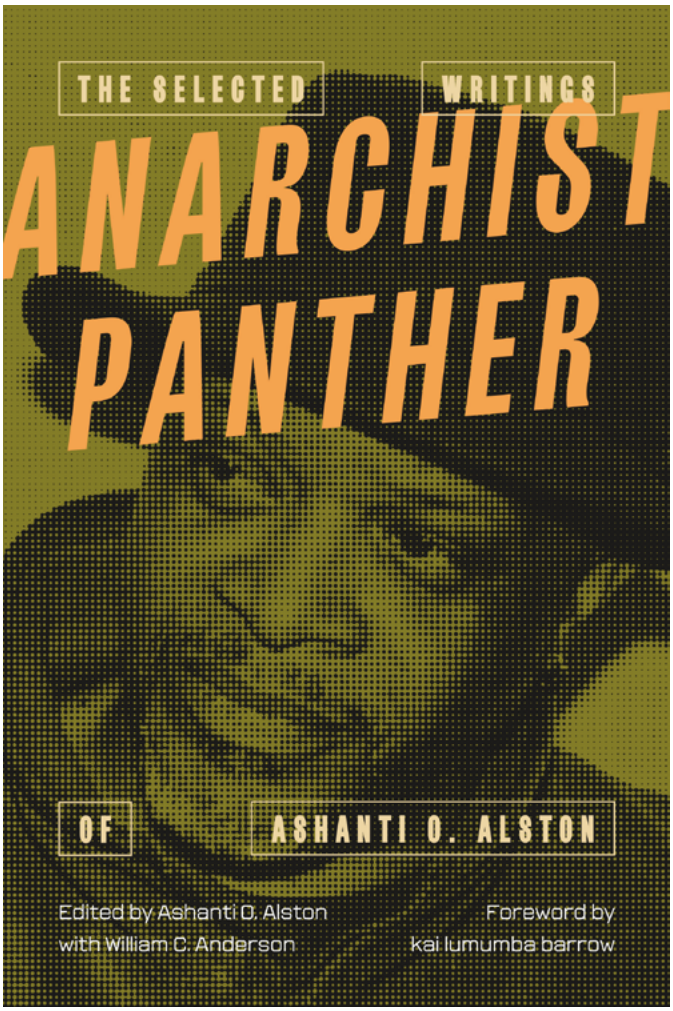
READING GUIDE

ANARCHIST PANTHER

THE SELECTED WRITINGS OF ASHANTI O. ALSTON

Edited by Ashanti O. Alston with William C. Anderson
Reading Guide written by Juan Verala Luz



Anarchist Panther is the first collection to gather Ashanti Alston's influential writing, speeches, and interviews. His thinking is built on his revolutionary life; his experiences in major struggles of the twenty-first century, as a Black Panther, Black Liberation Army soldier, and a political prisoner. Today Alston is known as one of the key figures who helped build Black anarchism into a living political tradition. The reading guide that follows is meant to help you think through his ideas in community, and share them.

"Consider jazz: it is one of the best illustrations of an existing radical practice because it assumes a participatory connection between the individual and the collective and allows for the expression of who you are, within a collective setting, based on the enjoyment and pleasure of the music itself. Our communities can be the same way. We can bring together all kinds of diverse perspectives to make music, to make revolution." (p. 36)

So proclaims Ashanti Omowali Alston to Hunter College students in October 2003. Like a catchy hook, related metaphoric references to revolutionary movements, cadent communities, and their musicmakers and movers and shakers resound throughout *Anarchist Panther: The Selected Writings of Ashanti O. Alston*, a first-of-its-kind compilation of greatest hits from the Black Panther Party cadre, husband, Black Liberation Army soldier, former political prisoner, Anarchist People of Color networker, movement elder, and father. Like jazz, this new volume from AK Press weaves together diverse compositions from an array of sources: podcast transcripts, public speeches, sketches, zine articles, collages, and even diary entries from international excursions.

kai lumumba barrow's foreword and on sustains Kamau Franklin's declaration that Ashanti is jazz incarnate (p. 4): complex, rhythmic, dynamic, inspired. He sonically entangles what he borrows from radical traditions and emergent contemporary struggles with radical psychology, feminist praxis, and more, composing new ways of viewing–and fighting for–the world we deserve. Ashanti's "non-ego eldership," as the emcee righteously hums before Ashanti trades eights with his future editor William C. Anderson (p. 143), won't permit him to admit as much; instead, he might say he's one of many instruments that fills our jam session of collective (re)imagining. But even if that's the case, Ashanti isn't just any session musician; his experimental melodies, conjured from the chops gained over sixty years in revolutionary struggle, syncopates with his bandmates in offbeat time signatures.

