Ashanti Alston
Speech at AK Press (2006)

First thing: *Power to the people!*

[AUDIENCE RESPONSE: Power to the people!]

What we usually say when someone says, "Power to the people," the response is, "*All* power to the people," alright? But "all power" means that all power goes to the people, right? Didn't say "to the party," didn't say "to the state," it didn't say "to the slick talkers" and all the other ones. *To the people, to the people, to the people*, alright? So for me, it's like, it's very anarchistic, you know? To the people, right? *Power to the people!*

[AUDIENCE RESPONSE: All power to the people!]

Right on, that's pretty good...

What we're going to try to do tonight is to talk about our experience in Chiapas—this was last year, though, so this was all before the *Sixth Declaration*. And a lot of the things that are going on with the *Sixth Declaration* I am still trying to understand. I have not formulated any analysis, any positions, I am just open to what's going on there, and especially hearing people's interpretations when they go and come back, or the things that I can find on the internet, I'm trying to understand. But this is still, for me, one of the most exciting struggles that has been going on probably since the Spanish Civil War, early days of the Chinese Revolution, early days of maybe even the Cuban and maybe some of the African liberation movements and other Third World liberation movements—this is exciting stuff happening here!

We're still engaged in this project here of making revolution in the United States.

And it's why it's exciting to me that brings in my past, in terms of the Black Panther Party. I think it's important because we're still engaged in this project here of making revolution in the United States. And I smile when I say revolution because I love the word revolution. I just learned to change "Big R" revolution to "small r" revolution, and I'll probably get into some of that today because for me, that's a big step coming from a time period where "revolution" meant that there was a particular way that you had to think/organize/fight; with a particular plan that led to a particular goal that would look like a particular thing—whether we called it socialism, communism, whatever,

you know? And to go through so many changes in my own lifetime, to being open to learning, to come to the conclusion like the Zapatistas, that there are no "plans." There are no "final plans", there is no "Big R" revolution, there has never really been one that has succeeded.

But small revolution means that the small people get to make this revolution happen; they bring in their creativity, they bring in their diversity, coming from different places in life, different experiences, different knowledge bases, means that no one can come and say, "Well I got it all. You just got to follow me, you just got to follow our organization. You just got to see our vision." So for me, this Zapatista revolution becomes what we could've done in the 1960s, at our height, that is what I see the Zapatistas doing now. Their vision, their style of working with people, how they draw from their own cultures, how they're open to pulling knowledge and information from other areas of the world and all of this stuff they do. And so I look at the things we did in the Panther Party and say, "Man, I wish I could've done this, I wish we could've done that, maybe we wouldn't have lost," you know?

Coming from a small Black town in New Jersey—Plainfield, NJ—"Black Power" was what pushed a lot of us young people to more radical positions. Before that, the Civil Rights Movement held sway and it was all about integrating into the Empire. A lot of us were learning from Malcolm X and looking at some of the other struggles going on in the world, and it was like, why do we want to integrate ourselves into a capitalist society that is thoroughly racist and killing us—what is this thing abut wanting a piece of the pie? So from them kind of inspirations we looked for different information. And at the time, it was 1968 May in France, it was the struggle of the Vietnamese from the French to the United States. The Third World Liberation Movements were giving us ideas, new ways to go. And for a lot of us to be exposed to socialism, communism, and Marxism, that was really, really great stuff at the time. And for someone like me who was just an average high school student—not really great, not really interested in reading, the Black Panther Party found me at a time when it made learning one of the most exciting things in the world. But learning about how to create freedom. How to build our own power bases. How to take our lives back, in that time period.

We did our best. And when I say we did our best, we organized; not only our community, but so many different communities were inspired to organize, so it wasn't just us. It was the Latino communities, the Asian communities, workers was doing their thing, women were doing their thing, the anti-war movement was strong. It just seemed like this was a time of possibilities—anything was possible! We just had to figure out how to come together and do it. The Black Panther Party stood out from a lot of the revolutionary Black Nationalist groups—what we called ourselves—because we was about working with anybody who was down with this idea of revolution, who was down with this idea of liberation for the different communities within the Empire. We worked with everyone, from poor whites in the Appalachian mountains to our Puerto Rican neighbors—like for me, coming from New York or New Jersey, we all lived side by side. And it made sense that the Puerto Ricans who were fighting for independence of their island, though they may have lived in New York or New Jersey, independence was their objective. And for those of us fighting for Black Power in our communities in the United States, it made sense that we would bond together. And that was happening in different ways and different expressions all over the country. And it was happening in different ways and different expressions all over the world.

