

THE
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A WEEKLY ANARCHIST SHOW

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The Lives and Legacy of Martin Sostre

(with Garrett Felber)



The Final Straw Radio
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was republished by Pluto a few years ago, I encourage people to read that. At this point, I feel everyone that I know has read or is reading Burton's *Tip Of The Spear*. Yeah, if you wanted to read that in tandem with anything about Martin, it would all make a lot of sense.

TFSR: Cool. Those are great suggestions. I appreciate it, and thanks a lot for making the time to have this chat and all the work. I'm excited to add your prior book to the stack of things I really want to read when I get a chance. Thanks again for having the chat, and I look forward to sharing this with listeners.

Garrett: Thanks for the invitation. I appreciate it.

This week, we're sharing an interview with Garret Felber, author of the book *A Continuous Struggle: The Revolutionary Life of Martin Sostre*, which is due out May 5 from AK Press. Garret speaks about the life of Martin Sostre, famed jailhouse lawyer who successfully won cases related to the constitutional rights of prisoners, was politicized in prison by the Nation of Islam in the 1950's, ran radical Afro-centric bookstores in Buffalo NY to radicalize the youth, embracing anarchism during his time imprisoned on a frame up during which he was a celebrated political prisoner resisting cavity searches through the courts, went on to organize after his release for tenants rights and rehabilitating disused buildings for community centers and helping run a childcare. Sostre was a mentor to Lorenzo Komb'oa-Ervin and Ashanti Alston and laid important foundations for modern Black Anarchism in the US.

There's a lot in here and we hope you enjoy the book and that the story inspires complex, creative and combative resistance to all forms of domination.

MSI: <https://www.martinsostre.com/>

Study and Struggle: <https://www.studyandstruggle.com/>

Free the Mississippi Five: <https://www.studyandstruggle.com/ms5>

Free Society People's Library: <https://www.instagram.com/freesocietylibrary/>

Justice for Geraldine and Martin: <https://www.instagram.com/justiceforgeraldineandmartin/>

In the Belly: <https://www.bellyzine.net/>

In the Mix: <https://inthemixprisonerpodcast.libsyn.com/>

video of JEEP: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwmELJwEsk8>

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TFSR: Would you introduce yourself for the audience with your name, pronouns, location, and any affiliations that you want to share?

Garrett: Yeah, of course. My name is Garrett Felber. I use “they” pronoun. I’m based in Portland, Oregon, and I organize with Study and Struggle and the committee to Free the Mississippi Five.

TFSR: Cool. Thank you so much for having this conversation and for the work that you do. Before we get to the book that we’re going to talk about, *A Continuous Struggle: The Revolution and Life of Martin Sostre*, which is due out in May from AK Press, I wonder if you could talk about Study and Struggle and that committee that you mentioned, and the work that you all do.

Garrett: Yeah, of course, happy to. Study and Struggle was an organization that I was a part of co-founding in 2020. We support radical study groups in prisons, predominantly in Mississippi, but also in Washington and New York. Also involved in putting out print publications like *In The Belly* and the committee to Free The Mississippi Five launched this last August. It’s a campaign to free five women who were sentenced to life with the possibility of parole in the late 80s and early 1990s, and they were due up for parole after 10 years, and have since been denied between 7 and 14 times each. So among them, they’ve been denied almost 50 times. That work is ongoing. Actually, Linda Ross went up on Wednesday, and we’re waiting to hear back about that. So fingers crossed.

TFSR: I’ll definitely put links in the show notes to what you can give me on those groups so that folks can learn more. But I’m curious, with Study and Struggle, our local ABC has tried a couple times and unsuccessfully to get going an inside-outside study group. I don’t know if that’s what Study and Struggle is mostly focused on, or focused on getting the materials to folks based on what their desires are, and then helping facilitate folks getting new content. We were starting off based on the local Prison Books chapter. They had an inside-outside study group because they’re sending to tons of prisoners already. They ask people like “Hey, are you interested in reading this? We’ll get you a copy of this book or the zine or whatever,” and then if they can’t get participants live on a phone call during one of their meetings on the outside, and then, because people are going to read stuff at their own pace, and they may have different levels of access to phones and such, we’ll maybe, in some cases, get a written version and then put together a zine of people’s thoughts and feelings about what they’ve read, and send that zine

in one place. Another thing I’d like to shout out is the Justice for Geraldine and Martin campaign. Some folks in Buffalo have been really active, doing great work, pushing for the exoneration of Martin posthumously, but also his co-defendant, Geraldine Pointer, who’s 81 years old and still has never had her conviction for the frame-up overturned. There’s a great effort, and you can find that information through the Martin Sostre Institute website.

Then the other two things I’m working on are, in many ways, direct legacies of sitting for five years with Martin’s thought. One of them, I already mentioned, is the Committee to Free the Mississippi Five. The fact that I got involved with a defense campaign coming out of this book is not shocking to me. The other one is I’m starting a radical mobile library called the Free Society People’s Library. Again, it would be hard for me to not see some link to wanting to create a prefigurative counter-structure built around political education. So, yeah, that’s what I’m working on.

TFSR: Oh, that’s amazing. I’ve not been to Buffalo, but I loved the fact that at some point in the book you talk about burning books in Buffalo and the legacy that they are building off of. I think that that’s dope, and that that’s what that mobile library makes me think of – creating spaces of engagement and discussion. That’s really cool. I’m excited.

Garrett: Yeah, now I remember Leslie telling me that before Burning Books started, that it was basically a library project and that they were going to name it in commemoration of Martin. Without knowing that I’m not at all shocked by any of that. That makes so much sense.

TFSR: Well, Garrett, that was the last of the questions that I had. Is there anything that I didn’t ask about that comes to mind right now that you want to mention during this recording?

Garrett: You had asked for other suggestions for further reading. Can I throw out some of those for folks?

TFSR: Cool, yeah.

