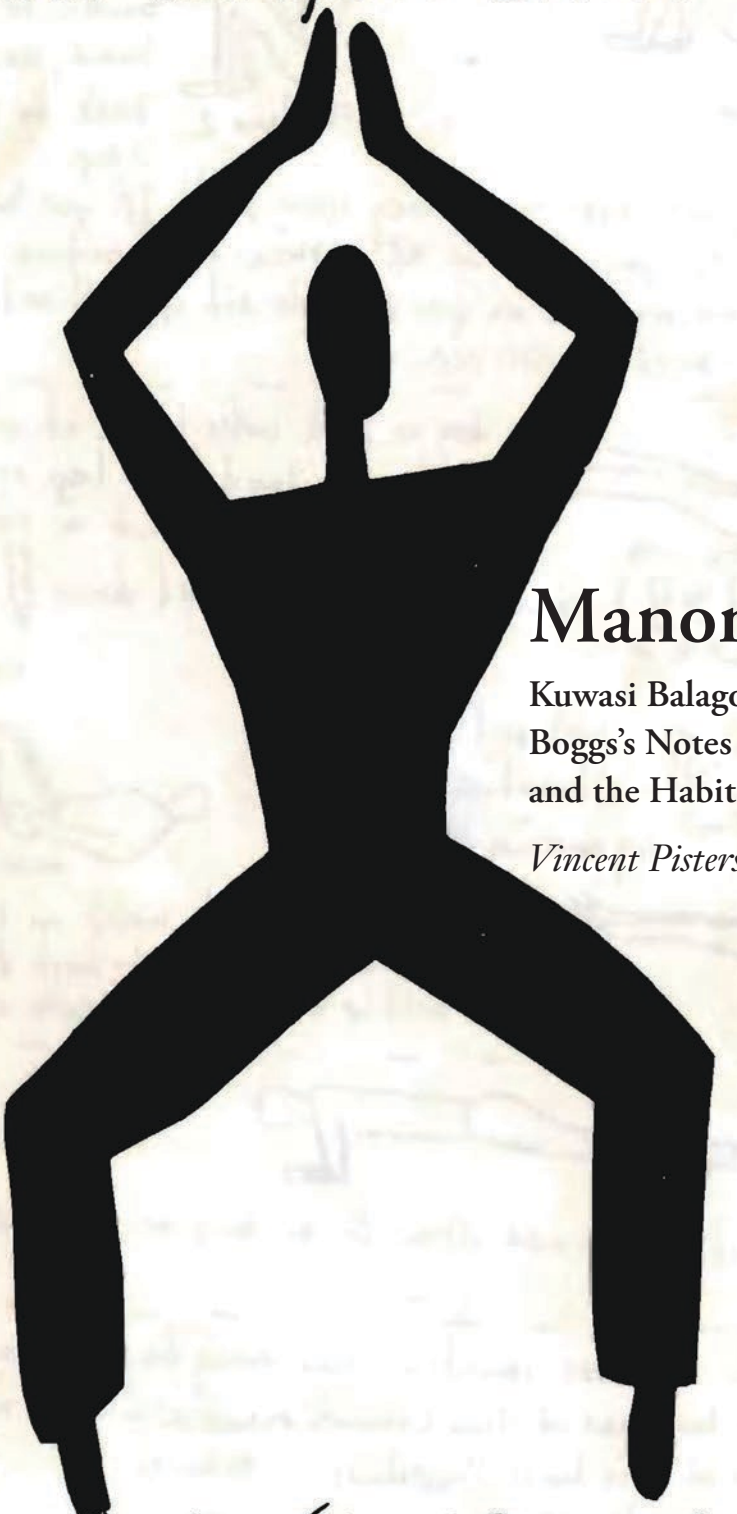
Kuwasi Balagoon's Exercise Book



Manomation

Kuwasi Balagoon and James Boggs's Notes on Automation and the Habit of Freedom

Vincent Pisters Møystad

"...Without freedom (the ability to live in total), there isn't any big deal in living, since to accept fascism is to forfeit life."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204325100828 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In the 1980s, the North American autonomous collective Resistance began to circulate a pamphlet entitled *Kuwasi Balagoon's Exercise Book*. The cover (fig. 1) features a Black, athletic, silhouetted figure, arms raised, legs spread, knees bent, feet *en pointe*. It is a stance that exudes strength and discipline, perhaps even punishment; the figure is poised to strike explosively, or is being subjected to a stress position for enhanced interrogation—maybe in a stress position, maybe in a state of yogic grace, depending on one's associations. Underneath the figure, in an elegant if urgent cursive, we read "Without Freedom (the ability to live in total) there isn't any big deal in living, since to accept fascism is to accept death."[1]

The author, Kuwasi Balagoon, was an anarchist member of the Black Liberation Army (BLA), then incarcerated in Rockland County Jail in New York State and charged with participation in the attempted expropriation of the contents of a Brink's armored truck on 20 October 1981 by members of the BLA and Weather Underground. According to his comrade Amilcar Shabazz, the pamphlet consisted of Balagoon's

> ideas on "PT" or physical training, in his handwriting, with sketches of different exercises, especially what could be performed in the tight confines of the small cells he spent many hours, days, and years of his life locked up inside prisons and devoid of human contact. His body was as solid as iron from his PT practice, which was a key to his life and his power to escape. (in Balagoon et al. [2001] 2019:268)

The pamphlet consists of illustrations of a workout routine, with accompanying explications. In a matter-of-fact tone, Balagoon writes that "this system has been worked on and used by FREEDOM FIGHTERS" and that, when performed correctly, this system "not only exercises your muscles but more importantly [gets] you used to continuing when fatigued" (Balagoon, "Exercise Book," 271).[2] The pamphlet is part of Balagoon's contributions to American anarchist letters and Black liberation politics in the United States, an oeuvre largely composed during frequent periods of incarceration and written to comrades on the outside. Balagoon also composed poems and wrote extensive trial statements, repressed in courtrooms but published in anarchist and BLA publications. These letters, poems, speeches, and pamphlets were gathered and published in the edited volume *Kuwasi Balagoon: A Soldier's Story. Revolutionary Writings by a New Afrikan Anarchist*, first published by the Quebecois anarchist organization Solidarity in 2001 and in 2019 by PM Press and Kersplebedeb.

1. The images used in this article are from Kuwasi Balagoon's *Exercise Book*, republished in *A Soldier's Story* (Balagoon et al. [2001] 2019). The digital version of the *Exercise Book* from which the images are derived is hosted by the Freedom Archives of Berkeley, California; see https://freedomarchives.org/.
2. All quotes by Balagoon are from *Kuwasi Balagoon: A Soldier's Story* and will be cited with the title of the specific text and the page number from the 2019 edition. Quotes from works by other authors included in the same book will cite author(s), title, and page.