But one of the things that I do think weakened us was that it got to a point where we saw that there had to be one way, one path, to revolution. Marxism, Leninism, even maybe Trotskyism and others did play a big part in that, but it was the idea of a scientific revolution; that you had to think scientifically, that if we held to the correct analysis and organized amongst specific groups that was designated as the only revolutionary class or group that could do this, that would lead us to this final objective of freedom, communism, socialism—wonderful terms, but all that was taking away from these different individual struggles' own integrity. And what I mean by that is that not all of us was really buying into that it just had to be one way. Native American and Indigenous people here was like, they didn't want to hear that stuff. Like the Indigenous people of Mexico, they had their own ways of understanding the world. And they wanted that to be respected, but I think that one of the mistakes we made was that we was

trying to push everybody: one-way revolution, "Big R" revolution. That, and what the counterintelligence program was doing—and the counterintelligence program was merely playing on our own weaknesses, on our own contradictions, it did what it was supposed to do. It made sure that we fell. That we destroyed ourselves. And it's always better to get the oppressed to do that—when it looks like they're destroying themselves by their own hands, rather than to have the government, CIA and others do it. So that's why it always looks better for Black hands to shoot Malcolm X rather than some white FBI, some white police, you know? Because it affects us more in our spirits when it seems to happen from our own hands. And they know what they're doing because they have been crushing revolutions all around the world.

What was important for me was being a part of an experiment in changing the world. It inspired me, it inspired so many other people. I was a Panther, a field worker, on the ground, organizing. A Panther on the ground who was brought up believing that "n*ggas ain't shit," "n*ggas will never organize," "they will never unite," "never, never, never, never, never do anything positive." Now, here comes the Panthers who got programs with Black people feeding Black children, Black people providing clothing for Black people—well, anybody actually, in that neighborhood area was getting fed, whether you was Black, white, you know, of color. Didn't matter. Free clinics, right? Liberation schools, and the whole idea was that

What was important for me was being a part of an experiment in changing the world.

we could do for ourselves. To live it, and to take those kinds of risks, where you are actually serving each other, destroys all the myths that you were brought up on, you know? So no longer was it "n*ggas ain't shit," it was "we are Black people," we are "people of African descent," "Africa is our roots," "Black is beautiful. That was heady stuff. That was stuff that was not only cleansing us, but it was giving us a nurturing that made us feel like nothing was impossible. But again: FBI, the Counter Intelligence Program, the local police departments, people's fears in your community, the media's role in shaping people's thoughts all played a part into frustrating our efforts to keep this revolution building, building, and building. So by 1970, '74 maybe the early '70s, for all intents and purposes, there were no more revolutionary movements. They were on decline which meant that a lot of us might have been on the run. Or just trying to hold together the movement from an underground position. And I was one of those who was trying to hold it together from an underground position, because at some point I was recruited into the ranks of the Black Liberation Army.

Never was the Black Liberation Army a figment of our thoughts, it was very real. It was a part of the Black Liberation Movement. And when we went underground and we took up arms, we were part of a movement, an army that was the same as the Chinese Liberation Army, that was the same as the Tupamaros, that was the same as the MLPA in Angola. We saw ourselves as developing that armed force within the United States that could protect those of us who were activists in the communities, and also to help promote through financial means whatever our needs were. So that means that yeah, the banks, we rolled into them banks. Yeah, and we went in there and we made withdrawals, right? We did not call what we did robberies, so we didn't say bank robberies, we had a fancy term and I think it was a Marxist term, too. We called it expropriations. And our feeling was that banks were just those institutions that sucked the blood of people, and that's how they got their money. So we was just getting monies that came from us some other way anyhow. The whole thing was to put it back into the movement. And that's what we did. Dope dealers got the same thing. We was that force, like especially in Harlem and in parts of Newark, where we hit the dope

dealers. Dope dealers felt our sting because we took their drugs, we destroyed their drugs, we took their money and their money also went into programs in the communities.

We understood that even as guerillas, urban guerillas in America, in the United States, we had to help fund ourselves. We were not waiting for the Open Society Institute and that guy George Soros to fund our revolution. There was not a movement that had any kind of success that did not find ways of funding themselves. But you had to have a certain daringness to do that. And I think one of the successes of the Black Panther Party is that it reached into our society and got those groups of people who had that kind of daringness. That was that lumpen-proletariat as we called it, right? That was people who had already been in a kind of combative relationship with society. That gave the Black Panther Party so many advantages, because you had people who didn't work, or didn't do any work that had any meaningful part in production, but who were willing to learn because they was on the bottom. They were willing to like, break out of old role models that said that we couldn't do anything, and in the organizational arms of the Black Panther Party, we found ourselves doing stuff that we never thought we could do.

