUSE]

VIKKI LAW:
Thank you Mariame. Can we just have ten seconds of applause that I can record and we can send to Stevie later?

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you. Garrett, I will give this to you and you can figure out the tech behind it. All right. We have just heard an amazing conversation. Those of you who were here last night have heard about Martin Sostre's amazing struggles behind bars. Question. Before tonight, just by a show of hands, how many of you had heard of the August Rebellion at Bedford Hills? All right.

How many of you -- yes. Not enough. I'm going to give you the 3.5 minute history lecture before Garrett comes and pulls me off the stage with a hook. In 1974, in August of 1974 at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, the maximum security women's prison in Westchester, 45 minutes or an hour away, there was a woman named Carol Crooks and she was a jailhouse lawyer. She is not very well known in history because history is usually not written to talk about subversions and uprisings and prisons.

On that August day she was in her housing unit when male guards from Greenhaven, the men's prison 30 to 40 miles away, dragged her out of her cell, brutally beat her, dragged her down the hallway, and placed her in solitary confinement without a hearing. The month before that, Carol Crooks had won a court injunction saying the prison was not allowed to do this, so very clearly this was retaliation for her jailhouse lawyering and her jailhouse lawyering victory.

This might have ended there except that the women around her protested. They took over portions of the prison, they allegedly took seven staff members hostage (some of the women say they didn't take any staff members hostage, and that the guards locked themselves in a room to try to get away from them), they demanded proof that Carol Crooks was alive. They demanded that the media be let in, and in response the prison cut the phones, they cut communication, they stalled, and the women continued to hold the prison and they withstood being water hosed, they withstood being tear gassed, and then finally the state of New York and the Department of corrections called in male state troopers and guards from neighboring male prisons to take back the prison. The women were all sent to solitary confinement.

This was about 200 women that took over the prison and participated in this. This was not just four, five, six. This was a good number of women in the prison and they were sent to solitary confinement where they found Carol Crooks, who had not been given any medical attention or any assistance after having been brutally beaten. All of this occurred because Carol Crooks, like Martin Sostre, was a jailhouse lawyer who not only challenged but changed prison conditions. Six months earlier in February of that year, she had been thrown in solitary and had been sentenced to stay there for the remaining 17 years of her prison sentence.

She filed a civil rights lawsuit that established the right of all women at Bedford to due process before being sent to solitary. This was not something they had before. And as I stated earlier, in July the court sided with her and issued an injunction prohibiting the present from placing women in solitary without 24 hour notice and an actual hearing, so the August Rebellion was clearly retaliation because she won. The following year, and she kept fighting even in solitary, after having been brutalized and after having been beaten, after having seen all the other women

come to her defense and be equally punished and be isolated, in 1975 she and the other women were back in court filing yet another lawsuit to free themselves from solitary. And they won that.

Fast forward six years later and in 1981 that lawsuit was finally settled with the prison system, and they won the right for all women to know what the charges were against them within 24 to 48 hours, which they did not have before. They won the right to call witnesses as to what the alleged charges were against them. They won the right to get a written decision of whatever the hearing decided, so it was no longer like we're just verbally going to say something and there was no documentation that you could then use to challenge.

And they won the right to have a hearing within seven days of being thrown in solitary. No more of this you just stay there forever and ever and not know your charges and never have any sort of due process. The court also awarded them $127,000 which is a lot of money, especially in 1981. They used that to buy equipment to make everyone's conditions better. They bought things like a washer and dryer, they also bought equipment for the law library so that women had access to things like typewriters and other equipment that existed in 1981 that would help them.

And for Black and Latinx literature, for the general library which was not there, we heard Stevie talk about the importance of having this kind of literature and how it is often not bought by the prison administrations. Then with the last of that money, they threw themselves a party with ice cream, and I end with this to remind us that Carol Crooks and Martin Sostre both remind us that we must fight and fight and fight. And when we win, we should also make time to celebrate before we get back in the fight again.

[APPLAUSE]

Carol Crooks passed away during the pandemic. Her fight and her victories and her legacy live on and that is something that we should remember. Thank you. [APPLAUSE] The next panel, so don't go away, is the Imprisoned Black Radicals Tradition panel, so can we have the next panelists please come up? [APPLAUSE]

ORISANMI BURTON:
Peace, everybody. Greetings, it is such an honor to be here. This has been amazing today and yesterday and we are so thrilled to be doing this and celebrating the revolutionary life of Martin Sostre. My name is Orisanmi Burton, I'm an assistant professor of anthropology at American University and I have the pleasure of facilitating the conversation with these esteemed panelists. To my right we have Masia Attila Kamaathi Mugmuk, to his right, we have sister Laura Whitehorn, and last but not least brother Jose Saldana. Each of these panelists in their own ways have been involved in revolutionary political struggle within and outside prison walls and each of them in different ways are a part of and carry on the legacy we are here to celebrate,

that of Martin Sostre. So without further ado, I just want to get into it and I'm gonna ask each panelist questions separately and see what comes up. I hope you all enjoy this.
I'm gonna start with brother Masia who was a political prisoner in New York and New Jersey for over five decades, and your first bid was in New York from 1960 to 1975 and I just want to share for folks here that would've been the same time that Martin Sostre was inside, and much like Martin Sostre, brother Masia not only understood himself to be a revolutionary but was understood by the state to be revolutionary and so he was targeted as such. So if you wouldn't mind, I would love to hear you tell the audience about who you are and how you became politicized within the walls. Tell me about some of the organizing you did and how you developed yourself into a revolutionary in the 1960s and 70s.