Figure 1. (facing page) The cover of Kuwasi Balagoon's Exercise Book, *reproduced in* Kuwasi Balagoon: A Soldier's Story. Revolutionary Writings by a New Afrikan Anarchist *([2001] 2019:269). (Image from https://freedomarchives.org/)*

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204325100828 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The politics of the "Exercise Book," and Kuwasi Balagoon's life and political work more broadly, constitute an embodied performance of autonomous resistance, a life lived, in Balagoon's own words, *in total*. The letters, short texts, trial statements, and poems that accompany the "Exercise Book" all proclaim that embodied "freedom is a habit" (Balagoon, "Anarchy Can't Fight Alone," 153), a contention that unfolds across the failures of representational politics in the workplace and state, a path not taken in the aftermath of the foreclosure of both anti-imperialist resistance and workplace militancy as mass movements in the 1980s, an ethogram of arrythmias in the breakdown of the historical machinery of capital.

The "Exercise Book" is an expression of an insurgent mode of resistance developing against the intensification of automation and the eliminationist logics of deindustrializing racial-carceral capitalism from the 1960s into the present. In 1963, auto worker and communist James Boggs premonitorily diagnosed these developments in *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Diary*. In this text, Boggs grapples with the discourses on and practices of automation that had come to dominate industrial relations and political imaginaries in automobile manufacturing, particularly as these related to class composition, political realignment in American society, and the prospect for renewed Black liberation struggles. Boggs draws together discussion on automation and cybernetics as expressive of capitalism's deeper, secular crisis, and predicted a precipitous carceral turn in the organization of the state and an increasing autonomy of social struggle from the dynamics of capital accumulation:

> Thus, automation not only poses the questions of poverty and employment and related economic questions. It brings into sharp focus that element which the Negroes always bring with them when they struggle for their rights. It makes the question social because it poses the relations of man to man. (Boggs 1963:37)

Written from the Chrysler assembly line in Detroit, Boggs's analysis presciently lays out in his contemporary discourses on automation both the increasing autonomy of capital from labor and, concurrently, decisive reconfigurations of the logic of production in relation to the rhythms of resistance to capitalism, prefiguring later Autonomist analyses associated with figures like C.L.R. James and Mario Tronti. In Boggs's analysis then, automation is the latest iteration in a longer historical process of the alienation of labor power as productive of the dehumanization of laboring humans, an emphasis on historical continuity that we find in many Black analyses of factory work; we may recall Richard Pryor's character Zeke's declaration that "everybody knows [...] plant just short for plantation" in the film *Blue Collar* (1978). Boggs paints a social landscape of an "excess" population locked *out* of production but locked *into* an existential struggle with an aggressively expansive carceral state, the very terrain across which Balagoon maneuvers.

These two texts—Boggs's analysis of the racializing dynamics of automation and the embodied performance of autonomy enacted across the pages of Balagoon's writings—take the form of *notes*: the titular pages from Boggs's notebook and Balagoon's clandestine epistles, assemblages of thought formulated within and against conditions of restraint and exhaustion. These works, replete with tenderness, impassioned exhortations, incisive analysis, and wry humor form part of a wider tradition of epistolary insurgency by *résistants* that Shanya Cordis and Sarah Ihmoud identify as a "poetics of living rebellion" (2022). Orisanmi Burton's work on the carceral state and carceral insurgency since the 1960s draws heavily on practices of letter-writing, reconfiguring this reading and writing as a dialogic research practice rather than a philological object. The letters are "materialized experience, consciousness, affect, and social life" and "the scholarly value of the 'data' that letters generate is incidental to their social, political, and ontological value as a collective world-making praxis" (Burton 2021:625). Building on these epistolary methods, Burton's writing is distinctive in its refusal to accede to the depoliticizing historiographic practice of casting carceral insurgency as against the excesses of the carceral state, a struggle for larger cages. Instead, Burton chooses to take seriously the stated politics and the developed analyses of the insurgents themselves. It is in this

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204325100828 Published online by Cambridge University Press

spirit that I approach the work of Balagoon and Boggs, and Burton's concepts of carceral war and abolitionist world-building (2023) structure my conclusions along with Fred Moten's discussion of the Black revolutionary politics emerging within and against more strictly dialectical historicism and the strictures of assembly line and prison alike (Moten 2017:1).

Why Isn't the Whole World Dancing

Life is rough when your attitude is bad

—Kuwasi Balagoon, "life is rough" (in Balagoon et al. [2001] 2019:74)

Balagoon's revolutionary practice and thought were profoundly shaped by a very stark relationship to violence as a kinetic and visceral force, a straightforward capacity to inflict harm on others. Writing in *Look for Me in the Whirlwind: The Collective Autobiography of the New York Panther 21* (1971), Balagoon outlines his formative political experiences as a participant in the United States Army's postwar occupation of Germany. With characteristic deadpan, he refers to the US Army as "the *other* army." Faced with racialized violence from white fellow soldiers and racial discrimination from the military hierarchy, Balagoon joined an organization known as De Legislators, a clandestine network of Black soldiers organized to facilitate "fucking up racists" and avenging acts of violence against Black soldiers:

> One at a time we would catch up with them and beat and stomp them so bad that helicopters would have to be used to take them to better hospitals [...] We would plan things so that we could kick something off inside a club that would instantly turn into a riotous condition—once everything was in chaos it was impossible to pick us out. We then broke faces and bodies of whoever we planned to get and made our escape. (Balagoon, "In the Other Army," 90)

Within this constellation, Balagoon acquired the nom de guerre of De Prophet, for his knack of "prophesying that so-and-so was going to get fucked up in a predetermined amount of time, and then going on and fucking the chump up" (91). In addition to these experiences of planning and carrying out clandestine violence, De Legislators shared "worthy literature" and engaged in mutual political and strategic critiques. Balagoon's prose in these passages is unadorned, stark, but animated by an impassive joy at the discovery and development of this collective capacity for clandestine mayhem; constrained and tormented within the most extensive machinery for the breaking of bodies and faces ever assembled, that *other* army, De Legislators engaged in the collective labor of redirecting the flows of industrialized mutilation.

The unflinching strategic calculations of empire's capacities for harm, and their effects—as well as his own capacities for harm and those of all the oppressed—is a recurring theme in Balagoon's writing. He does not theorize armed struggle in the manner of his Marxist-Leninist contemporaries, arguing against the fantasy of an organized vanguard. Nor does he evince much interest in an ethics of violence (or nonviolence) as such: in lengthy trial statements, Balagoon amply explicates his position that violence, the breaking of bodies and faces, is an endemic feature of US American empire, an incontestable fact of life and one that demands a response, a rerouting of violence away from the colonized and towards the colonizer (Balagoon, "Brink's Trial Sentencing Statement," 141–45). In these statements, Balagoon's historical sweep is vast. It traces clear and direct continuities in the temporal flow of empire from the early modern period into the present. Balagoon also tracks spatial permutations across what in the parlance of late-20th-century US anti-imperialism were understood as internal (racialized, oppressed, and incarcerated peoples in the United States) and external colonies as well as the psychic configuration of empire's participants and objects (137).