Garrett: For things written by Martin, the Martin Sostre Institute has been putting those up. We’re also working on finishing these lessons, so we’ve put together study guides based on seven parts of Martin’s life with writings from him and other folks. We’re hoping that people will be encouraged to send those to comrades inside. If folks haven’t already read Lorenzo’s *Anarchism and the Black Revolution*, which

how he always found opportunity in repression. There are literally moments where they physically cut out a piece of his letter to his lawyer, and he's, "Perfect. This is Exhibit A." There's not even a moment where he's upset — "These motherfuckers cut out my letter" or whatever. He was always a step ahead of the repression by seeing the opening it created. I think that's such a valuable tool for organizers. And just understanding that his life isn't giving us a roadmap or blueprint, but it is showing that when you struggle, there will always organically be new struggles. Struggle produces new terrains of struggle. So, if you continue synthesizing what you learned from the last stage and move toward the next one, it will unfold and unfold and unfold. His life is such a good example of that.

The other thing your question made me think of is — perhaps ironically, because I talk in the book about the disagreement between Grace Lee Boggs and Martin — the Grace quote where she says, "What time is it on the clock of the world?" My understanding of Grace's meaning with that question is not that there's this revolutionary moment, but to be constantly reevaluating: what are the political conditions we're in right now? So you're not stuck in an old way of thinking.

I think Martin and Grace both shared that aspect of constantly reevaluating what's in front of them, and not thinking in terms I think sometimes. I and other folks get very stuck in a hierarchy of struggle: "Oh, this is the most important struggle," or, "This is the thing everyone should be doing." Martin was very much: "What's in front of me? What is the thing within my grasp that I should be organizing around?" It doesn't mean that other struggles are less or more important, and it doesn't mean they're disconnected from his.

But the idea that when he comes home, he becomes a tenant organizer and starts organizing young Black teens in Paterson and Passaic — it's not because struggles in prison didn't matter anymore, but it is recognizing the shifting terrain and what's in front of him. I think that's a really valuable lesson to take.

TFSR: Yeah, thank you. So are you working on anything now, or do you have anything on the horizon?

Garrett: I'd love to just say, "I'm retired. That was it. This book was calling it." No. So, I am book-wise, putting together a collection of Martin's writings, speeches, and interviews with AK, which should come out next year. It's called *I Cannot Submit to Injustices*. One of the things I tried to do was get Martin's voice to come through in this book as best I could, but there were so many times when I thought people need to read this entire speech or this entire article. A lot of that stuff we've been putting up through the Martin Sostre Institute.

I'm excited for people, especially inside, to have access to Martin's words

in further with that book, so that folks can start their own study groups maybe inside, which I think is a really cool model. But we've had no success unfortunately getting feedback from prisoners about wanting to participate.

So I'd love to hear a little bit about the way that you negotiate this in your structure, and also how you're getting around the mail digitization and limitations on materials getting in that's been more and more. Which is pertinent to this conversation about Martin Sostre also.

Garrett: Yeah, it's shifted a little bit since the beginning. We started as supporting and facilitating inside-outside groups when we started in 2020, and that's shifted quite a bit over the years, realizing the bandwidth necessary to be both helping people outside with reading groups and inside. So it's really shifted a lot towards just sending materials, dealing with the censorship issues, putting money on people's books. There's a phone line where people can call and connect and get support that way, whether it's emotional, financial, whatever. And, yeah, the mail digitization is state-by-state. Mississippi, where most of our folks are, they're late to that game. Only in the last year or so did people get tablets, they've started photocopying the mail and giving people photocopies instead of the originals, but largely what we're sending in are books, and then maybe a zine or study guide or something like that. Most of the people that we support in Mississippi are at the state designated women's prison, and we had an entire year where not a single thing got through. So they wound up, we did a phone zap, and they wound up sending 23 boxes of books back. So it is not without its challenges. Like I said, it's so state by state. So we've got different challenges in New York where there's actually a different censorship infrastructure, and it looks different depending on where you're struggling.

TFSR: Because you mentioned *In The Belly*, could you talk about that project a little bit too?

Garrett: I'm probably not the best person to talk about *In The Belly*, the folks who work within Study and Struggle was Safear Ness, who was among the folks who started it inside, but it's a print publication that's entirely edited and written by incarcerated folks and sent inside prisons. I believe there should be the next issue coming out pretty soon.

TFSR: Cool. I'll definitely put some links in the show notes for that. They also are affiliated with, I think, *In The Mix* podcast too, which features heavily conversations with various incarcerated revolutionaries on a number of different topics. It seems a hit or miss on the timing, it's not a regular

podcast, but there's some really fruitful conversations that happen that I think, everyone should give a listen to. I would to talk about the book, *A Continuous Struggle: The Revolution and Life of Martin Sostre*. Congratulations on this book coming out, that's super exciting. I wonder if you could paint a thumbnail sketch of Martin's life and share how you came to write this biography.

Garrett: Yeah, the thumbnail of Martin's life, I'll try not to do 20 minutes [laughs]. I feel in some ways even after writing a 400-page biography, there's so much more to be known and developed about Martin's ideas in life, there were whole sections where I felt I wanted to give a chapter to something that's actually a sentence. I share a little bit in the introduction about how I came to know about Martin's life. It was a random connection. I was working on my dissertation on the Nation of Islam's organizing in prisons. I came across Martin's name in a letter from an incarcerated Muslim who was writing to Malcolm X. They were all being held in solitary confinement because of their religious beliefs, and there was an upcoming trial, so he was writing to Malcolm to try and get him to be a key witness.