MASIA MUGMUK:
Thank you. First I'd like to say, Power to the people.

ORISANMI BURTON:
Right on, Power to the people. [APPLAUSE]

MASIA MUGMUK:
My name is Masia, and they used to call me General Masia because I have a military disposition about myself and how I train people but when I first came into prison I only had a third grade education. I couldn't hardly read or write. And I met some individuals that were very politically conscious, as well as spiritually, and they saw potential in me and they put me on the side and started educating me about African history and culture that I didn't know too much about. And I met this gangster and he was the last of the 40 Theives. He was an elderly gentleman. He asked me a question, he said, do you know who Tarzan was and I said no. He said let me explain this to you. You look at the word Tarzan, what does it mean, you have the word tar and then you have man, it means a Black man. Now I did not know that he had knowledge of African history and culture even though he was a gangster. He told me I have been in prison for many years, I'm doing a life sentence and there's a lot of us in here doing life sentences but we don't want you to follow our footsteps. We want you to educate yourself. Learn something about your history and where you came from and what is your purpose in life, otherwise you're gonna wind up in prison for the rest of your life like we are.

We have nothing to lose. We're through gambling. Ever since that happened I met another individual they call him Hekima, it means wisdom in kiswahili, a wise person. And he was versed with history and culture and he had it all down pat. Even though at that particular time, they would not allow you to have books that was relevant to African history and culture, especially JA Rogers' book. *From Superman to Man* was a book he introduced me to. He knew it by heart and he explained it to me. Even though I could not read or write I retained the knowledge and then one day there was a demonstration in the population and it really inspired me. An individual was locked up because he had a holy Quran in his possession.

At that particular time you could not have a holy Quran. You could not have books on Swahili or Arabic. They didn't mind you studying Spanish, they didn't mind you studying Italian or French or German, but they didn't want you to study Swahili or Arabic and I didn't know why, I didn't understand. So he told me everybody's gonna stay inside their cells until they demand the release of this individual. I didn't even know this individual but I was down with that. I didn't appreciate injustice. Cause I know I was a victim of injustice myself. In a way it was a blessing because it enabled me to learn things that I didn't know about before.

So I got down with the demonstration, I stood in my cell and the guards came to my cell and they had about seven or eight guards, and they took me to a lockup unit on the rooftop, solitary confinement. They placed me in a hole for 30 days. I couldn't eat proper food because they would not feed you. They might feed you two slices of bread infested with dead roaches. You had to pick out the roaches out of the bread and eat it in order to survive. Then you would get a glass of water and it reminded me of Dannemora. They did the same thing when I was there, but I'm not gonna talk about Dannemora right now, I'm gonna finish this part here.

After 30 days, being released, I was in the midst of individuals that were very politically conscious. Despite the fact that they were religiously involved, and they called themselves Muslims, the Nation of Islam. And I met another gentleman who was well read seemed like he had a PhD and spoke three different languages and his name was Kiongozi which means leader in Swahili. He set up a class on the roof after we did thirty days and we was placed in a cell and they gave us some of our property. Every day they had recreation on the rooftop and we would go out there and talk and he would start speaking about English, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology.

He started teaching these things, even business law, criminal law, and we started learning, and then we had debates and discussions on the chair. My third grade education was eliminated in three months, I learned how to read and write. I got a high school diploma, what they call a secondhand type of diploma, I learned that and then I started reading the dictionary and I was inspired by another man who did a lot of time in prison. That was brother Malcolm X. They say that he studied the dictionary from A to Z. He increased his vocabulary tremendously. He went to the library and studied books on sociology, psychology, biology, history, poetry, philosophy.

That is how he built up his knowledge, so I was impressed by that. And I started studying the dictionary A through Z. Every day I would take maybe 10 words out to build up my vocabulary. and James X. Pierce, as they called him Kiongozi, he would quiz us with the 8 parts of speech. He would ask the question, what is a noun, what is a verb, what is an adjective and so forth and so on but he put it in an African context. He said the name of a person, Kwame Nkrumah, he used that as an example and then he used other names and we learned that and every day we would quiz each other and we would speak Swahili.

I learned Swahili in such a short span of time, that I forgot all about English, so much so that when the police came by because they teach you to say yes sir, no sir, thank you, no thank you, and I developed that type of discipline. So when an officer came by to serve us the food and whatever I wanted to eat I would say 'asante,' and he looked at me like I was crazy. I said [phrase in Swahili] And then it dawned on me that I was speaking another language. I wasn't speaking English, so I say 'excuse me, thank you.' And he walked off. So that is when my political ideology came about because see the Nation of Islam at that time was different from the Muslims they have today. They studied Marxism, Leninism, anarcho-communalism, philosophy, history, they had a quiz on each subject.

We were learning universal knowledge. You had a choice to choose any one of these schools of thought and I appreciate the different schools of thought that elevated me to educate myself and the unity and strength we had, they tried to break that up. They stopped allowing us to come to the rooftop to socialize and practice public speaking. And we took a Dale Carnegie course, they teach you how to speak, how to use your hands to describe things instead of saying "you know what I'm talking about, this is what you do" I'm just showing you.