Balagoon's outlook arises from a life spent, in large part, in highly regimented circumstances, in the other army, in prisons, with every movement planned and surveilled, an intensification

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of carceral Taylorism with deep roots in Black life in the Americas. Hilary Beckles reads the work of C.L.R. James ([1938] 2001) and Eric Williams ([1944] 2022) as laying the groundwork for a body of thought that casts slavery, that conjunction of the carceral and productive modes of regimentation, as "the primordial site of Atlantic modernity, and as one of several important locations where its contradictory tendencies were acted out as ideological contest" (Beckles 1997:777).

The slave trade and the plantation economy pioneered a wholesale rationalization (from the perspective of capital accumulation) of the lives and productive capacities of the human beings subjected to it. Pablo F. Gómez writes about the premonitory role of slavery in the quantification of human beings through the development of the *pieza de India* (piece of India), a unit of measurement of a human being's productive potential arrived at through a standardized calculation of the age, size, gender, and physical health of an enslaved human, "methodologies that allowed them to translate slave bodies into numbers and calculate the inherent value of corporeality as it related to an increasingly normalized constant unit" (Gómez 2021:47). This quantified instrumental rationalization of human beings as productive units would have a significant impact on the development of speculative financial and insurance instruments through the calculation of risk (Baucom 2005) and early computational thinking (Whittaker 2023).

In "Origin Stories: Plantations, Computers, and Industrial Control" Meredith Whittaker shows how Charles Babbage and Ada Lovelace collaborated on theoretical "calculating engines" that lie at the root of much contemporary algorithmic computation, and were developed in direct response to the problem of rational control of laboring bodies. The connection between their work and industrial rationalization in 19th-century England is well known, but Whittaker demonstrates its deep imbrication with Atlantic slavery.

> Plantation management guides routinely circulated among British capitalists, and an industry of preformatted accounting books, templates, and manuals was widely available in Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, often commingling with literature on industrial management. (Whittaker 2023)

The methods of surveillance and rationalization that undergirded Babbage's advice to British industrialists faced with workers rebelling against industrialization was thus directly adopted from the plantation. Equally, the calculating engines themselves were conceived as a means of worker surveillance, and the analytic categories of "skill" and "freedom" that undergirded these early computational logics were themselves drawn directly from the organization, surveillance, and disciplining of human beings on the plantation and in the factory (Whittaker 2023).

James Boggs writes of the stark impact of automation on the social composition and political prospects of the mid-20th-century American working class. Boggs worked in the US American automobile industry at the height of its operation and the beginnings of its increasingly precipitous decline. In "The Rise and Fall of the Union," Boggs concisely defines automation:

> Automation is a change in the mode of production which is more radical than any since the introduction of the assembly line. But unlike the assembly line, which was to increase the manufacturing workforce over what it had been, automation is an advanced form of technology which replaces human controls with electronic controls. What had already happened to the coal miners with the mechanization of mines was now catching up with the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] in chemicals, rubber, steel, glass, autos, machinery, etc. (1963:23)

This switch to advanced "labor-saving" technology precipitated a sea change in terms of class composition. Most immediately, thousands upon thousands of workers found themselves unemployed. These workers were consigned to an expansionist state for their sustenance, whether through

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disability or unemployment benefits, early retirement, incarceration, or absorption into the new peace-time standing army.[3]

Whatever the specifics, these displaced ex-workers are kept alive through the contributions of the remaining productive workers. For Boggs, this creates a distinct set of political problems. In place of the older cleavage between workers and bosses, society would come to be split into a primary antagonism between those involved in production and those not involved in production. The latter would be unable to accept their designation as superfluous humans. When it came to superfluous "work animals, like the mule, they could just stop growing them. But automation displaces people, and you can't simply stop growing people even when they have been made expendable by the system" (1963:36). The former, the bosses, would find themselves increasingly resentful of being expected to shoulder the burden of providing for these expendable humans, leading to an increase in fascistic and genocidal political movements.

Automation is not, for Boggs, primarily a question of technical composition but of social organization and a circuitry for the exercise of power over laboring bodies: "more was being produced not only by the new automated machinery but by forcing workers to tend more of the old machines—man-o-mation" (1963:23). Boggs's account thus emphasizes the intensification of capital's control over the worker's body, whether at work or in the carceral life worlds of the excess members of the population, rather than the way automation was ostensibly intended: as technological progress towards generalized leisure.

This perspective is echoed in Aaron Benanav's *Automation and the Future of Work* (2020), in which he argues that automation *discourse* emerges not at conjunctures of accelerating technical progress, but rather at those points in time that see a widespread devaluation of labor as a constitutive element in capital accumulation. Rather than technological advances rendering human labor increasingly superfluous, automation tends to follow, rather than lead, the rendering "excess" of populations, except under the specific circumstances of high levels of capital investment in export-oriented manufacturing, which tend to be the exception, rather than the rule, in the development of capitalist social relations globally.

What emerges from this brief exegesis then is a conceptualization of automation not as technological innovation in the production process as such, but rather an expression of a longer-term tendency on the part of capital to dehumanize labor and intensify its control over laboring bodies. This dehumanization is achieved through machines and through racialization, but always with a clear objective: the intensification of the exploitation of labor and the expropriation of surplus value. What Boggs prophesied and Balagoon declared uncompromising war on is the social order that emerges when capital comes to see itself as independent of human labor, and as responsible for the production, management, and elimination of excess humans.

Don Hamerquist's *Rewrite #3* is a prescient analysis of the consolidation of carceral and eliminationist logics as a response to this decentering of human labor from accumulation, which he names "secular crisis" (1983:1). Building on Marx's *Grundrisse*, Hamerquist argues that the metabolic relationship between capital and laboring human being has absolute limits, at which point, per Marx, "the surplus labor of the mass has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth [...and] with that, production based on exchange value breaks down" (Marx [1939] 2012:705). This crisis has been concentrated at specific sites (the decolonizing "peripheries" of capitalism and so-called emerging economies) but is increasingly unavoidable in the capitalist centers (Hamerquist 1983:3). The horrifying undercurrent churning through Hamerquist's text is this: what happens

3. For example, in 1958, unemployment in Detroit was at 17%, with mass layoffs a regular feature of life in and around the auto industry. This is corroborated by the research of Daniel Clark (2020). Clark does not break down that 17% by race but one can deduce from other sources and circumstantial evidence that this precarity would likely be intensified for Black workers.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204325100828 Published online by Cambridge University Press

when capital no longer needs us? Soberly, Hamerquist argues that "forceful restructuring" by "authoritarian state structures" through "counterinsurgency" is the most likely state response (18). At the same time, Hamerquist acknowledges that the 1980s was a time of intensifying genocidal logics in advanced capitalist societies, in the form of racialized eugenic practices in the welfare state, the increase of mass incarceration, the rise of neofascist movements, and, in the decolonizing world, the mobilization of "ethnic" violence by imperial and social-imperial states jockeying for power, tendencies that have intensified in almost unimaginable ways in the decades since.