This was probably early 2010 to 2011 and I googled Martin's name, and there was a very bare bones Wikipedia page that came up, and it mostly focused on Martin's frame up in Buffalo and his time as a political prisoner. So I was really interested in this earlier period where he was in the Nation of Islam in the late '50s, early '60s. Then I was like "Wow, this is fascinating, that he became a political prisoner and ran a bookstore." So I found his address, and I wrote to him, and he sent me back this letter with all these primary sources. It was a revolutionary newsletter that he had published in solitary confinement at Wallkill. Then it was this photo of him and Sandy Shevak with preschoolers in the 90s. I was trying to interview him at the time. He basically said, "I'm too busy." he's 90 at the time, "I'm too busy. But you know, these these documents will tell you everything you need to know." So I stayed in touch with him a few times via letter. Unfortunately, he had a stroke a year or two later, and then passed away in 2015. And so I stayed in touch with his family, and eventually came to the conclusion that I needed to write a biography. So in terms of his life, he grew up in Great-Depression-era Harlem, I talk in the book about the possible influences that that had on his political life. He was drafted into World War II, and became politicized through that process, but then, especially while in jail, he met Julio Pinto Gandia, who is a revolutionary nationalist Puerto Rican lawyer, and then shortly after that, he becomes incarcerated on a six to twelve year sentence in New York State, joins the Nation of Islam and really teaches himself law and becomes an important jailhouse lawyer. So that's this period where he's more of a politicized prisoner.

He gets out in 1964, moves to Buffalo, starts a chain of radical bookstores

not always getting it from his perspective because of a lack of documentation. The book isn't a hagiography, this uncritical biography of a leader that should be emulated, or a saint, or whatever. There are points in the book where you're like "Yeah, it seemed the decision that he made here may have been based on this personal turn that he took," or "people disagreed with the approach that he took." I can't remember the examples, because this wasn't a written-down question, but where it sounded like "he was being a person sometimes," having feelings and maybe not acting as the ultimate revolutionary ideal through those decisions. The book is making space for someone to be a complicated person who gets to have feelings and have bad days, or a different perspective than the author of the biography

I think there's something about that I think the modern abolitionist movement is reckoning with perpetually: how do we deal with difference? How do we deal with conflict? How do we deal with people being wrong and still having a lot to contribute? How do we figure out how to work through these things and find middle ground that we can work through, or understand where the other person's coming from? That nuanced approach that I think you tried to take in the book — I really appreciate. I don't read many biographies, so this was helpful for me.

Garrett: Well, I'm glad that came through.

TFSR: Martin Sostre innovated much in his struggles, but his adaptations were effective, in my view, because they fit the needs of the moment, and he seemed to frequently be reassessing and retooling his approaches. Some doors appeared closed, such as grants for rehabilitating and renovating buildings for collective projects using public funds, or effective jailhouse lawyering. Other doors opened with the availability of those speakers and the ability to not only reproduce the effect of having those speakers on the corner or on the soapboxes by playing a *Malcolm X Speaks* record from inside the shop through the speakers, but also maybe drawing people in — young people — through playing rock and roll or R&B through the speakers to get them into the space and having a conversation.

I thought that he was pretty innovative and wasn't limited by possibility in a way that a lot of other people — I find myself sometimes to be. This may be redundant to prior questions, but I wonder if you could say something about Sostre's adaptability and adeptness at shifting times and reading possibilities.

Garrett: I think one of the ones that stands out for me, that I've taken as a lesson, is

Garrett: There are so many answers to this question. Broadly speaking, I hope people get a sense of how dynamic and multifaceted struggle is. There are endless places and ways to engage in struggle. You see that through Martin's life so clearly — not just in the trajectory of his life and political development, but the number of terrains at any given time that he's struggling on.

I think another key one I mentioned earlier is this emphasis on deeds and actions — not for the sake of doing something, but understanding their interrelationship with theorizing and political education. Those aren't discrete things, where you do one and then you do the other, but rather, you're always doing things in the world, and as you're doing those things, you're theorizing and understanding differently how the state responds, and then nimbly reassessing. You can see, materially, in his life how he's constantly doing that.

Another thing that comes through in his life that I think is really valuable — I'm in part thinking about the lessons I've taken through researching and writing this book — is that confrontation is such an important tool to keeping the state on its heels, but also to creating new conditions. But at the same time you're doing that confrontation, you're also doing prefiguration and building counter-structure. So again, it's not this either/or, where you're just doing actions or just building, but you have to be doing this combination of things as things come up.

I already mentioned the political development. The reason for me of writing a biography is not to put someone on a pedestal or say this person is so important for X reason. But I think we live our lives, to some extent, individually in community with others, and I think it's valuable to see how a single person can go through different stages of struggle and political development. I think that's a useful political tool for us.

To that point, I tried to write, to the best of my ability, a political biography of one person that still demonstrates that no one struggles alone. Even when Martin's talking about the single-minded, single-handed struggle for prisoners' rights, of course, he's doing that in community, with support of other people. Everyone's playing all these different roles.

So I hope that that comes through in the book — that there are all these other people who are constantly cross-pollinating ideas with Martin, getting ideas from Martin, being politicized by him, doing very small, sometimes, forms of support that mean a lot. I hope it's not the kind of biography people read and think, "Wow, this was this towering figure. I could never do the things that he did." There are plenty of people in the book to understand yourself through, I think and I hope.

TFSR: I think it took me a minute to come up with this term, but I appreciate the fact that, having read this, I could be impressed with this person and all the different evolutions that you can see throughout it, even if you're

there, and then gets framed in the long, hot summer of 1967 and gets this virtual life sentence. He gets a 30-40 year sentence, and then we're into the "political prisoner" years, although I try to complicate in the book that binary. He continues to win important cases for prisoners rights. His politics shift during that period from revolutionary Black Nationalism to more Maoism to anarchism, and I discussed that in the book. He eventually wins clemency in late 1975, he's released in '76 and then he lives this long chapter of his life as a tenant organizer in New York and doing youth mentorship in New Jersey. So for me, the book was fascinating for many reasons, and him as a figure, but I think he so encapsulates the arc of what a life of *Continuous Struggle* looks and the political development that goes along with that, and the shifting terrains of both the political landscape that he's operating in and how he's reacting to it. That's my brief sketch of 92 years of *Continuous Struggle*.

TFSR: Good job, that was brief!

There's a distinction that you make in there that I didn't actually come across in the book, but I recall this being attributed to Martin. We can talk about this later on in the conversation, if you want. But the distinction, and this comes out in chapter headings, between politicized prisoners and political prisoners, and maybe I'm misremembering that attribution, but could you talk a little bit about that and where that concept comes from in Martin's work, and how he applied it vs how it's understood today?