But anyway, what happened is that he said don't use your hands when you speak. We have a tendency to do that. Most of us do I guess. He said, put your hands behind your back if you get nervous. Put them behind your back. Just do like this here if you get nervous. But if you want to emphasize something, you say "in order for you to win intelligence, the words I'm here to speak. You must first consider why I speak as I do." And this is how we used to practice public speaking.

We got used to doing that and that's what enabled us to recruit a lot of individuals into the Nation and then eventually when Malcolm X got assassinated a lot of us had to change our ideology. We became revolutionary. Because we didn't like what happened to him. Even today they apologize, but it's too late, they eliminated the great man who was very resourceful in knowledge and wisdom. So we started thinking about Karl Marx and Lenin, Engels, we started reading all about them, we read all the classical works we could possibly get in the institution. Cause we had to win lawsuits to get books in.

At that particular time, as well as with this man [Sostre] on the screen, they did not allow us to have certain books in prison. You could not get books on psychology. I didn't understand why. You couldn't get books on sociology. I didn't understand why. You couldn't get books on revolution and stuff of that sort so we had to find means to get it through court. We had to order a bilateral arbitration in order to show cause and a complaint in a 1983 lawsuit. And finally, we won at court and they started allowing us to have books. The only reason is they allowed us to have books at that time is because we was in isolation, we weren't in population. And they felt we gon' stay there for ten or fifteen, twenty years whatever amount of time that we were serving. But it was amazing. And then they shipped us out to different institutions so they could divide us. Because we was learning too much at that particular time.

And as Stevie was saying about the newspapers, they would cut out articles on anybody that was radical, revolutionary, militant or whatever the case may be, they wouldn't let us read that. You had to read between the lines. So when I got sent to Attica I was in solitary confinement and won a couple of lawsuits and they allowed me to have any books that I wanted on revolution. I got books on Kwame Nkrumah's revolutionary handbook, I got Karl Marx books, Guerilla Warfare by Che Guevara, Fidel Castro's ideology–

ORISANMI BURTON:
We are going to transition to Sister Laura in about 30—

MASIA MUGMUK:
Okay I'm sorry I'm taking up too much time.

ORISANMI BURTON:
No you're not I just wanna let you know, but this is an important story. So I just wanna let you finish.

MASIA MUGMUK:
I'm gonna finish this last little piece here, I'm gonna curtail it. I realize we have other guests up here and they're gonna share a lot of knowledge with you as well. So I don't want to hold up all the time. But anyway, where was I at?

ORISANMI BURTON:
You were getting books while you were in solitary confinement in Attica.

MASIA MUGMUK:
Okay thank you, see I needed help, we need to remember certain things sometimes. We need a little humor, too. We need a little humor–

ORISANMI BURTON:
Absolutely.

MASIA MUGMUK:
—in moments of madness. But anyways, when I came to population I only had three days to organize in Attica. They put me in the worst population, worst wing I said, was D Block.

ORISANMI BURTON:
And this was 1970?

MASIA MUGMUK:

Right 1970 before the Attica incident. It was amazing. It had all these gangsters and would-be killers, don't care type of attitude. They weren't interested in revolution, they weren't interest in reading the books so I had to talk to them on their level so I said look, I tell you what, if you're interested in money, fast money I will show you how to get fast money from the revolutionary perspective and you can live high on the hog and at the same time you can serve people that are oppressed and poor.

Create a Black Robin Hood organization, like the story of Robin Hood. You could rip off banks, loan companies, payrolls and what not and feed the people and at the same time you can live high on the hog. They became interested, "Okay tell me about that." [LAUGHTER]

ORISANMI BURTON:
So on that note, I mean, this is what we get when we talk to Baba Masia, right? So on that note, because, this is…I mean, so, this is what we getting when we talk to Baba Masia, right. But, this is a perfect moment to transition because I wanted to ask Sister Laura... and it's important because what you're just hearing right now is the deep roots of the Attica rebellion, right. And we heard about that yesterday with Martin Sostre and the way that he laid the groundwork legally, ideologically, sowing seeds through political education for what became Attica. And we are hearing from Baba Masia the same kind of, that deep-rooted, that history, that tradition that Attica grows out of.

Obviously Sister Laura wasn't in the Attica rebellion, but you were active at that time and you did a lot of work to support the people who were involved in Attica. So I wanted to ask you to speak to the significance of Attica. Before you do that you could tell us a little bit about who you are and your political biography, but then I wanted you to talk some about the specifically revolutionary trajectory of Attica, right, that often gets lost when we talk about it.

LAURA WHITEHORN:
Yeah.

ORISANMI BURTON:
Yeah, Thank you.

LAURA WHITEHORN:
Thank you. Thanks for including me in this panel. It kinda breaks my heart that I'm on this panel because if we're talking about the revolutionary Black tradition in the 70s, I wish Eddie Conway who just died were here. I wish so many people who died in prison, who led those movements inside, that inspired me and a whole lot of other people to become not just prison abolitionists but imperialism abolitionists, and to focus on the prisons, because, for a couple of reasons. One is that after the counterintelligence program had attacked and tried to destroy the Black organizations, including, not limiting to, but including the Black Panther Party, which is what had

organized me to be revolutionary in the first place, and so many of those people were in prison, those leaders.

And there was an attempt to begin, what we call now mass incarceration, to make sure there wouldn't be another Black Panther Party because the areas that people lived in would be decimated or whatever the correct word is for destroying communities, that families would be, generations would be, interrupted. Which is what you see if like me and like my co defendant Susan Rosenberg who's here. You're in a women's prison or like Roz Smith in Bedford, you see that the women in prison, the Black women, the brown women, are being robbed of their children and their families and interrupting the generations.