We understood that even as guerillas, urban guerillas in America, in the United States, we had to help fund ourselves.

People started coming to us, wanting to join, wanting to support. It created such a concern for the FBI that they declared us Public Enemy Number One. But that's what

it's supposed to do when people are effectively organizing, anywhere, but it's gotta be a result of the work that we do. When people start pulling each other out of the system, out of the system's ways of thinking, of course the system is going to get concerned. And it's going to throw all of its forces into disrupting that. And it did that with us. But I think that [they succeeded], partly, not only because of the rigidness of some of the ideas that we took, but because we were young and inexperienced and they were very experienced in what they did. So, we were amongst other groups that were destroyed.

We found ourselves doing stuff that we never thought we could do.

After that, a lot of us went to prison. Some had to leave the country and go into exile. Many were killed. But even more, their lives were destroyed, even to this day, some who are still alive are just like, walking dead because they done lost their minds, you know? Or they went to drugs or alcohol to just dull the pain, you know? All of that stuff. But those of us who went to prison, we kept on reading and kept on reading and kept on analyzing, kept on looking at our struggles from different lenses.

Like for me, for example, when I went to prison I started reading radical psychology. I started reading feminism. I started reading Erich Fromm and Marcuse, and people from the Frankfurt School, people I ain't never even heard of before, but they were giving me different ways to look at what has just happened with our struggle. All of that was

leading me to try to find different forms of struggle that may give us a better chance at developing. That maybe we wouldn't create the same problems that we had in the past: How do we get away from hierarchy? How do we create organizations that don't silence women? That ain't shutting out those who are queer? Or the ageist stuff that goes on; because we was all young, we didn't even want to deal with nobody over 30, 35, you know? Even today it seems like it's just the reverse, it's that the older ones don't want to deal with young people.

But it was like, how can we create organizations that somehow reflect the kind of society that we want? And continually build, continually find ways to sustain ourselves so that we can eventually take back chunks and chunks and chunks of our lives. Coming out of prison, you come out with all these ideas. But one of the things about coming out of prison is that you're coming back into, like, a vacuum. I was in from '74 to '86. In that time period it seemed like people didn't even know about the Panthers, didn't know about the Weather Underground, didn't know about the anti-war movement, the women's movement, the Native Americans, the Chicano struggles, the Puerto Rican independence movement, didn't know! And you get a sense that the system was very effective at seemingly erasing all of this knowledge.

So we walk around, we're out here now and there's not much organizing going on—what can we do for the political prisoners, those who are still in? Not much going on. My spirits would be up, sometimes down, up, sometimes down. Through the '80s, the rest of the '80s I did things for political prisoners with just the few handful that was also doing it, right? Here comes the '90s; the Panthers from the west coast, and Panthers from the east coast finally started talking again. And we came across an idea that we wanted to put out the newspaper, so the early '90s was this effort of Panthers from the east and west coast getting together and we got a newspaper. Young people see the newspaper and they want to know about the Panthers. Now we got a Black Panther collective, and other people was forming other organizations. Sometimes it did well, sometimes it didn't. Spirits go up, spirits go down. For several years, my spirits was like "Oh, man I wonder if we're going to do this?" you know?

Then 1994, January 1st happens. It's like a blast from outta nowhere. Some people, some Brown people in the southeastern mountains of Mexico just had an uprising. They just took over all this land, they just kicked out the Mexican police, kicked out the military. And did it in such a flamboyant way. It was like "Woah!" If these people can do this, and not have all the resources and technologies that we have here and always claiming that we ain't got no money, we can't do this, can't do that, and they have found a way to take back their lives, then revolution is back on the agenda, you know? And then the more you find out about them, you get into more of their thinking, yeah, you find out more about [Subcomandante Insurgente] Marcos but you get more into their thinking, and how they're viewing things. Why is this guerrilla organization not fighting to capture state power? Why is this armed guerrilla organization doing things that don't seem to focus so much on their guns? But it's clear that they're not putting their guns down. Different from the Tupamaros, different from a lot of the other guerrilla organizations, whether it was the Red Brigades or whatever. For me, it was exciting, because I know that our attempts to use guerrilla warfare to aid the community movements wasn't really effective, right? I know also that groups' efforts to come up with the "grand solutions" wasn't really the way to go. So now here are these Zapatistas saying it ain't really about the "grand

Then 1994, January 1st happens.

It's like a blast from outta nowhere.

Some people, some Brown people in the southeastern mountains of Mexico just had an uprising.