Garrett: He talks about it in the short documentary film about his frame up, which came out towards the end of his incarceration in 1974, and he talks about the difference between a politicized prisoner and a political prisoner. He doesn't explicitly say how it applies to himself, but I would say, through other speeches and writings, he saw himself as a political prisoner, and understood political prisoner in what we might understand in the classical way of being in prison for your political views or actions. Obviously his first six to 12 year sentence where he's incarcerated for selling heroin and then becomes politicized in prison through his readings and organizing in the Nation of Islam, that maps on to being a politicized prisoner. In the course of writing the book, I had actually titled the chapters in that way to because I was like "Oh, this works so perfectly. He's got this whole time where he's a politicized prisoner. And this time where he's a political prisoner." I came to be troubled by the neatness of that when actually comparing it to the messiness of what was happening, which is that he's up for parole, actually, after four years of his six to 12 year sentence through earned time. It's because of his affiliation with the Nation of Islam and his lawsuits and organizing that he gets set off by the parole board. And then he winds up in solitary confinement for the last five years, and does his full 12 years. So I started thinking, and a lot of this came from conversa-

tions with Stevie Wilson, too. It became really obvious to me that he was already a political prisoner during that first term, because the state was responding to his organizing with imprisonment. That there's not this idea that you can be held in prison for your political ideas even while already being in prison. So I tried to get some of that nuance out in those chapters as well.

TFSR: When he addresses that distinguishing between those and the distinguishing character being: What are you going in for? What are you facing when you go in? Because it's in both cases, it's technically for heroin distribution, although in the second one, it's clearly a manufactured police frame-up as the title of the film describes. Does he make the distinction towards the responsibility of the movement, towards an individual being a politicized prisoner, being different from that of a political prisoner, or the amount of trust that should be given to someone based on why they go inside and how much they're going to actually follow through on their political commitments?

Garrett: It's inconsistent over time. In his essay "The New Prisoner" he writes, "We are all political prisoners," and it's very much in that post-Attica moment where that argument is being made, that the political conditions for all people, especially people of African descent, who are imprisoned, is a political one. So there he makes that argument. Then a few years later, he's really making the argument that there has to be a hierarchy or a priority basis of who's supported. He's arguing that the Puerto Rican nationalists have been in for 20 years, and people in the movement need to support them. So it's not a consistent thread throughout his life. I do think that he distinguishes a little bit more than I might in my own organizing. I think he would see someone who, like himself, became politicized inside as needing that support in the way that you're describing,

TFSR: I'm asking you an unfair question, because A) he's not here to answer that himself, B) this was over, as you said, a 92-year lifespan, when he went through so many different adaptations to his experience with the world and his feeling of how he wanted to uphold himself through that, and how his struggle would look like. To make some overarching, distinguishing period at the end of the sentence thing about his view on political versus politicized prisoners is an unfair question anyway. I was hoping to offer some space here if you want to talk about your elder and comrade, Sandy Shevak, who just passed. He'll come into questions a little bit later, as we talk about the period of time when Martin and Sandy's lives overlapped, but I wonder if you want to say anything about him and his contribution to the book.

book, including figures like Attica brother Frank "Big Black" Smith and Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, who went on to organize as anarchist. He also worked with many people during both stints in prison, especially during his time in JEEP. I wonder if you could talk about his commitment to investing in relationships to foster autonomy and autogestion, and some of the legacy of his work, which you've already addressed with the education and politicization of youth. I'm curious if you have more to add about who he influenced.

Garrett: I think if you were to say, what are the through lines of Martin's life, one of the top ones would be mentorship and political education of young people. Part of what dawned on me as I was doing interviews for the book is everyone met Martin when they were 20. You have multiple generations of people being politicized by Martin and mentored by Martin. His age is changing, but the group of people that he's working with are always in this earlier period in their life. So it was hard to keep reminding myself that he's the same generation as King and Malcolm, even though his prominence is mostly during the Black Power era and beyond.

There are so many examples. He met Frank Smith in the Nation of Islam during the 1950s. That's a period before people come to know Big Black. Lorenzo he meets in prison when Lorenzo is in his 20s. Ashanti he doesn't meet until later, but is influenced by his writings. He's writing to the Young Lords. Then, of course, all the folks with JEEP. He meets Sandy in his early 20s, so when Sandy and he are organizing together, Martin's twice his age.

He was so committed at every stage to figuring out how to bring young people into the movement and doing intergenerational organizing. I talk in the book about Black News, which is this newspaper that he starts while in prison. It's very much in line with The Black Panther paper, or even the model of the Nation of Islam's Muhammad Speaks. He's imagining paying young folks in Buffalo on the East Side to go around and sell the newspaper, and he's trying to hire high school kids to do editorial work for it. The fact that he's doing that from prison at Wallkill, and that's not even close to Buffalo — it shows the depth of his commitment to the idea that young folks have a key role to play, and that regardless of whatever age you are, you should be in conversation and community with them.

TFSR: On the website MartinSostre.com, there's a presentation of you speaking where you open up talking about what would have been Martin Sostre's 100th birthday. What do you hope that readers will find in this book? What lessons and insights of Martin's life and struggles will they find that will aid in building a world that might have shared a vision with the one that he had?

about his thoughts on anarchism. We have the examples of his organizing.

TFSR: I would imagine if there were times when he was talking explicitly about that model, during his JEEP years or any of the projects he was doing after he got out, then maybe those oral histories would have come up with something. I guess he didn't find a lot where that was explicitly described.

Garrett: Yeah.

TFSR: I was looking back because also the way you were talking about the decentralized nature that he was experiencing with the NOI inside of prison. At one point, when they were getting materials taken away and their autonomy and organizing were taken away, I think before he went into solitary confinement, they were making a decision amongst themselves. It sounded like a model of, "Cool, when we get repressed, this is going to suck, but it's also going to send a message to other prisoners. Whenever they send us into lockdown, we're going to be locked down among a bunch of other prisoners, and we'll start talking about Islam, and eventually, we'll get more" — or, I guess, the Muslim Brotherhood, I think, is what they were calling it at the time, right? But building adherence and more solidarity through this framework that, in these early days of the Nation of Islam, challenges white Christian hegemony in the New York prison system, I thought that was pretty insurrectionary.