And so, Attica, to me, was the counter to that. Attica was, "Fuck you US imperialist state. You put us in prison. We're still gonna be revolutionaries". And I think that gets lost a lot in the horror, of correct, horror, when you see the massacre and the aftermath. And I feel like, I mean, in addition to the new film about Attica, people should look at the original film that Lucinda Firestone did that was closer to the time of Attica, because to me it more shows the nature of the rebellion itself.

So, I sort of had a thought while Mariame and Stevie were talking. I can't see because there's this light in my eyes, but I know there are a lot of formerly incarcerated people in this room, not just on the stage. I see people. I sort of wanted to ask everyone to stand up, but I don't want to make people uncomfortable. But what I want to say to us is: let's stop when people want to hear how bad prison is, if they don'... if we haven't made that clear yet then people aren't even reading like the major newspapers that just ran a story about 20 or 30 people being beaten, dragged at of their cells and beaten, at Sing Sing in November. And they aren't looking at the stories about women being sexually abused in the prison that I was in, in California, the federal prison, which was going on when I was there on a lesser level, but where the guards are actually being brought, it's being brought out. There are suits going on.

Okay, I think people love to hear about how bad prisons are for some reasons that are good and some reasons that are bad. When people start asking us to describe our time in prison let's talk about how we resisted instead. [APPLAUSE] Because we all did. Or we wouldn't even be sitting here. If we hadn't resisted we wouldn't be part of building a movement against incarceration. We wouldn't be part of saying Close Attica. We wouldn't be part of saying Release Aging People In Prison, and abolish life without parole and death by incarceration.

So, I'm really glad Vikki, if you are still here I can't see, that you told the story of the August Rebellion which otherwise I was gonna have to tell really fast. And I first met Vikki because she read about the… they called it a riot, it was not a riot, but the rebellion that we did at Lexington, the federal prison in Lexington, which was a women's prison at that point. There are so many examples, and we did them over and over again. And we did them because the nature of prison

is to oppress resistance and every time we tell a joke, every time we laugh, everytime we share commissary, which we are not allowed to share, all of that, all of that builds resistance.

The other thing I sort of wanted to say in the beginning because I was a political prisoner and before I went to prison and after I worked on the cases of political prisoners. And I was talking to Craig [Gilmore] before, and remembering I actually spoke here in 2015 with Ruthie Gilmore and Arun Kundnani. And we talked about literature that was coming out about political prisoners and by political prisoners. That was 2015. There are people sitting in this audience who are political prisoners, who at that moment I was talking about and did not think would be sitting in this audience now. [APPLAUSE]

We have, through the struggles… we have— there are the five political prisoners in New York State who are now out. Eddie Conway, even though he did die nine years after he got out, he got out after 44 years. And most recently, Dr. Mutulu Shakur was released [APPLAUSE] and people who worked on his campaign are here. And I say that partly to say we have victories, which, you know, we all know that, but partly I say it to think, and thinking through Martin's eyes, think about all the work that went into that. Vinny, his beautiful son, said last night that he was sitting watching TV with his dad, and he was cursing the US for going into Iraq. And he thought his father was gonna say, “Right on,” you know, “Tell ‘em”. And he didn’t. He said what are you going to do about it? And then listed, like you said, a bunch of things that probably started with, you know, write a letter, do this. Work, work, work. And the theme of tonight is what are you going to do about it?

So, before I shut up on this round, I just want, I sort of want to ask everyone who is willing, to listen to Martin, to get involved if you are not already. To get in the really nitty-gritty, not always pretty and often challenging, not just because it’s hard but because it raises questions of principle when you are fighting to change the actual racist structures. So we’re trying to change the parole system. We’re trying to do it really radically with bills that look very… what do we say… reasonable. But we’re always confronted with principal issues, and the main one is not throwing anyone under the bus. And If we don't build a movement that together will work to make sure no one is thrown under the bus… So I want to ask people to join the campaign by the Alliance of Families for Justice to close Attica. I want to ask you to go up to Albany next week to fight against the rollbacks on the little bit of reforms that were made on bail. I want to ask you to come with us on April 17th to fight to end life without parole sentences, and to make the parole board into something closer to what we would like to see, which is basically a presumption of parole for people.

And anything else, anything else. Martin did everything. He resisted himself, he went to the hole, he did lawsuits, he wrote petitions, anything he could do. And each of those things by itself does not a revolution make, but if we do them from the standpoint of this is all building towards a movement, a powerful movement. Like I don't know if anyone else is old enough? Ms. Susan [Rosenberg] you were there, to have marched after… She's not old. [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] She's

not old, but she was there. She was a baby. We marched to the courthouse or somewhere in Buffalo. And we marched to Albany. And we marched everywhere around the Attica Brothers, and we said you are not gonna put people in prison and keep them there for a rebellion that was a matter of human rights and the right of self-determination.

And we went all over the country. And we showed films, and we had discussions. And we fought for Dacajeweiah [Hill] who was gonna be convicted of one of the murders of the guard. And there was success in the movement, but what happened between that moment and now? And I think part of what happened is that, as Jose [Saldana] always… I hope I'm not stealing what you're going to say… but Jose always talks about how after Attica the state instituted these reforms that didn't make a real difference. So, sorta nice little things, but that made it impossible for incarcerated people to gather that much power ever again, and that happened to us too in the federal system where they stopped allowing us to meet without a staff person.