Amílcar Cabral wrote that colonial power was limited in its application of violence; it enforces "genocide of the indigenous population and creates a void which empties foreign domination of its content and its object: the dominated people" (Cabral [1970] 2009). As long as a subjugated population was not destroyed outright, practices of exploitation and subjugation would invariably come under constant, if modulating, attack by the colonized. This created the "dilemma of cultural resistance," a space of contingency in which, Cabral argued, emancipatory practice could be built. The life-world confronting Balagoon on the eve of the Brink's robbery, the life-world theorized by Boggs and Hamerquist, is one where this contingency for emancipation has been foreclosed, where the colonized are no longer the content nor object of the colonizer's extractive regime, having already been reduced to a social excess, to nothingness.

Towards the end of his life, Kuwasi Balagoon wrote a short meditation entitled "Why Isn't the Whole World Dancing," in which he reflects on the first time "i experienced terror and was able to keep my wits enough to examine it" (160). Having been placed in solitary confinement in a prison's Incorrigible Unit for "interrupting a funeral, pistol whipping a 'corrections' officer, shooting another, and aiding an escape" (160), Balagoon finds himself confronted with a group of prison guards moving through the unit, subjecting each inmate to physical and psychological torment as a prelude to physically punishing him for his transgressions. As inmates are beaten and terrorized around him and the prison guards joke about being "the German army," Balagoon is stricken with fear, "just entangled in a massive knot in my head" (160). He decides that if he is struck he will strike one of his jailers as best he can, though it may result in his death: "it was a puny resolve, as i felt that an attack would spell the end, and that fear is a great source of power" (162).

Balagoon is searched and stood upright, at which point one of the prison officers strikes him in the abdomen with a baton, "the vertical butt stroke taught to infantry" (162). While modestly conceding that his stomach "looks out of shape," Balagoon's persistent regime of sit-ups and leg raises have rendered him unusually resistant to such a stroke; "every muscle in my body was like a spring" and "the stick rebounded off my gut and i looked him in the eye, i couldn't help but smile. He responded by panicking" (162). The incident so throws off the guards that they retreat, and Balagoon and his fellow inmates reflect that

> this is state terror. The most terrifying part being what was happening to my neighbor, hearing what could happen to me [...;] making prisoners so fearful for so long that their personalities change to that of wimps who will accept whatever the state has in mind without resistance or retaliation. They are looking for hearts. (163)

This state terror, against which defiance is the only (however implausible) defense, demands viscera. It demands hearts. Balagoon cites a prison guard's maxim "grab them by the balls and their hearts will follow" (163); the state asserts physical control over the sexual organs of its subjects, which, in diagrammatic surgical-anatomical progression, it understands as foreclosing the possibility of resistance. The *Exercise Book*'s concerns with endurance and core strength finds its clearest vindication in an anecdote, not about Balagoon's first experience of abject terror, but his first experience of such terror *and* keeping his wits enough to be able to examine it. Balagoon's abdomen, his stomach, his gut becomes, in diametric inversion of the state's balls-to-hearts axiom, the means to exercise wit, reflection; to survive and fight a little longer yet through the persistent practice of abdominal resistance. As Burton writes, "the corporeal terrain of struggle is the terrain of physical violence" (2023:63).

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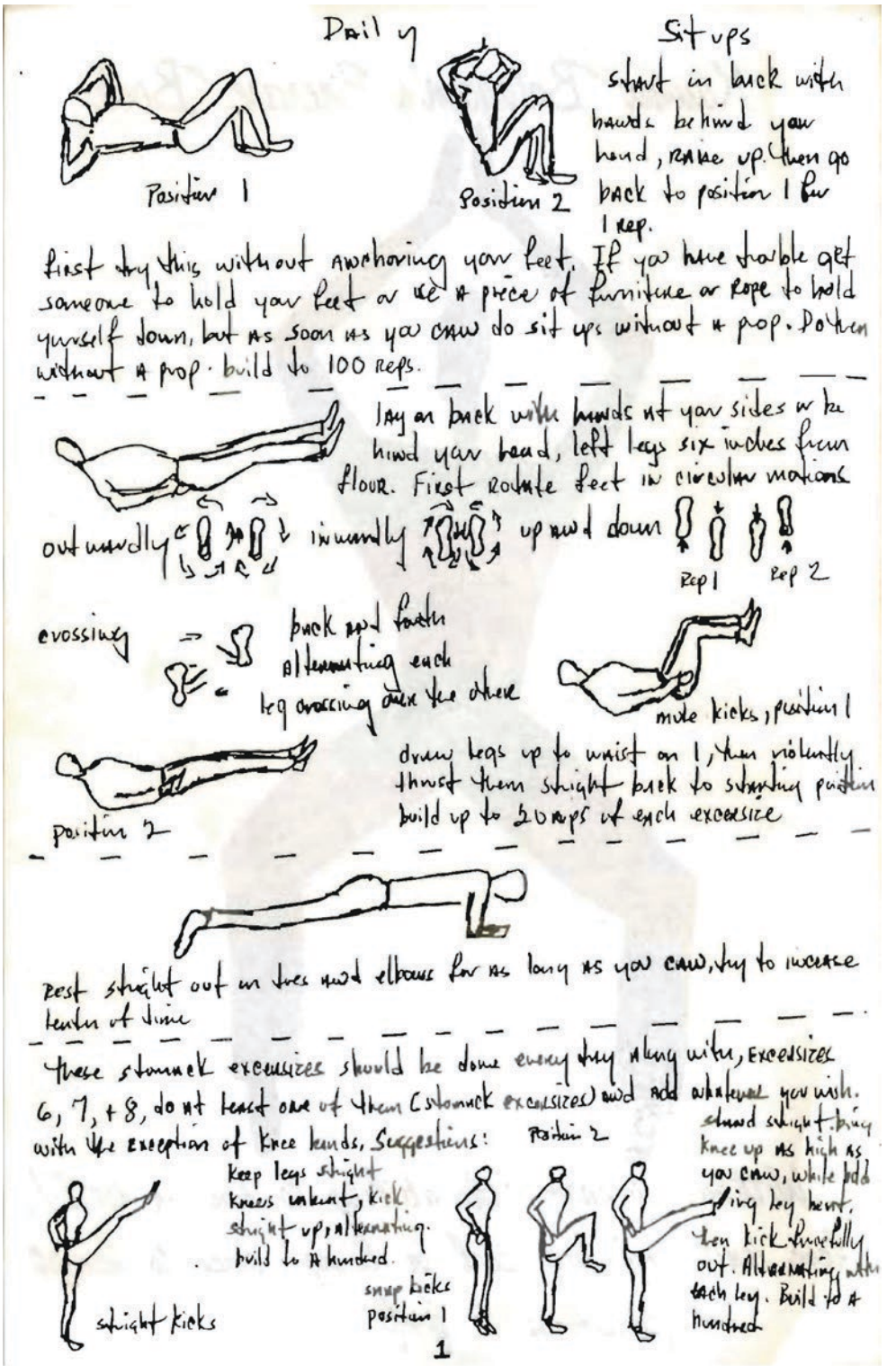