Garrett: Yeah, they take over solitary confinement and refuse to leave, basically turning solitary into a politicized zone. I think there are all sorts of ways you can read that as not in line with the typical NOI structure.

TFSR: It may not have been the intention, but history is important. The history of the World Workers Party comes into this. I guess you would call them part of the new communist movement or the new left. I'm not sure which.

Garrett: No, they grow out of the SWP break in the '50s.

TFSR: Okay, so that was a bit earlier.

Garrett: So they're Marxist-Leninists coming out of the SWP.

TFSR: Martin Sostre mentored generations of activists, as you cover in the

Garrett: Absolutely. Thanks for offering the space for that. All of us who know and love Sandy have been really stunned by his passing, which was just a few days ago. He was one of the very first people that I contacted when I decided to start this project. I remember when I called him, he basically said, "I've been waiting for your call." He was like "I already know who you are. I know that you're interested in Martin." From that moment on, that was in 2020, he was so embedded in this project. And he was so generous, not only to me and through the process and making sure that that part of Martin's life.

It was really unclear to me to go back to that earlier story of what is this image of Martin at a preschool in the- I guess I said '90s. It was the early 2000s. But I knew that that piece of his life existed, and it was important to me to draw that continuity to his earlier life. But I wasn't quite clear when I set out on the project of how much continuity there was, and also how much work had happened in New Jersey from the '80s to the early 2000s. And so Sandy was the key to unlocking all of that. He was still in touch with all of these young folks that he and Martin had mentored who are now in their '50s. We drove around. I visited him, and he took me around Passaic and and Patterson and looked at all the different buildings that they had rehabilitated and turned into a community center and affordable housing and a preschool.

So he was such a part of the living legacy of Martin and such a connective tissue to all of that. And throughout the whole process, absolutely, humble doesn't even really describe it. He was so modest about his own role in it, because Martin was a mentor to him. He met Martin when he was in his early 20s, and he had such a care and reverence for Martin. I should say, they had a really hard falling out where they didn't speak for the last 20 years of Martin's life, and that weighed really heavily on Sandy. So for him to approach this, despite that, with the tenderness and care that he had for Martin and Martin's family and me. I mentioned to you, he called me probably every three to five days for five years. And sometimes I would laugh, because he would call me on a Monday and say, "How's the book coming?" Call me on a Wednesday and say, "How's the book coming?" I'm like "Sandy. I haven't even done anything since our last call." I could go on and on about what a mensch Sandy was, but it's a devastating loss for so many folks. That's just his contribution to this book and this piece of he's one of those people is doing 900 other things in his community that I could not speak to, but others could.

TFSR: I'm glad that his experience and some of his flavor comes out in this book. That's the closest I'll have come to knowing him. But really appreciate what came through. So to my understanding, this is the first full biography of Martin Sostre. I first heard about Sostre maybe 15 years ago when I found a video of *Framed Up!!: The Imprisonment of Martin Sostre*

on the Christie Books website, where there was a collection of different videos that were about anarchism, or anarchists, or of interest to anarchists based out of the UK. Then his name started coming up around histories for me, around Black Anarchism that I was coming across. But I wonder if you could talk a bit about the general public amnesia about him that you're trying to remedy with this book.

Garrett: I, similarly, around the same time, came across Martin and found Frame Up. A funny thing about Frame Up, anecdotally, is as a film by a couple of anarchist filmmakers, Pacific Street Films, Steve and Joe. What's funny about it is that they made the film not knowing that Martin was an anarchist, and the fact that that never really came up, and it doesn't really necessarily come through in the film, unless you have that context. When I came across Martin, like I said, there wasn't much about him out there. It mostly focused on the frame-up in Buffalo. Then when I started talking to people and doing oral histories, it was like, if you talk to any radical of the '60s and '70s, they immediately know Martin, at least by name. So I felt part of the amnesia was a generational one. There had not been this cultivating generation by generation of who Martin was and why he was significant. It was this group of people for whom he was up there with George Jackson, Huey Newton, Angela Davis, in that same pantheon of folks. Then there was this drop off during the period where he was basically doing community organizing in New Jersey.

Even within the interviews, you know, I talked about Sandy's humility, but there's also Martin's humility. So I talked to these kids who were 14 to 18 working with Martin for years, and I would interview them and say I was working on this biography, and they only knew Martin as this 70 and 80-year-old who worked on construction projects in New Jersey. I would mention him being a political prisoner. Some of them were like "What are you talking about?" or "Whoa!" They had no idea about Martin's earlier life. Or they would say, "Yeah, I knew he was in prison but—" So I think there was that general sense of generational loss of an elder who meant so much to so many ideas and people. Then there's the secondary one, which is even if people knew his name, or even if they knew a sketch of his life, it wasn't really clear even to me, certainly, when I started it, of what were his unique political ideas. How were those disseminated throughout the movement? What was his impact? So I think one of the things I was trying to get through with the book was also an intellectual history of his thought. He would be listed as a key thinker in the development of Black Anarchism, but then I couldn't find a writing of his about anarchism, or what he had developed. He just knew maybe Lorenzo, and that connection in more recent years, because Lorenzo has been talking more publicly about that relationship. But it felt such a missing connection and a need to develop what Martin's ideas were and what his life and actions were as well.

bidden information, the creation of prefigurative infrastructure, and relationships between the courts, as they were called at Clinton prison, his bookstore and community spaces, the founding of various newspapers, and even the shape of his defense committee into localized cells, as he politically developed towards identifying as an anarchist.

Can you talk a bit about Sostre's anarchism as it developed, and where it coalesced and how it ended?