So, we weren't allowed to gather that way. That happened. Some little reforms happened, but also I think that people began to think that we could fix one piece of the system and that would change it. We can't. We have to fix all the pieces at once and we keep marching and not let anyone be thrown under the bus while we're doing it. Even when the wiser heads tell us you'll never pass that bill if you include these people, that people, and those people. So, I don't know, I just wanted to say a couple of things about that.

ORISANMI BURTON:
Thank you so much. [APPLAUSE] You know and your comment about the reforms is actually perfect because I know that Brother Jose was incarcerated in 1981 in a moment when many of those reforms had taken root. And so I wanted to ask you to tell us a little bit about your political biography, your time in the Young Lords Party, if you'd like to share anything about that, but then also tell us what it was like for you coming into the prison system in the 1980s when there were all of these reforms, including these formal education programs and yet you engaged in a kinda, a different kind of underground education program and you were mentored by many political prisoners, including Dhoruba bin Wahad, Albert Nuh Washington and many others. So if you could talk about that, your politicization, your ongoing struggle to organize in a context after Attica, I'd love to hear that.

JOSE SALDANA:
Well first let me say that, you know, I'm a formerly incarcerated person. I was released from prison in 2018, after 38 years of incarceration. And the only reason why I was released from prison was because the early members of RAPP [Release Aging People in Prison], which included Laura Whitehorn, they exposed the racist bigotry of the New York State parole board. They presented evidence of all this racism going on during parole hearings to the Governor. And the Governor perhaps did one of the few things he's ever did, that in my opinion is for the people, he didn't reappoint these racist people. Instead he appointed a diversified group of parole commissioners from social service providers, clergy, as opposed to law enforcement.

So, when I appeared before the parole board in 2018, I appeared before a newly appointed Commissioner who was a social worker. And unlike all the other hearings, she asked me one question about the crime I committed in 1979, and then she asked what have you been doing the last 38 years of your life? And based on what I'd been doing the last 38 years in incarceration, she released me. So, RAPP made that possible, made her being on the Board possible. Sadly, she only lasted two years. She was forced to resign, to retire. So two and a half weeks after I was released I reported for duty. I went to RAPP and I said, "I'm here." [APPLAUSE]

Sadly, 10 months after I was released, one of the cofounders, a pioneer in our prison system, Mujahid Farid, passed away and I became the director of RAPP. So that's, that's my story. I grew up in Spanish Harlem, El Barrio, and born in 1951. Born 101st Street, lived 107th, 111th on Madison and 5th. I was a street corner drug dealer most of my youth, inspiring to be the next Nicky Barnes, big drug kingpin, selling $2-dollar bags on the street corners of Harlem. And it was on one day that I see police cars all over the place. You know, I had to shut down my little street corner business, me and my little homies. All of us are first-generation Puerto Ricans. We had no vision of the future other than what we were doing.

And we heard that a group of people took over the church that my moms, my sisters and my aunts, everybody used to go to. I had no idea why would somebody take over a church. Well it turned that these were a group of militants. They called theyself the Young Lords. And what they did in taking over the church is, they brought attention to El Barrio. The poverty, perpetual poverty, that we inherited at birth. They brought attention to the rat infestation. I mean when I say rats, they closer to cats. That weren't afraid of you. They were biting babies. And nothing was done. We never even seen this. In the news today, if a baby is bitten by a rat, it's news. Y'know I grew up where dozens of babies, including my baby sisters and brothers, were being bitten by a rat. Eating lead because they were hungry. The paint that had lead poison. They were hungry. You know, that's perpetual poverty. Kids going hungry. Kids not going to school because they were hungry. And then the lack of medical care, treatment, and diagnosis. Rampant tuberculosis and other contagious diseases in this little neighborhood that I grew up in. And nobody gave a damn about it. But when the Young Lords took over the church, they brought attention to this. And here we are first-generation Puerto Ricans, 16-, 17-, 18-years-old, and we looking at ourselves and we saying, "Wow, news is out here." We're seeing our neighborhood in the news. And we didn't even have to say it, but we said, "Them guys that was in that church, they made this possible."

So, we started going to the church and we started listening, and eventually I was convinced, man, that I can't be selling drugs anymore. They gave me that type of moral compass and more importantly they gave all of us an identity that we could be proud of. Prior to that we were just, you know, Puerto Ricans, and we didn't even speak good Spanish. So, you know, we was actually discriminated on both sides of the spectrum. They called us New Ricans. And all of us were dark skinned, so you know, we developed a national pride from being around the Young Lords and we

became members of the Young Lords because we were proud to wear that purple beret. When we seeing them walking down the streets by the hundreds with that purple beret, we said, “Man, I gotta be there, I gotta be just like them.” So the Lords gave me an identity that I can be proud of and they also showed me how to organize people.