Organized into eight thematic acts, *Anarchist Panther* explores the range of Ashanti, from his personal biography and politics to *encuentros* with Zapatismo to hard lessons learned and now shared from struggle. This companion reading guide follows that thematic structure, but discussion groups and individual readers need not linearly follow it like sheet music. Instead, this volume's editorial arrangements allow you to sway wherever the music of social struggle, the striving for liberation moves you. As Ashanti's ruthless criticism–of movements past and present, himself before and now–encourages us to confront, many of these questions invite you to reflect deeply upon your own and our shared political performances. If we are to shake ourselves loose from Empire once and for all, we must improvise the artistry of total emancipation. Let this book harmonize us towards a never-ending symphony of worlds that holds many worlds, polyphonic productions as diverse as us, a freedom that no one nor system can ever mute.

FOREWORD, INTRODUCTION & A PANTHER'S BITE

"Chorus: *What makes free jazz so incredible is its freedom.*" (p. 1)

"That's how this often works. You hear someone out, think, and take time to learn and grow. Eventually, you find yourself in predicaments and situations that tell you what makes sense and what doesn't. It's not about us choosing positions as much as it's about positions choosing us." (p. 16)

1. In his introduction to the volume, Ashanti hammers the interrelationship between engagement and exploring the "inklings" we feel that something(s) is (are) amiss in our movements. How do these pieces fit together? What are some "inklings" you have felt in your development? How can you stay compassionately open to them?
2. How does William C. Anderson describe Ashanti's foresightful formulation of Black anarchism? What does that reveal about his contention that "positions choose us" (p. 16)?
3. kai lumumba barrow ends his foreword with a coda where Ashanti's comrades and friends answer what instrument he is. What instrument(s) are you? What musical genre(s)? What would your friends and comrades say? If those responses are different, how might you align them?

ON MY ANARCHISM

"When I speak of a Black anarchism, it is not so tied to the color of my skin but who I am as a person, as someone who can resist, who can see differently when I am stuck, and thus live differently." (p. 35)

1. Ashanti's anarchism is expansive, heterodox, jazz: it freestyles with that which came before it to rearrange a new composition. What are some of his guiding anarchistic principles? What unique concepts does he interweave with them? How does that align and diverge with how you approach your political outlook?
2. Time in the Black Panther Party reverberates into Ashanti's politics–though not without nuance. What does he carry within him from his experiences in and comrades from the Party? What has he left behind, and why?
3. De-centering decades of (ongoing) debates, Ashanti asserts that nationalism need not be at odds with anarchist horizons. Explain his argument. What reframing is required? How does a program of decolonization theoretically and practically figure into it?

4. Anarchist People of Color (APOC) networked hundreds of non-white radicals to challenge white hegemonic conceptions and correlated behaviors in the anarchist movement. Why and for whom are separate organizing spaces important? How are groups organized around points of oppression (e.g., Black caucuses; queer convergences) and privilege (e.g., men's groups; whiteness study circles) similar and how are they distinct?

5. Take any question from "Challenge to Ultimate Pantherism 1990s" (pp. 53–54) and turn it inwards. Replace specific organizational, ideological, or other terms that are relevant to your experiences and context. What do they reveal? How can constantly challenging deeply-held truths help us?

RADICAL PSYCHOLOGY LEARNINGS

"We, as a movement, had suffered a defeat at the hands of the External Enemy [at the time of this writing, 1983]. But we had not sufficiently looked at how deep was our own internalized oppression and the part that WE PLAYED in our own undoing." (p. 71)

1. How did dominant forms of socialization and enculturation inflect on and were reproduced within the Black Power and other liberatory movements? What might this tell us about the contradictory nature of social struggle?

2. Counterculture figures centrally in Ashanti's practice, from his references to his vernacular and more. Why emphasize it? What can these engagements unlock and how can they inhibit us? Think about your own cultural touchstones and consider how they figure into your political worldview and practice.

3. If we take seriously the conclusions that internalized oppression played(s) just as much a factor in our defeats as enemy forces, how can we combat both of them simultaneously? Put differently, how can we remove our own and help one another remove their Fanonian psychological masks (p. 81)? Consider individual, interpersonal, organizational, cultural, and communal practices.

ZAPATISTAS

"They were drawing on their own symbols, their own myths, their own stories. Everything became a part of their arsenal of the fight back… They were saying, let's create a space so that other ideas can come in from other folks who are oppressed, and there is no clear-cut way of doing this. So let's figure it out as we go." (pp. 108–109)

1. Throughout this section's collection of texts, what comparisons does Ashanti draw between the Black Panther Party's and the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN's) entrances onto the political stage? What do their shared features tell us about how social movement organizations can make lasting impacts?