Garrett: Yeah, I think I mentioned earlier that we don't have that many writings about Martin's anarchism, either from other people or from Martin himself. They're embedded in this very compressed period of letters to comrades when he starts identifying as an anarchist around 1973. So, I did try to be nuanced throughout the book, finding early moments where he might not have identified it as anarchism, but where it was seeding something. I mentioned the autonomous, decentralized way that the Nation of Islam was operating in New York in the late '50s and early '60s. No one would describe the Nation of Islam as anarchist, but I think part of why he was attracted to what was happening there and then became disillusioned with it when he got to Buffalo wasn't just his own shifting thinking but also the way it looked different in a mosque in Buffalo versus the way they were organizing in prison.

He traces his own anarchism back to the streets of Buffalo in 1967. That's explicitly where he says, "I recognize the power of spontaneous energy in the streets." Then again, it's another six or seven years until he starts using that language. In part, because he was also very aware of language and how important it was. He was always interested in politicizing young people, and I think he had concerns, along with a lot of other Black anarchists, about whether this language would be at all useful to Black people. So, as he's adopting that language, he's trying to think about how. I think that's why he says he uses "revolutionary anarchism," even though it's a redundancy, because saying "revolutionary" symbolizes or signifies upfront what it is.

So, there's the moment in 1967 in Buffalo where he identifies recognizing its power. Then there's the moment where he decentralizes his committees, which he talks about as his first experiment in anarchist organizing. Briefly, from his arrest onward, in 1967, there's this central committee in Buffalo that was mostly Workers World Party folks. He breaks with them in 1970, still has this centralized committee for two or three years, and then around that time, he starts developing what he calls a federation of these decentralized committees that operate with some autonomy, connected through him, and which he theorizes as future revolutionary bases. He's talking to them about building cooperatives, having bookstores, farms, and schools.

And then, unfortunately, we don't really get anything after he gets out

revolutionary anarchism, and talking about women's liberation, and understanding the ways that all of those things intersect is also a lesson in inside-outside solidarity and organizing, and how those ideas are cross-pollinating — that he's getting these ideas from folks outside. There are new materials being published, both on women's liberation and anarchism, that he's reading and then connecting to his own struggles over bodily autonomy.

TFSR: Yeah. Again, you could, I guess, later on too, see the influence of feminist critique. Maybe this is assumptive and based on those readings you mentioned, but the fact that he puts so much energy into- As you mentioned before that maybe he's not talked about because he was this big-shot political prisoner bringing these huge court cases, and then afterwards he goes, in this humble way, to struggles for the literal ability for social reproduction in working-class communities and working-class communities of color, in a lot of cases around the Northeast, and focusing on the social reproduction elements that are generally gendered — making spaces for community organizing, community support, making space for preschool and childcare work — I think there were soup kitchen-type or food pantry-type elements to this too. A lot of the stuff definitely fell under what the Panthers were working on at times — some of the more beloved elements of what they were organizing — like he was carrying on. I thought that was really fascinating. It leads to a lot of questions for me about: where is his head at with this? It's great that he was doing this.

Garrett: Yeah, it reminds me of the story that his wife told me. She said she came in contact with him basically as an outside supporter through Prairie Fire, and she was complaining about some of the misogyny within the movement — how men were given leadership positions and women were relegated to letter writing and doing that support.

It wasn't that, in his response, he was necessarily saying that wasn't important. But he said to her that that's important work — the letter writing and stuffing envelopes and all of that. He understood the way that that solidarity and support, which was gendered, was important to the movement. The fact that she was telling me that story 50 years later, and took that lesson — she just impressed upon me that he was always thinking in nimble and different ways about things, and challenging what she was thinking about things.

TFSR: So, you made clear through the book Sostre's views on the roles of movement building. Obviously, they would have changed over time, but how important it was through a lot of his organizing – of access to for-

TFSR: I think that humility is a really interesting part too, because a bunch of those people that you mentioned in that Pantheon are folks that were- Angela Davis was a public intellectual, then went on trial in relation to George Jackson and was persecuted publicly as a communist, a Black communist, and a Black communist woman in the '60s by Reagan and such. That's a reason for her to get known. George Jackson — obviously, his time in the limelight was pretty short and explosive — published two books, was in the fervor, and then was snuffed out, murdered. So it makes sense. He was not necessarily even doing self-promotion, besides the resolution of these legal cases and the liberation of his people. All these things are tied up.

With Martin Sostre's political self-promotion, at least, as is featured in the book, he comes up when he is facing the power of the state in these legal proceedings. He is literally one of the named defendants in both cases, so he has to be at the forefront, and it becomes about him. But the rest of the time, it doesn't say "Afro-Asian Bookstore in Exile, brought to you by Martin Sostre." He's not forefronting his personality in any of that stuff, or in JEEP or whatever. I think that maybe that says a lot about the way that somebody understands their role in society and within political movements. Yeah, and I guess it ties maybe to — if he's approached by you and you're interested in getting a biography out — and he says, "Here's some materials, I'm busy doing other stuff to talk about myself." If he avoided it, or maybe didn't know how to do that, that's curious, because the rest of our society is all about self-promotion. It's all about people making names for themselves, and "influencer" is now a term that people use. So I think that maybe says a lot — maybe about the time that he came from, the community that he came out of, or maybe about him personally. I don't know if you want to speculate on that or let it sit and stew.

Garrett: No, but there's an anecdote that comes to mind as you're saying that, which is, I think both Ashanti Alston and Cisco Torres told me similar things. There was a group that I came across in the 90s that was being referred to as The Collective. It was in Yuri Kochiyama's papers that I came across, and it seemed it was basically ex-Panthers, ex-BLA and maybe around the time of Jericho. So it was those folks trying to support political prisoners who are still inside. I was asking Ashanti and Cisco do you remember these meetings, or what you all were doing? It was hazy, but both of them basically said that Martin was an elder for them, and a really important one, but you wouldn't know who he was in the room unless you did know. It wasn't like he came into the space and said- It was like he came he did the work. It was like "Oh shit, was that Martin Sostre?" People really were like "Oh, wow?" He was really interested in doing the work, and that was something that

came through across all the different political development in his life. He was very, very action-oriented, results-oriented, not interested in celebrity at all.