For the first time we see, in fact they weren’t too much older than we were, but they would go from apartment to apartment, talking to the people, addressing the people's needs. They weren't like the local politician that just come around to try to get our votes. They actually were talking and spending time, drinking coffee with people in their apartments and listening to them for hours about their needs, about what they’re going through, about their struggles, about their children, about their grandmothers. So, this was my first exposure to a real organized world and then as I started reading my history, I started reading about Don Pedro Albizu Campos, and then him I learn what a model leader is supposed to be. [Applause] Dona Lolita Lebrón, what a model leader is supposed to be. And this is what carried me on throughout my entire life

When I was arrested for… and this is something I always knew was going to happen. When I was nine years old I seen a woman, a girl. She was very young, she was probably was maybe five or six years older than me, dragged. She was a sex worker. She was dragged from six stories down by her long black hair and I was carrying groceries for her to deliver to her and I seen her being dragged, bloody face and eyes open, just looked at me, and I froze. I’m nine years old. I froze. I didn’t even know what to do. I had the groceries in my hand, when they passed, I just put the groceries down on the thing and walked away. But I’d never would forget that, because that moment defined what policing in our communities is like.

And I knew that one day I was gonna square off with a police officer. And that happened in 1979. A cop was shot in Harlem and I was convicted and sentenced 25 years to life. I wound up serving 38 years.

So, I attribute everything I know about what organizing should be, about developing relationships with people, personal relationships with people, addressing their needs, and I understand what true leadership is. So these are two models that I follow, and I will forever be grateful for the Young Lords party for it.

ORISANMI BURTON:
Thank you. [APPLAUSE]

So, we’ve been talking a lot about organizing, building relationships, people coming together, sharing stories, sharing knowledge, developing themselves collectively. One of the things that happens in the wake of the radical prison movement in the latter part of the 70s is that the state developed new ways of preventing those kinds of things from happening, and one of those technologies is an old technology, it’s solitary confinement, but it gets refurbished, it gets intensified. They start to use it in new ways to really try to break radical organizing, to try to

break people who rebel. So, I wanted to come back to Masia and talk to you about your second bid which you did in New Jersey beginning in 1975. And if you could tell us something about the Management Control Unit [MCU], right, which was first established in Trenton State Prison in 1975 while you were there. The first target of the Management Control Unit is Sundiata Acoli, who was a former political prisoner who's now out, member of the Panther 21, member of the Black Liberation Army, a codefendant with Assata Shakur. He was the first target of the Management Control Unit. Masia was incarcerated in the Management Control Unit shortly thereafter. And then prison systems around the country, and to some extent around the world, started to utilize the same kind of technologies. So if you can tell us about that project and what were they saying? Who ended up in there? And how did you, as Laura instructs us to do, how did you continue to resist even within these kinds of spaces?

MASIA MUGMUK:
Well it was designed for political prisoners and prisoners of war. Sundiata, I knew him very personally. He was about one cell in front of me. Very good comrade. It was not designed for people who didn't have a formal education. Most of the people that was placed in MCU, what they call Management Control Unit, had a college education. Sundiata, he had a college education. And all the revolutionary people they had in there they consider as a threat to security. You didn't have to violate any rules or regulations of the institution, just the fact that you came there with the background that is revolutionary.

When I first came there I was placed in the law library. I was good with law because I learned a lot in New York prison. And they made me a clerk, and my job was to teach people how to research cases, shepardize them and so forth. For some particular reason there was two individuals that work in there that was informers. And they worked for the state, and they set me up and said I was advocating revolution. I don't do that in the law library, I speak law. If you want to talk about revolution, African history, culture, we do that in the yard. That's how I used to work.

But anyway, to make a long story short, they had ten police officers came to my cell, after I was suspended from the law library, on a hunch of a rumor that I was posing a threat. And they told me I had a lawyer visit. And I knew that was a lie because they came to me at about four o'clock at night. How am I gonna get a lawyer's visit around that time? So I knew it was a set up, and they handcuffed me, took me to MCU. And I walk about two cells from Sundiata Acoli and we greet each other, the power sign, and everybody else up there knew something about we greet each other proud. But, like I said, it was designed to control any political prisoners or prisoner of war. And not only them, people who was educated in general population who was jailhouse lawyers, as we would call them back then, they would take them out of population.

There's a handbook, correctional handbook, and I read it long before I went up there. What it says in there, in order to control the general population you must remove potential leaders, teachers, organizers, jailhouse lawyers, revolutionaries, militants, radicals, religious enthusiastic individuals that have a way of influence or gravitate humans to their organization or their

religion. And that's what they did, they round up certain individuals in population and isolate them. Because they didn't want them to have any influence over the general population.

It kinda reminds me of Fredrick Douglass, I remember something he said, which is… Stevie [Wilson] was saying the same thing in essence but not using his name. One day the slave master was teaching Frederick Douglass how to read and write, and her husband came in and told her not to teach an N how to read or write, otherwise they learn freedom. When he overheard that, that inspired him. So what he did, he got some candy and gave it to some of the white boys out there - they gave him some words - he built up his vocabulary and started learning how to read and write - became a great orator in due time.

The same thing happened in the general population. They didn't want you to be around people who was intelligent. People who would make you think for yourself. They turned it around to make it seem like you are a threat to security and therefore they don't want you in the population so they put you in MCU. So the MCU was designed for control, the general population, by taking out the leaders, taking out the educated people, taking out the jailhouse lawyers, and anybody else that was revolutionary inclined, they would put them up there. But they had to have a college education. The only one exception, they had another individual named Dhoruba. He was a young brother.

ORISANMI BURTON:
Not Dhoruba Bin Wahad?

MASIA MUGMUK:
No, not Bin Wahad. This was another Dhoruba, he was young. He was a Porter. They allowed him to work in MCU, so he'd been around all these revolutionaries and listened to what they had to say. And we shared knowledge with him. He built up his vocabulary, he built up his world outlook, he became revolutionary.