2. Rather than assert a capital-P Program, the Zapatistas practiced what Ashanti describes as "'facilitation-ist' without a Hidden Agenda" (p. 116). What does he mean by that? How does that compare with the Panthers' vanguardist revolutionary nationalism? What are and were these currents' express or implicit goals, and how do and did the means to achieve them flow from them, and vice versa?

3. What do you glean from the "Everyday Journal" entries that Ashanti kept during his visit to "Zap Land," Chiapas, Mexico (pp. 117–124)? How do relationships, patience, and joy fit around revolutionary ambitions?

PASSING IT ON

"We just had a memorial for one of our comrades, Thomas 'Blood' McCreary. Thomas would always tell a group: we apologize to you that we didn't win, because we didn't want you to go through this. That's him speaking for us. We didn't win. But y'all gotta carry this on." (p. 167)

1. Ashanti calls on comrades to sustain support for current and former political prisoners. He actively supports these efforts through involvement with the Jericho Movement and Critical Resistance, among others. Why is it so important to support our veterans? Consider not just the moral and ethical reasons, but also the organizational, political, and practical ones.
2. Vulnerability–towards one's self, with one another, and among the communities in which we are embedded–sits at the core of Ashanti's revolutionary practice. How does he both tell and show it in the pieces that encompass this section? What purpose(s) does it serve? What can you do to inspire openness among comrades, and what do you hope it unlocks?
3. The subsection's title "Passing It On" points to the importance of intergenerational exchange in social movements. What lessons does Ashanti take from his comrade Kuwasi Balagoon? What lessons do Ashanti and William C. Anderson share with each other? As you reflect on your movement participation, what lessons do you hope to pass on and receive from your movement siblings?

POLITICAL BIO

"Even in Plainfield [New Jersey], a very racist town, there was a rebellion that took place in conjunction with other major cities like Detroit and Newark [in 1967]...For me, as just becoming a teenager, it was profound in the sense that I got to see my people fighting back. Not only on television, but here in my very neighborhood." (p. 200)

1. Inspiration to commit his life to revolutionary liberation began from Ashanti's direct experience. How did it happen? Think back to when you first began your revolutionary journey: what inspired you? How do you hope to flourish that inspiration for others you encounter?
2. Ashanti intimately unpacks his difficult decision to transition from aboveground militant in the Black Panther Party to underground soldier in the Black Liberation Army. What can we learn about commitment, risk, and sacrifice from the relationships between his aboveground and underground activity?
3. Emotions are the media with which Ashanti paints intimate portraits of his movement activity. Write down every time he references how they shaped his and his comrades' behaviors. What does that tell us about making strategic and tactical decisions? How can you attend to emotions seriously in organizing spaces?
4. Why does Ashanti underscore experimentation, not dogmatic recreation, in his and our collective practice? What elements are necessary to make a successful experiment? Now, outline your context: What conditions exist and what others do you need? Then, design an organizing experiment by identifying where you want to go and mapping backwards to the steps you can take to get there.

HARD LESSONS

"But it's real simple to me at this point, if you can't build those really good healthy, even joyous relationships with your comrades who are queer, who are women, then what are you doing? You just want to get into some combative thing about the system outside of us. There is something wrong there." (p. 239)

"In order to be able to do, to act for liberation, you have to let go of fears, accept death, and now live for the revolution. It's not about having no fears. It's as former Black Liberation Army member and US revolutionary living in political exile Assata Shakur said a long time ago: it's having no fears *that control you*." (p. 250)

1. Reflecting on his time in the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army, Ashanti argues that participants in these formations' singular focus on the "political struggle" inhibited them from engaging in "social struggle." Define these two concepts. Where do they overlap, and where do they diverge? How can engagement with one feed the other, and vice versa?

2. Hilary Darcy interviews Ashanti about challenging deeply-ingrained cis-heterosexism in our movements, each other, and ourselves. What do they say about the complicated dynamics around machismo? What other cultural norms, practices, beliefs, and behaviors do they interrogate? What have you encountered and even reproduced in movement spaces, and how have or can you challenge them?

3. Ashanti evocatively describes the "magical psychic, maybe even spiritual, liberation" he and his comrades felt from striking fear into their oppressors with Fanon's and literal "gun in hand" (p. 246). When have you felt most powerful in organizing? Allow that situation to overtake you again. What elements did it require, and how can you recreate it?

4. As Assata Shakur declared and Ashanti reiterates, the revolutionary must approach their purpose with no fears that control you. As your journey into revolutionary and social movement activity continues, what fears do you carry with you? How can you and your comrades address them, together?

Get your copy of ANARCHIST PANTHER from AK Press.

Email sales@akpress.org for information about reading group discounts!