TFSR: Lacking a lot of details of his life, I think that you do a really job of filling in the context and development by looking at those events that he did participate in and the people around him as well, which feels an apt tribute to his own humility and views on social change and movement, maybe. Can he talk about the influences that help politicize Sostre, the see that he swam in? The beginning of the book, I think is riveting. I grew up on the West Coast, and so these descriptions of developments in Harlem, and of the Puerto Rican communities and the leftist communities, and the remnants of the Garveyite movement and how that moved forward in the early Communist Party, all these things coalescing, I thought was fascinating to read about.

Garrett: I'm so glad to hear you say that because I had a lot of anxiety about the first 40 years of his life. That was where I started — I started writing it at the beginning — and then I was like, "Oh my God, no one has ever really even done an oral history interview with him." There's one, and it was not focused on his early life, and I really only got access to it in the last few years of writing the book. But this just wasn't a person who had told- People develop a narrative about their life as they tell it more and more. So really, the only hints of his early life were these things in letters. I used that letter he wrote to Stokely Carmichael as a way in these small references to Michaux's Bookstore or a street corner. How can these be windows into the world that he might have lived in?

Huge shout out to his son Vinny, because honestly, Vinny did two family-style oral histories in the last few years of Martin's life, and those contained more information than I had from anywhere else. His family's willingness to be collaborators in this was really important and sweet.

So, yeah, in Harlem, the main influences that he gestures toward are, as I mentioned, Michelle's Bookstore — the place that really stayed with him. This Black nationalist bookstore, which at the time that he was a young kid, was not the Michelle's of the 60s that people might know, with Malcolm X giving speeches in front of it.

I talk a little bit about Club Julio A. Mella, which is a Spanish fraternal communist organization that his dad apparently frequented. Fortunately, there was some great research that had come out in the last five years about that, which I could draw on. He mentions the street corner order, so I talk a little about that public world, part of giving a sense of the political landscape of Great Depression Harlem — the evisceration of that public intellectual world in our own moment.

shift toward anarchism.

The other thing I'll say is that he's very consciously making an argument — which I talk about in the book — is not so clear to everyone: that his refusals are an example of revolutionary organizing in solidarity and in concert with liberation struggles around the world. I think that's such an important point. He's refusing them, but he's also saying, "I'm staging a one-person version of the National Liberation Front in Vietnam." He sees what he's doing, and he talks about the influence of liberation struggles in Vietnam on him too.

So I think that's a good example of how he's conceiving of the role of the individual in relation to the collective, how internationalist struggle takes place even on the local level — all of those things.

TFSR: To expand on that too — because I did write a question, but I'm going to scooch that to right here — he also makes a temporal argument, saying that the position of incarcerated bodies, in particular Black incarcerated bodies in the United States, and their regular inspection and assault before 1865 by slave owners or at the auction block, or by slave catchers — these attacks on the autonomy of racialized bodies go back to the foundations of the United States and beyond that.

He makes the argument that this is not only about international solidarity and solidarity among prison populations, but also that this is a part of Black liberation and the liberation of people here. I think it was fascinating that you brought up his interest in the women's liberation movement that was happening then, and the discussion and comparison with him taking that statement of: this is about bodily autonomy, not being degraded, not having my nobility challenged, and my right not to be attacked by people.

I can see this in the struggle and arguments that non-cis men — to use today's language, I guess — are fighting for: the right to protection for abortion, the right to challenge sexual assaults, the right to this whole spectrum of things that, in some ways, are taken for granted at this point, although they're obviously being chopped away at by patriarchy in this society.

But I thought that tying it to the international national liberation struggles and also to the struggle against patriarchy and tying it back to Black liberation from the beginning, from being stolen to these shores was really fascinating.

Garrett: Yes, and some of that was piecemeal speculation on the readings he was doing during that period where he's transitioning his thinking and identifying with

Garrett: Yeah, and why he's filing these lawsuits is in part to put the state on the defensive, and in part to carve out more space for revolutionary organizing inside. The censorship case is about getting revolutionary materials inside so people can become politicized. If you take it as a legal victory, you miss all the strategic value and the real reason he's bringing these cases.

TFSR: Yeah, and making it about both the collective — how do we get a movement victory and build off of this — simultaneous to how does this benefit me, is really, I guess, what jailhouse lawyering as an idea, as in *Jailhouse Lawyers Speak*, or whatever, as a political framework with a revolutionary horizon, comes up.

During the frame-up trial, during one of the speeches, in the film, he makes a point of saying- I was listening to *The Dugout* podcast, and they were playing lots of samples from the film in a recent episode on Martin Sostre, where they mentioned this book too. He was talking about how he was being further persecuted for refusing to submit to these sexual assaults by the guards — these rectal exams — when he was coming out of solitary to get into a courtroom. There's clearly no way that he was sneaking anything out that could be of any consequence.

I don't know that I actually addressed this specifically in any of the questions, but since I'm bringing it up now — is it okay if you address his argument and his experience, and what he said about the fight he was taking on throughout his already ongoing court fights?

Garrett: Yeah. So he's part of a larger context of challenging these strip searches, and specifically, in his case, the "rectal examinations." These are things that, when he would leave solitary confinement or come back to solitary confinement — which was often happening in his case to go to either legal visits or to court — he was being forced to strip in front of all these guards and submit to these sexual assaults.

Martin had refused to do them for some time, and at some point, he started being assaulted. He tried to file a lawsuit against the guards for assaulting him, and the state held up his mail and then charged him with assaulting the guards in retaliation. That wound up going to court in Plattsburgh. He used that as a catalyst to build a defense committee in Plattsburgh and stage political theater there. I talk in the book about how that politicized people outside about the sexual assaults happening in prison.

The way he's theorizing it is that the state's narrative of protecting from contraband or whatever is bullshit, and this is really about stripping him of his personhood. He's doing it at the same time that he's refusing to shave his beard. I talk about these within the broader context of defenses of bodily autonomy and his

You had all these radical speakers on the street, coming from different political traditions, and libraries and bookstores, and you're like, wow, okay, imagine being 13 in that context.