Figure 2. Stomach exercises. *Kuwasi Balagoon's* Exercise Book, *p. 1. (Image from https://freedomarchives.org/)*

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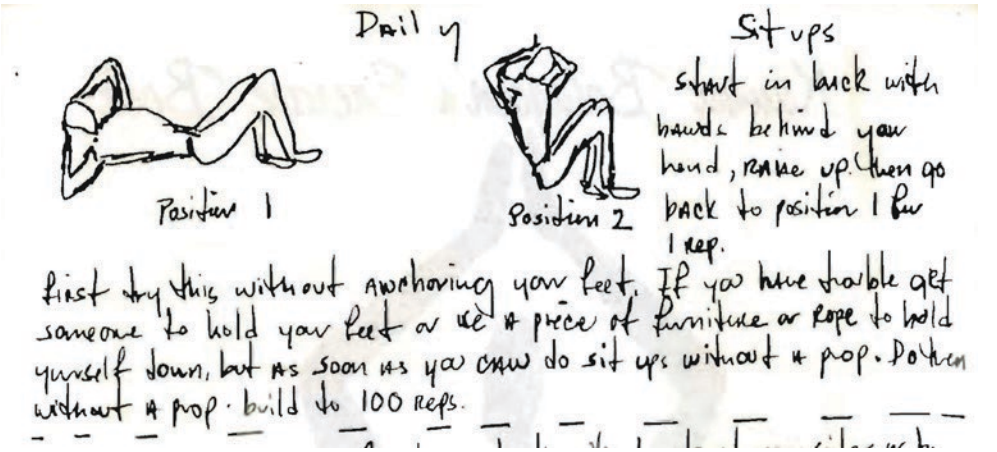


Figure 3. If you have trouble, get someone to hold your feet *(detail from figure 2). (Image from https://freedomarchives.org/)*

Where Do We Go from Here

Kuwasi Balagoon undoes the state's oedipal psychosexual terror with his stomach, off which baton techniques taught to imperial infantrymen must necessarily bounce, the gut from which screws cower. Kuwasi Balagoon, who took the name Balagoon, understanding it to mean "warlord" in Yoruba, echoing the god Ògún—warrior, metalworker, exiled rebel, distiller of ardent spirits. Balagoon, who, in the words of Bilal Sunni-Ali, "the newspapers [described] as nine feet tall, leaping over two cars at a time while still shooting at the police who were chasing him (Bilal Sunni-Ali and Matt Meyer, "Kuwasi: A Virtual Roundtable of Love and Reflection," 2019:59). Kuwasi, born on a Sunday, Kwasiada, Under-Day, the day of the universe; Kuwasi, comrade of totality.

Burton understands Balagoon and other incarcerated fighters for Black liberation as embodying a form of *manhood* posited as the negation of their relegation to the carceral nonexistence that Boggs identifies as the fate of the Black postindustrial ex-worker (Burton 2023:43). Kuwasi Balagoon was a "gender rebel" with "his own way of looking at things" (Sekou Odinga and Matt Meyer, "Kuwasi: A Virtual Roundtable of Love and Reflection," 56), and Burton warns against drawing any simple equivalence between his claims to manhood and the patriarchal violence of the white supremacist state (Burton 2023:43). The Akan day-name "Kuwasi," adopted by Balagoon after a conversation with *babalawo* (Yoruba priest) Efuntola Oseijeman Adelabu Adefunmi, with its association with the universe and totality, draws attention to Balagoon's life and work as an aperture to other worlds (Bartle 1978:82). Former Panther Kim Kit Holder writes that Kuwasi Balagoon's life was "an example, especially for LGBTQ people, to show the possibility of the universality of Panther politics and [...] a badge to deconstruct the concept that armed struggle is a hyper-masculine phenomenon" (in Balagoon et al. [2001] 2019:54).

Among the most poignant passages of Kuwasi Balagoon's writing are those in which he imagines future emancipatory movements. As committed as he was to armed struggle, Balagoon, unlike some of his contemporaries and other theorists of revolutionary violence, did not argue for its primacy over other forms of action. In his view, a developed capacity to exact retribution against the state and its representatives is necessary for emancipatory movements, but far from sufficient. Instead, Balagoon imagines cooperatives, printing presses, gardens, agricultural cooperatives, mutual aid groups, communally owned housing, childcare: "revolutionizing our lives." In "Where Do We Go from Here" Balagoon fully embraces the prefigurative traditions of anarchism, the desire to build

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a new world in the shell of the old, and to engage in the direct appropriation of use value as well as the construction of new social relations in the present (234).

In the collectively authored "Kuwasi: A Virtual Roundtable of Love and Reflection," Balagoon's comrades and friends recall a man who loved music, poetry, getting high, playing with children, dancing. Balagoon refused to be constrained by any social convention, whether it was bourgeois or dour and philistine puritanism, which characterized some revolutionaries (see Blanc 1972; Vaneigem 2012). He frequented the Mudd Club, a crucial site for the development of punk culture as well as a number of the artistic milieux of 1980s New York. Danielle Jasmine writes of how Balagoon cultivated relations of love with people of all kinds, of different gender expressions, giving of himself tenderly and generously. Jasmine, a poet and the granddaughter of one of Balagoon's lovers, mourns her grandmother through reading her correspondence with Kuwasi.

> My Grandma loved a man [...] a passionate, supportive, inspiring man [...T]hroughout his letters, he offered support for her sobriety, health, and family [...]
>
> Beyoncé's song "Halo" has been an anthem for me [...while] reading Kuwasi's letters, feeling their presence in the lyrics "remember those walls I built, well baby they're tumbling down." [...] To balance the struggle for freedom and justice with peace and light is a remarkable feat. That Kuwasi could understand and accomplish this, despite the physical walls around him, is a remarkable thing, something he offered to all of us in his life. (Danielle Jasmine and Matt Meyer, "Kuwasi: A Virtual Roundtable of Love and Reflection," 2019:52)

The recollections of those close to him during his fleeting weeks and months outside the prison and away from the front are every bit as jaw-dropping as any of his exploits as a guerilla, and it is in the figure of Balagoon dancing, Balagoon laughing, Balagoon tenderly looking after his friends' children that we begin to understand what he may have meant by "freedom (the ability to live in total)" (see fig. 1).

In *American Revolution*, Boggs argues that struggles around automation intensify and highlight "that element" that he argues is always at the center of Black struggle. Black freedom struggle, for Boggs, necessarily renders every political question *social* (1963:37). Boggs, from the vantage point of the most technologically advanced manufacturing industry in the high-modern world of the 1960s, is unequivocal in situating struggles over and in response to the introduction of automation and cybernetics to the automobile factories as part of a deeper, longer continuum of struggles. For Boggs, these struggles, while taking shape as "struggles over poverty and unemployment," are fundamentally questions of social relationships. Furthermore, automation, as outlined above, represents a *generalization* and *intensification* of those struggles. As humans become increasingly displaced from production and their exploitation a less central element in accumulation, the mystification of economic struggles over shares of surplus value fall away, leaving a more nakedly social struggle over human being.