And then prior to my coming there, they set some other individual up because one of the revolutionaries got killed in MCU. They tried to say he wanted to escape. They put a weapon that didn't exist in the institution. I can't think of his name right now, but he was a BLA [Black Liberation Army] member. I wasn't up there then when that happened, but the Sergeant came there and they went in the back and shot him in his head and killed him. Sundiata got shot, too. They were trying to kill him. They wanted to take him off count because he was a revolutionary and he had a great influence over a lot of people in the institution, just like Martin Luther King, not Martin Luther King… Martin Sostre. He had influence over people in New York. Him and quite a few other people. And they don't want that type of influence, so that's why they had MCU. Is to control the individuals .

That's how the COINTELPRO, when it came into existence, it was designed to control the population by eliminating any radical organizations out there, whether it was Black Panthers,

Young Lords, Five Percenters, Nation of Islam, communists, socialists, or whatever the case may be, or any great leader. Even Martin Luther King for example, he was about ready to change, they eliminated him. They had to assassinate him. Because he would've turned it into a revolution. In a way he was a revolutionary, a lot of people don't know that. Cuz he saw the handwriting on the wall, and he was about ready to make that turn. Before he could make that turn they eliminate him, they assassinate him. So any great leaders in prison, outside of prison, like Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah, Che Guevara, they eliminate you when you speak the truth.

ORISANMI BURTON:
I know you have studied the various ideologies, so we'll stay on this for a minute or two, but what you talk about in terms of how the State targets leaders specifically would seem to suggest that maybe an anarchistic strategy would be a way to evade that kind of repression. Martin Sostre obviously adopted anarchism. I know that you've studied anarchism. I wonder if you have anything you want to say about that political ideology and how it may or may not help deal with this kind of repression that you're describing.

MASIA MUGMUK:
It's all related. Everything is related, if we understand it correctly. What happens in the prison, happens in society. Prison reflects society and society reflects prison. As Malcolm once said, he said, don't be surprised I did time in prison. It's not a disgrace you did time in prison, it's only a disgrace if you maintain being a criminal. But he put it in different words of course. The same thing applies to society as far as divide and conquer. In prison, because they are doing the same thing, he once said that America means prison. We are all in prison, whether you realize it or not. There are two things I remember from a long time ago from a revolutionary perspective in prison. You got minimum privileges, and you got maximum privileges. Minimum privileges are limited to prisoners, maximum privileges are limited to society. Even though it's not predicated on the principles of freedom in a literal sense, if we understand the word freedom. They don't want you to have freedom of thought, freedom of expression. I remember studying in a course of critical thinking and I remember Mao Zedong once said, criticism has two different levels and they're very constructive for improving mistakes. You criticize yourself for errors you make, in order to improve yourself. The same thing, when a group of people come together they criticize each other in a very positive and productive way so they can correct their mistakes and errors. The same thing in prison. They don't want you to practice that type of principle of disciplining yourself and correcting your errors and mistakes so you become decriminalized. I just want to add these three things here, and I told you about it a long time ago. The correctional handbook I was telling you about a while ago, they had three adjustments for prisoners.

ORISANMI BURTON:
If you can, I'm going to cut you off in about one minute.

MASIA MUGMUK:

I will say this briefly. There are three approaches of adjustment. One is jailing. The person in jail is not thinking about freedom, he just lives in prison as a way of life, he hustles, he makes homemade wine, he does all kinds of crazy stuff and he's not concerned about bettering himself. The second one is doing time. He's slick, shrewd, clever. He's trying to get out of prison by any means he feels is necessary. So he gets an education, a paraprofessional job, and he makes it seem like he is a good person and he changed his life but he's still got a criminal mentality. The gleaner is like Martin Sostre, Malcolm X, George Jackson, Eldridge Cleaver, or anybody that transformed themselves into a revolutionary, regardless of what organization you lay claim to, he or she is considered as a gleaner. Those are the righteous revolutionaries in prison. The same thing in society. You have those same type of personalities. I'm gonna leave it like that because you have some other questions to ask.

ORISANMI BURTON:
Thank you so much. We have about 10 minutes left so I will ask a general question I would love for both of you to talk about because you started to talk about Releasing Aging People in Prison and I wanted to give you an opportunity to talk about that a little bit more tell us about what the organization is and to situate it within this longer trajectory of struggles over human rights, over liberation and talk about how you are navigating within the confines of the legal system using reformist language strategically but trying to maneuver in different ways to make some real radical progress. Sister Laura, if you would?

LAURA WHITEHORN:
Just one thing about solitary, also, is remember that the government tried to - before they turned Marion [Prison] into a control unit and then they opened Florence [Prison] - and if you don't know those names, just Google them. That is the history of how control units were being used and then against Muslim prisoners and especially people from other countries outside the United States. And Daniel McGowan is here and he can talk about this. You weren't allowed to speak your own language. You weren't allowed to have a phone call without an interpreter being there so they can rat on you. There are a lot of layers of it.