The next political space that I talk about is in prison and in jail. That influence of Julio Pinto Gandia and then the Nation of Islam. I tried really to give a sense of what it would be to be in the Nation of Islam in New York at the period that he joined, and how different that might look from people's preconceived notions of it or what it looked like from the outside. It really was an autonomous collective of folks doing mutual aid and political education inside.

I think those were all examples, and I tried to trace those over time. Seeing Paul Robeson speak on the streets of Harlem, then shows up when he's got his bookstore in Buffalo, and he's got people from CORE on soapboxes, or the story he tells about the loudspeakers in front of his bookstore to attract young people — you could imagine that in Harlem in the '30s as well.

I do think there were these moments that circle back again and again. Then you see it in JEEP — I had this moment where I'm talking to the young folks, and they said, "Oh yeah, at the front of the store was this library where we could sit and peruse books, and the books were donated by Abbie Hoffman." You see the circling back again and again to key ideas and moments that he's trying out.

TFSR: Yeah, the reproduction of spaces and dynamics that have worked throughout his life led to his politicization, awareness, and continued growth — and the conscious reproduction of those methodologies so that he could expand, politicize, get more folks talking about this, get more people engaged. That definitely speaks to me. I find myself doing that too. I was politicized partially by stuff that was on the radio, and that's why I want to do the storytelling that I do.

You've mentioned *Those Who Know Don't Say*, and I realized I didn't ask a specific question about it, but if you could say a little bit about what that book is and the relationship between the two.

Garrett: Yeah. *Those Who Know Don't Say* was an outgrowth of the dissertation. I came across Martin while doing research for that book on the Nation of Islam's organizing during the Civil Rights era, which then led me to organizing in prisons. This must happen to other authors too — you're writing one book and then getting excited about this other thing that's leading you. So, you could probably read *Those Who Know Don't Say* and realize, "Oh yeah, this person's really interested in Martin Sostre," but it's not what the book is about.

I had done a bunch of the research on the Nation of Islam's organizing during that period of the late '50s and early '60s, when he was already inside in New

York, and I brought that to this book. In part, I found those the hardest chapters to write, because I felt I was rewriting sections of the old book. I didn't know how to say this differently, or how to say it with Martin at the center, or whatever. On an author level, I felt the years at Clinton and Attica were really hard for me to write. I hadn't decided to write this book until that other book came out, but a lot of the research was the basis for this.

TFSR: One thing that so straight was famous for, or infamous to some, was his jailhouse lawyering. Would you talk about some of the cases that he brought, under what conditions, some of the precedents that it set, and how he landed about the role of legal battles as revolutionary strategy?

Garrett: Oh, that's a meaty question. Okay, I'll start with the conditions where he teaches himself law. Like most folks who learn the law while inside, he's trying to figure out how to get out of prison and teaching himself the law in the mid-50s. For folks who might not know, at that time, incarcerated people did not have constitutional rights. That's not something that was at all a given.

Through his cases with other Muslims in the Nation of Islam — either ones where he's the plaintiff — *Sostre v. McGinnis* is a big one, but there are also cases like *Pierce v. LaVallee*, *SaMarion v. McGinnis*, where Martin either has a hand in writing it as a template or actually drafts it. There are examples where he writes the entire thing and has someone else sign it. I give the example in the book of how he writes these legal templates, puts them in bars of soap, and leaves them in the showers so other people can pull them out and reproduce them.

He's part of this wave of prison litigation that's really the first movement of prison litigation to bring about established constitutional rights for incarcerated people. That's what his legal battles looked like between 1957 and 1964. Then, when he goes back in in 1967, he really begins what he calls “a single-minded, single-handed struggle for prisoners' rights”. He is being held in solitary confinement, cut off from all access to his comrades, denied political materials, and he drafts what is probably one of the most important prisoners' rights cases — *Sostre v. Rockefeller*. It's hard to overstate how big he's going in that lawsuit. He's literally in solitary confinement and suing Nelson Rockefeller.

TFSR: The governor of New York at the time.

Garrett: Yeah, thanks. And it goes to the court of Constance Baker Motley, who rules mostly in *Sostre*'s favor. It gets severely cut back on appeal by the state and winds up being called *Sostre v. McGinnis* because they let Rockefeller off the hook. But that's a huge case and victory. Of course, he uses the courtroom as political

theater, because it's being held in New York during a time of tremendous revolutionary upheaval.

Another key case is *Sostre v. Otis*, around political censorship. Through that case, he essentially wins the right for incarcerated people to have due process when things are denied them — so the right to file a grievance, to be notified that something has been confiscated. All of those things are still technically laws today, although, as we know, not practiced often.

TFSR: That's within the legal system, within the prisons or within the DOC in whatever state or federal system, not necessarily into civil or criminal court on the outside, right?

Garrett: Yeah. So, if you were denied a copy of *Workers World* in prison — depending on what state you're in — you should have some legal right to be told: on this day, we denied you this for this reason, and you have such-and-such days to appeal. The idea is that *Workers World* folks should also be notified of that denial. Of course, none of this usually happens, but part of what's so important about winning it in that period is that it allowed tons of revolutionary materials to enter the prisons during this time of revolutionary ferment. So it was huge in that way as well.

Then, to the question of how he conceptualized the role of law, this changes over a 20-year period, but certainly by the period of 1967 and his frame-up onward, he's thinking about the courts. I have a chapter called “The Court as an Arena,” which is a quote from Martin. He's thinking of the courts as political terrains to wage struggle very publicly. The things that are often hidden abuses in the prison, this is a space where you can flood the courtroom, have people be politicized. There are really great examples over a 10-year period of him doing that.

Some other ways he talks about law — he calls law as “oppression codified.” So, to your earlier question about the historical amnesia about Martin, one of the other interventions I was trying to make is that there was some interest in Martin that saw him as a legal reformer, or saw his lasting contribution as the change to the law, while this is a person who was for abolishing the state and did not believe in the law at all. That's something I wanted to make clear in this book for those folks who were championing him as a legal reformer or a constitutional law trailblazer or something.

TFSR: I could see that view of him being championed by a legalistic framework and losing all of these other elements of who he was and who he became, and who he come from, or whatever.