At the same time, the definite framing of "that element" suggests a certain invariance of resistance to these processes, albeit a morphological one. For Boggs, this social question of human being is at the center of Black struggle, one that, in his analysis, is on the cusp of a far broader generalization. It is with this in mind that I turn to the forms of these social struggles. What is it that emerges from this nexus of decoupling social antagonism from capital accumulation, the intensification of carceral mechanisms, and the generalization of post-plantation social relationships?

In *Tip of the Spear: Black Radicalism, Prison Repression, and the Long Attica Revolt* (2023) Burton presents testimony and theorization from incarcerated militants involved in the "long Attica," the continual state of insurgency within the US state prison system beginning in the 1960s. Against contemporaneous sociological accounts that cast the uprising as a response to harsh prison conditions, Burton takes seriously the rebels' own characterization of the struggle in prison as a continuation of revolutionary struggle on the outside, of the prison as a concentration of intensities

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at play in society at large. The titular tip of the spear represents the sharpest end of repression but also the most advanced forms of liberation struggle. Burton's account, composed in dialog with archival material and the accounts of the rebels themselves, presents a tableau of not only resistance to repression but also the carving out of spaces of comparative freedom within and against the prison. One particularly evocative image: "An Attica brother told me that he authored a manual for carceral guerrilla warfare while immersed in the spiritual jazz of Alice Coltrane" (2023:75).

Burton also writes of the attempts at self-organization in the context of prison rebellion, both in the more immediate sense of the emergent modes of cooperation, participatory decision-making, and autonomous action in the context of open moments of rebellion, such as the occupation of the Attica yard by prisoners, but also in more solitary acts of crafting a revolutionary subjectivity (106; see also Capobianco 2025). These acts of resistance, while understood by incarcerated revolutionaries as part of a wider strategy, were often also an act of self-valorization enacted with great immediacy, as in John Boncore Hill (Dacajeweiah)'s account from the occupied Attica yard:

> What stunned me most was this one elderly brother who was looking up at the glimmer of silver stars and was sobbing uncontrollably. I asked him, "what's wrong brother?" He replied, "I am so happy, this is the first time I've seen the stars in 23 years." At that point I understood freedom as more than just free will unobstructed by any external factors but also an emotional, sensory, symbiotic relationship between wo/man and the universe. It was simple gratitude, humble submission to the natural laws of creation and the sense of elation of feeling that connection. (Hill and Bruderer 2001:20)

A throughline in Burton's account is the intensity of performances of freedom, or the "poetics of living rebellion" (2023:74) as self-enacting moments within the most repressive set of constraints imaginable in the form of a racialized regime of almost total violence and surveillance. Burton writes of these poetics as "acquiring meaning not through reason, or logic [...] but through feeling and listening, by engaging with sonic frequencies, pulsing cadences, and the quiet spaces between" (74).

In a 1983 letter to avid punk and leader of the Free Puerto Rico Committee, Meg Starr, Balagoon writes:

> i had been led to believe that I was an oddity.
>
> Even on the street i had to separate political from social dealings. The people i met at the Mud Club (*sic*) and other clubs and the people i knew from the Liberation movement were distinctly different! But there's no separation in my mind about political and cultural things, so i write you and want to see you and convince you to aid me in being a more complete person. i intend not only to survive but to grow, not only because to survive i'm gonna have to grow, but also because i've resolved to deal with this condition not merely as a fall, but as a step in the evolution of myself. (Balagoon, "Letters from Prison," 51)

In this letter, Balagoon expresses in clear terms his commitment to live in total, and to dismantle the wall separating his life as a militant and as a human being working to live with joy; Balagoon wants to be complete. He insists on life lived in total, and wants to be whole; his politics flooded with life. Perhaps Balagoon approaches love, dancing, getting high, listening to music, and writing poetry with the same tenacity and courage that he brings to his confrontations with the state. Perhaps his confrontations with the state are simply his refusal to compromise those joys even momentarily, to ever be less than he is, even when the baton blow lands, the rifles are pointed, the cage slams shut. We can think this desire for wholeness against the pieza de India, the expression of human being as a standardized unit of labor power, all the strength of limb and spirit that Balagoon seeks to mobilize in full on his own terms, reduced to a fungible instrument of financial speculation. The violence and tenderness are both, at root, a rebellion of a body against its separation from itself.

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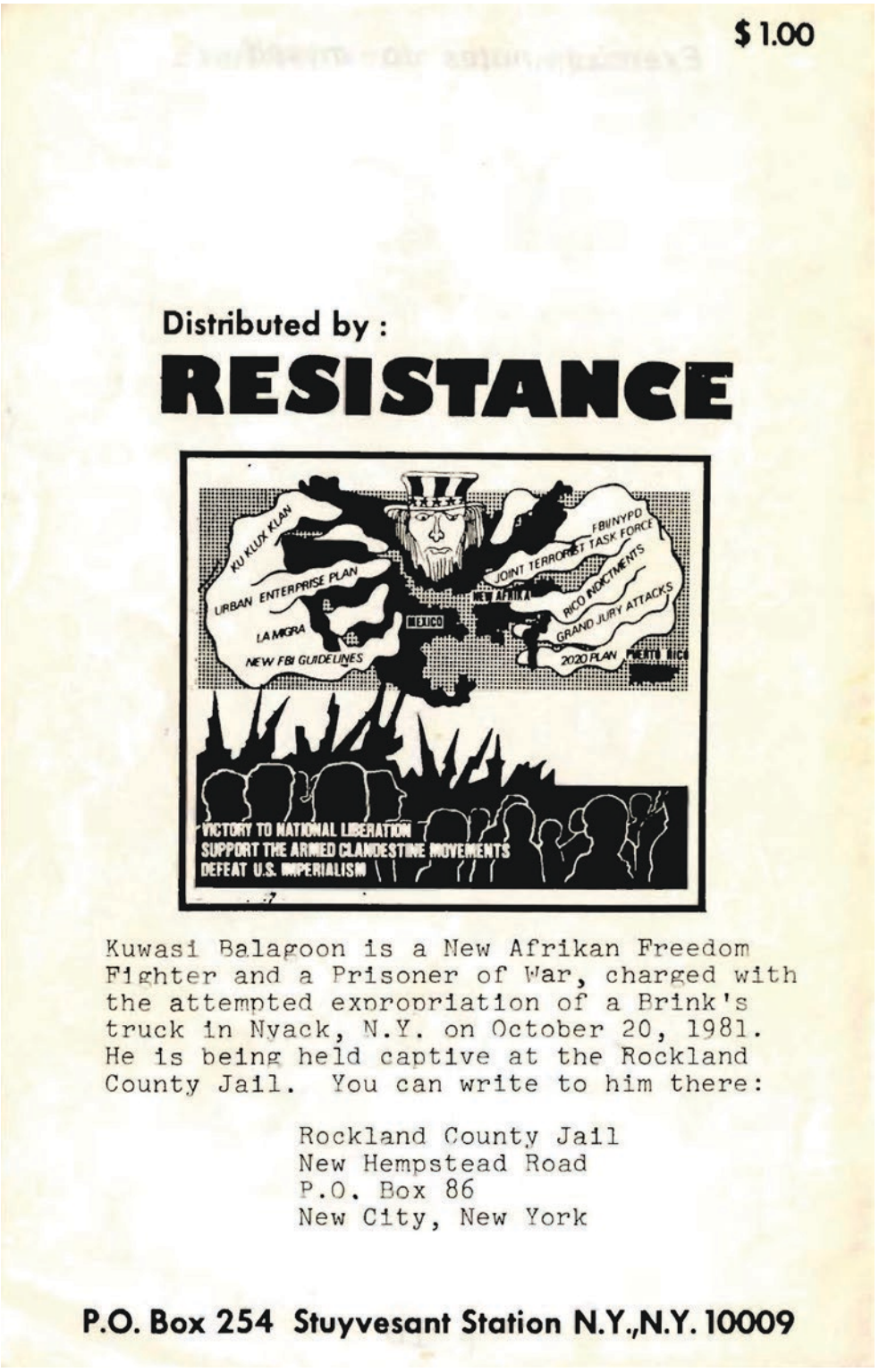