For women there was the Lexington Control Unit that was going to be for women political prisoners so it was such a horror show that we were able, people were able to get a lawsuit against it and get the Episcopal Church to come in through the Puerto Rican revolutionary movement and a lot of stuff to close it down. And then we got sent to… they opened up something in Marianna [Prison] which is where I was and Susan [Rosenberg] was, and Marilyn Buck and Silvia Baraldini. And the reason I am saying it is that, a lot of times when people talk about solitary or about control units, they define it by the rules there. Like, you're locked down for 23 hours a day, things like that. And we said, you have to look at the purpose of it because we were in a control unit where we were locked down but locked down altogether. We used to joke it was like a ship of fools because you can never go anywhere. We always have to look at what is the purpose and the purpose, like you were saying about the CMUs, is to control political thought, to control the prison by removing people, and also in the case of women is to drive

people, to take people who have either a mental illness issue or an emotional issue and push them to get worse. And we saw that. When I was in the hole, I saw women being driven to try to commit suicide.

So, okay, I'm supposed to talk about RAPP. [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] So we trace our history, as Mariame was saying, through the history of struggle of oppressed people and the history of struggle for human rights and for national liberation, of Black people, Puerto Rican people, indigenous people, in the United States, Latinx people.

And we see what people talk about as mass incarceration, as I said before and other people have been saying, as a result, a development after COINTELPRO. Chokwe Lumumba was the first person I talked to about this and he said, "COINTELPRO? Mass incarceration." Get leaders in the organizations and then - what is it in war where you destroy cops? Crops! I'm sorry, destroy *crops,* so nothing else grows… Oh, destroy cops [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] -- my nature is coming out. So we started it [RAPP], and it was [Mujahid] Farid and Kathy Boudin and I. [APPLAUSE] And I cannot tell you how hard it is for me to say that knowing that I'm the only one left. And with the support of Sophia Elijah who was then the head of the Correctional Association. We were looking at, how can we affect change for people convicted of violent cases? Because the entire movement around prison reform, change, whatever, was talking about low-level, nonviolent. Because that's easy.

It is easy to convince someone that - well, it's not, they still executed many innocent people - but you can convince people that the death penalty shouldn't be used for people who are innocent. It's harder to convince people that the death penalty shouldn't be used for someone who is guilty of what they were convicted of. And we started it also, quite frankly, because Eddie Ellis and Herman Bell and David Gilbert said to us - we were trying, we did a campaign to outgoing Governor Patterson, trying to get the political prisoners out - and they said we are looking around us, those who were still in prison, or Eddie was saying, you know the political prisoners are among an aging population and if you can put them in that context and talk about why these long sentences are so brutal and against human rights, and are death by incarceration, you can build more room around the political cases. Number one.

Number two, we then realized that we were not political prisoners, and I wasn't because I woke up one day and said, I think I'll be a revolutionary. It sounds like fun. I think I'll go to prison. That sounds like great fun. No, I was moved by the conditions of oppressed people in the United States and around the world and I was convinced that there was a strategy led by oppressed people for national liberation. I was convinced. And Attica, if I had not been convinced before, showed me prisons are a major part of repression. So why should there be a distinction between the struggle to free political prisoners and the struggle to end the criminal, racist, permanent punishment system. So that is some of how it started.

And I'm turning the tables on you because very often Jose gives the easy wrap and leaves me to talk about the harder part but I want to say one last thing. I have a criticism of all of us in the prison movement,whatever we call it, which is that we are not good at being internationalist. I don't have time to talk about it but in thinking about it, RAPP has tried to do events. I just want to say one thing, in the spirit of Martin, which is: Free Palestine! [APPLAUSE]

If we don't fight for that, if we think we're fighting against white settler colonialism as an international system and not supporting the people of Palestine against Zionism then we are going in a funny direction. Not funny.

JOSE SALDANA:
A couple of things I really want to quickly stress. RAPP is a multigenerational organization. We are as diversified as we can be. And one thing we do is, we don't shy away from harm - interpersonal harm. We know the people who are impacted by mass incarceration are also impacted by interpersonal harm, so we try to develop leadership from among those in our communities, families with incarcerated loved ones. We develop leadership with them because they are our greatest voice and they are our greatest power.

We also help develop leadership with incarcerated people because we advocate for everybody. We do not exclude anybody from justice because we believe our movement is rooted in the historic movements for racial and social justice that didn't exclude anybody. Not even the civil rights movement, it didn't exclude anyone from voting, the indigenous people didn't exclude anybody, so we will not exclude anybody based on a crime or conviction or the length of sentence. It doesn't matter to me whether you're innocent or guilty, or what crime you committed, you are a part of this movement.

The one thing that we ask to become involved in our movement is that you first and foremost start transforming your thinking. Because we cannot have leaders that's going to harm people. Leaders are going to heal people, not harm them. That is a very critical element to our campaign. We are very, very close to passing two bills. It's just a first step towards dismantling the system. But we're not *hollering*, tear down the walls, bring everybody home. We are bringing people home. In the last three years because of our advocacy we have brought 16 people convicted of cop killings in New York City home. We take the hard cases and we ask that -- because this is a community movement, a real peoples' movement led by formerly incarcerated people and people, families, that are impacted by mass incarceration who have transformed their thinking to become real peoples' leaders who will not sell out, who will not betray the movement and they will not betray your loved ones.

This is what makes us special in this movement, at least in New York State.

ORISANMI BURTON:
Thank you so much. [APPLAUSE]

I can't think of a better way to end this conversation and of course this is still a beginning, so I invite all of you to come up to our panelists and start conversations and start to conspire and figure out how you can get involved. Let me please ask you all to share your gratitude for Baba Masia Attila Kimaathi Mugmuk, Laura Whitehorn, and Jose Hamza Saldana. Thank you so much.

[APPLAUSE]