Figure 4. You can write to him there, *Kuwasi Balagoon's* Exercise Book, *back cover. (Image from https://freedomarchives.org/)*

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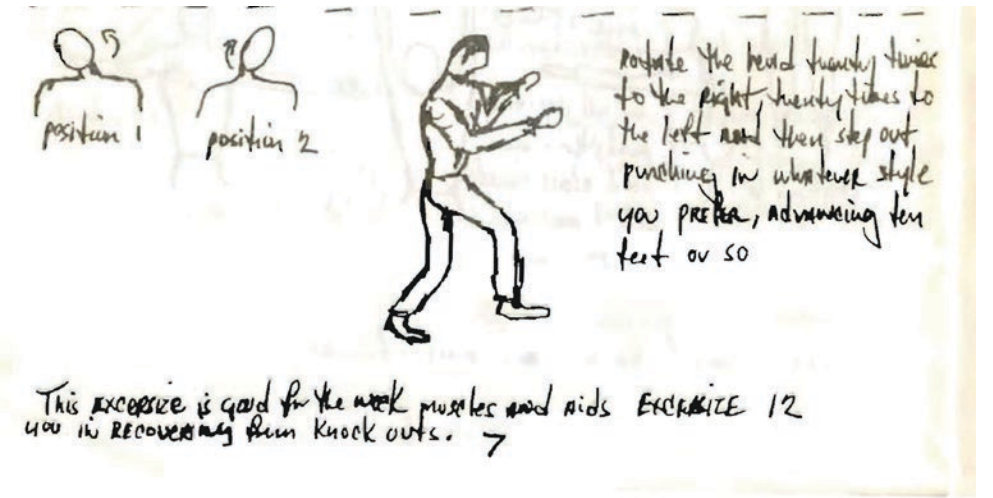


Figure 5. Aids you in recovery from knock outs, *Kuwasi Balagoon's* Exercise Book, *p. 7. (Image from https://freedomarchives.org/)*

This Is Not a Riot, This Is a Whole *Thing*

Perhaps this text suggests a redemptive narrative arc to Kuwasi Balagoon's life: shooting, dancing, loving, and hating his way from prison to freedom. My hands, typing, are drawn towards a happy ending, the resolution of tension, the softening of horrors; the bright eschatological fantasy of that revolutionary upheaval that Balagoon's sacrifices may have hastened, the one that will retroactively redeem him and lend his life a world-historic vindication.

Instead, Kuwasi Balagoon died in prison, of AIDS, in 1986, killed by the white supremacist carceral state and the institutionalized sexual bigotry of its attendant medical formations, a fighter for liberation dying alone amid the historic retrenchment of reaction, out of road and out of time, the body that had lifted him over prison walls, into the arms of lovers, across dance floors, into the Yoruba temple, wasting inexorably away against itself.

Writing about Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's troubled and necessarily unrequited embrace of imprisoned Black liberation fighter George Jackson (Deleuze and Guattari 1974:277), Taija McDougall considers their seeming inability to *cite* Jackson as emblematic of a wider set of problems that arise in the encounter of institutional scholarship and the figure of the Black Prisoner Theorist, as McDougall refers to Jackson in "Left Out: Notes on Absence, Nothingness and the Black Prisoner Theorist" (2019). McDougall's text starts from a significant aporia and intrusive absence. Deleuze and Guattari, in formulating their ideas about emancipatory fugitivity, thought a great deal about Jackson's aphorism: that as he flees, he searches for a weapon. For all the eclecticism of these texts' bibliographies, Jackson's aphorism is never actually cited (McDougall 2019:1). McDougall suggests that this is not simply a mistake, as the absence has been maintained in successive translations and editions of Deleuze and Guattari's texts. Rather, McDougall proposes the omission as a "performative gesture" that reinscribes George Jackson's dehumanization, but perhaps also highlights his fugitivity, his escape. Unlike the fugitive citation, still on the run and nowhere to be found 47 years later in 2019, and unlike theorist of emancipatory fugitivity Gilles Deleuze, George Jackson died in prison. The Black Prisoner Theorist can be "furniture in the thinking spaces of *Anti-Oedipus* and its concerns with the breaking through the walls of the system" (McDougall 2019:7) but remains peripheral to, even absent from, the theorizations of emancipatory politics to which his undoing gives rise. It is the "becoming Black" of John Brown, and not the Black being of George Jackson, that ultimately underwrites the emancipatory fugitivity of Deleuze and Guattari (8).

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This contradiction cannot be resolved through methodological or bibliographic reflection. Nevertheless, in order to work towards a meaningful politics of emancipation, the urge to fold the horrors of Balagoon's life into a theoretical-celestial pantheon of eternally fugitive freedom fighters that can *inspire* us must be resisted. As McDougall suggests, some things must be sat with. Kuwasi Balagoon is dead, and the social order against which he threw his body persists, intensifies, worsens by the day. We will have to do without world-historic vindication for now. Rockland County Jail still stands on New Hempstead Road, its cells still filled with prisoners 38 years after Kuwasi Balagoon's lonesome death in 1986. It was expanded in 2004 (rocklandcountyjail.org).

> Rain, rain, rain all day
> Wash this stinking town away
> Down the river and out to sea
> Every home and every building and everybody
> (Balagoon, "rain," 77)

In 1970, while on trial as one of the Panther 21, Kuwasi Balagoon participated in the uprising at the Queens Branch of the House of Detention, part of a coordinated series of uprisings across New York City jails. Victor Martinez, a leading cadre of the Young Lords Party and spokesman for the rebels in Queens, declared "this is not a protest. This is not a riot. This is a whole *thing*. We are going to create a paradise out of this hell!" (Liberation News Service 1970; in Burton 2023:33).

Balagoon was an anarchist and a New Afrikan; his comrades drew on Marxism-Leninism, revolutionary nationalism of different stripes, vernacular traditions of resistance. The leading cadres of these uprisings, Balagoon included, held deep commitments to theoretically informed programs of collective liberation. It would be a mistake to discount this aspect of their politics in favor of an individual, and ultimately tragic practice of radical fugitivity, however incandescent. Nevertheless, if Balagoon's revolt was indeed a life lived in total, he never achieved the *completeness* that he sought, and the revolutionary project to which he committed his life stalled. How can we think through both the totality of freedom exercised by Balagoon and the foreclosure of that emancipatory horizon at the same time? Victor Martinez's program, his *threat*, to create a paradise out of the machinery of terror constructed by the state, is tragic not because it failed outright, but precisely because of the moments in which its success was undeniable in ways that are difficult to reconcile with a more programmatic and historical sense of collective liberation, as in Dacajeweiah's account of the comrade who weeps upon seeing the stars for the first time in 27 years amid the coruscating yet brief prison-yard commune in Attica.

In "Not in Between" from *Black and Blur*, Fred Moten discusses "the lyric singularity, manifest always and everywhere as surplus, which is the *material spirit* of the postcolonial future" (2017:1). Moten traces the contours of this lyrical singularity by way of Cedric Robinson's account of C.L.R. James's political development through his engagement with the Black Radical Tradition and the Haitian Revolution in particular in *The Black Jacobins* (James [1938] 2001). As leader of the Haitian Revolution, Jean-Jacques Dessalines's break with the politics of the Enlightenment and the irruption of an African mass politics into the Atlantic revolutions are echoed in James's own break with the "closed dialectic" of orthodox Hegelian Marxism (Moten 2017:8; for a fuller account, see Robinson [1983] 2021:241–87). These ruptures, both at the social-historical and historiographic-theoretical level, which are brought about by the self-valorizing practices of Black social life, are characterized by Moten in literary terms: "new grammar can emerge from conventional writing infused with another sensuality" (2017:3). Moten traces a similar concern with the emergence of immanent practices of breaking or cutting that reconfigure social life in James's wider oeuvre; the socialism already in the factory, the new society always struggling to emerge within the constraints of the old:

> titles like *The Invading Socialist Society* or *The Future in the Present* offer a glimpse of something powerful in James's phrasing: he puts forward a notion of an internal incursion that can

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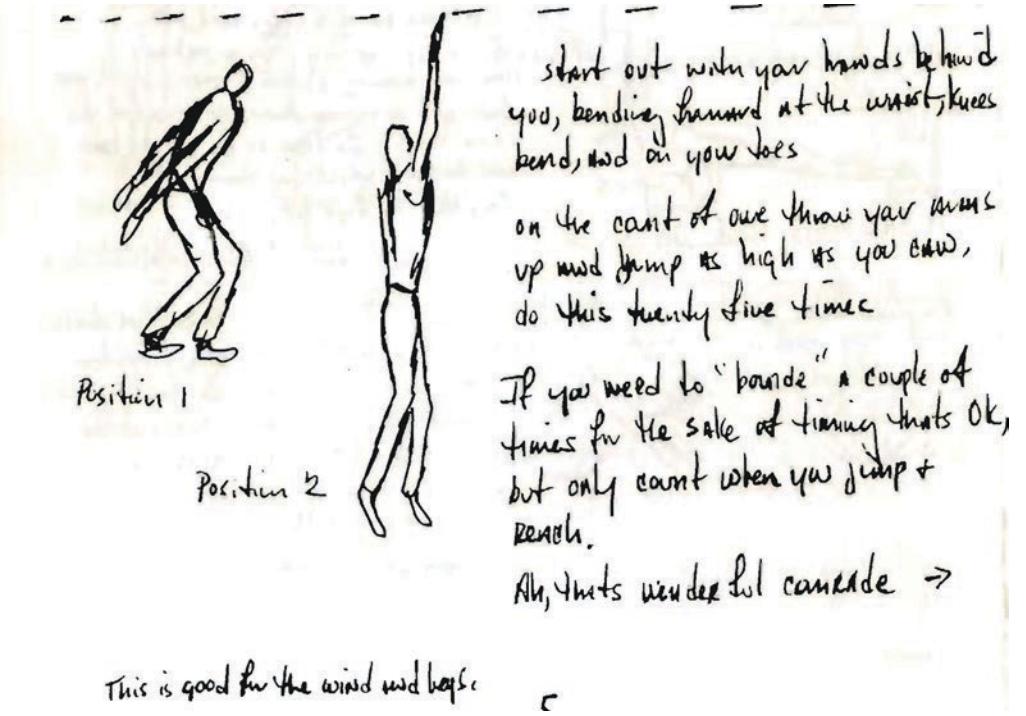


Figure 6. Jump as high as you can, *Kuwasi Balagoon's* Exercise Book*, p. 5. (Image from https://freedomarchives.org/)*

> be seen in relation to an interior force of exteriorization, moving toward a possibility coded as outside, an actuality inside. (12)

Moten's lyric singularity rhymes with James Boggs's more laconic *element*: an excess, one that imposes itself as automation and rebellion ruptures the ritualized dialectic of economistic disputes between labor and capital. The element haunts the present order, underwrites it and dissolves the economistic framings it seeks to impose on social antagonism. Moten's sense is that this element must be approached as a poetics, an augmentation, not an opposition, to more historical approaches to the question of liberation. The task is to develop a sensibility, one which "takes into account the lyric's infusion with narrative, that sees the historicity and political desire of the lyric precisely as the refusal that animates" (Moten 2017:3).

In the summer of 1981, Kuwasi Balagoon would have been in New York City. He had been underground since 1978, when he escaped from Rahway State Prison. In the winter of 1979, he had helped break Assata Shakur out of the Clinton Correctional Facility for Women (Umoja 2015). In the summer of 1981, he would have been planning the Brink's robbery along with comrades from the Black Liberation Army and the Weather Underground. Maybe, on some of those warm, tense nights, he would have taken a break and sauntered downtown, or across one of the bridges on the East River, to join the crowds at the Mudd Club. Maybe, on one of those nights, he stood in the crowd, underground in the underground, to see Jean-Michel Basquiat and Michael Holman's band Gray engaged in their own attempt at, as Basquiat described it, "trying to be incomplete, abrasive, oddly beautiful" (in Fretz 2010:39–40). Holman's video would have been projected on Balagoon's face, on a brow furrowed with concentration or perhaps smiling brightly in confused recognition. Maybe he nodded his head, trying to catch the rhythms intermittently woven in and out of a composition like "Drum Mode" (1980/81). Maybe he floated away with the lonely pings and bleeps echoing through the song.

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Maybe Gray was playing a louder, more aggressive piece. We can imagine the arms, chest, and shoulders trained as per exercise 10 to lift a body over a wall shielding vulnerable friends and building a kinder pit, or the ankles rendered limber and flexible by exercise 11 performing intricate footwork. Maybe Kuwasi Balagoon pogo-danced, jumping as high as he could.

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