


Martin Sostre was a Black Puerto Rican born in East Harlem in 1923. He settled in Buffalo in 1964 after twelve years in prison. Working at Bethlehem Steel during the day, he saved enough money to open Buffalo's first revolutionary bookstore—and one of the first Black radical bookstores in the country—the Afro-Asian Bookshop.

AFRO-ASIAN BOOKSTORE



The "Soul Literature" Center
WHERE YOU CAN OBTAIN ALL THE
SIGNIFICANT BOOKS ON NEGRO and
AFRICAN LIFE and CULTURE.
WE ALSO HAVE ISLAMIC LITERA-
TURE and THE HOLY QURAN.
COME SEE OUR COLLECTION OF
IMPORTED AFRICAN CARVINGS, PAINT-
INGS, XMAS CARDS and GIFTS!

1412 Jefferson Ave. Near Woodlawn

Advertisement for the Afro-Asian Bookstore, *Buffalo Criterion*, 1966

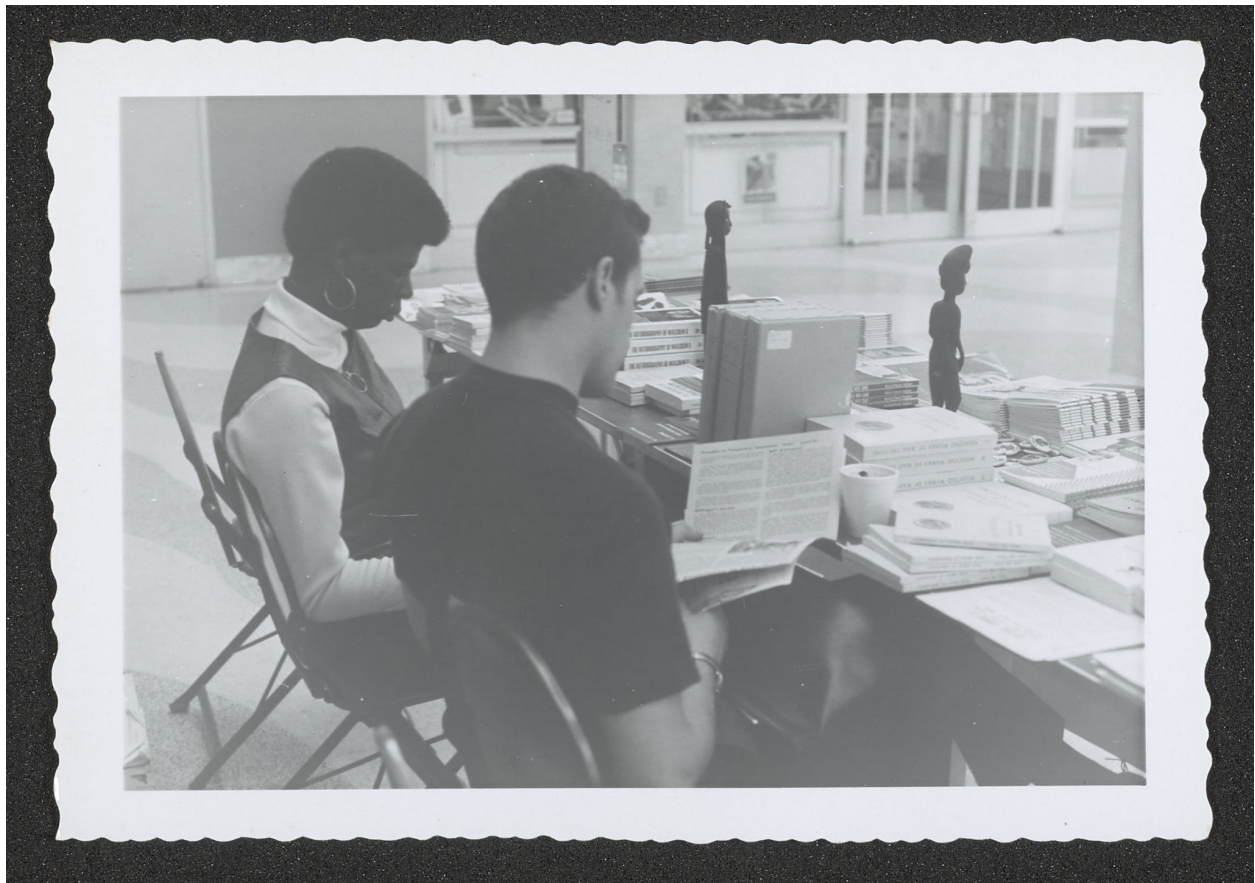
Sostre described his bookstore as a "community center," where people could use the phone and toilet, borrow money, or get change for the parking meter. He later wrote that he hoped to make his bookshop the "main library of dissent and protest literature in Buffalo." His use of "library" was deliberate. "You could come in and sit down and take a book off the shelf, read it and go through it and put it back and walk out." Sostre sat and talked for great lengths with anyone who came in. Customers could pull any book off the shelf and read it until finished.

The bookstore's literature reflected the internationalist solidarity of its name. He carried materials such as the speeches of Fidel Castro, the journal *African Opinion*, Mao's *Little Red Book*, and the autobiography of Ho Chi Minh. Eventually, he added African lithographs and wood carvings, paintings, and cards. Records of Malcolm X's speeches were played to draw people in, connecting with young people in particular.

In the summer of 1967, Buffalo erupted alongside over 150 other cities in response to ongoing police violence and organized abandonment. Sostre kept his store open until the early morning, providing sanctuary from the tear gas and police violence in the streets, and a space to decompress and analyze what was happening outside. In the waning days of the rebellion, Sostre's bookstore had its windows blown out by fire hoses as the neighboring Woodlawn Tavern

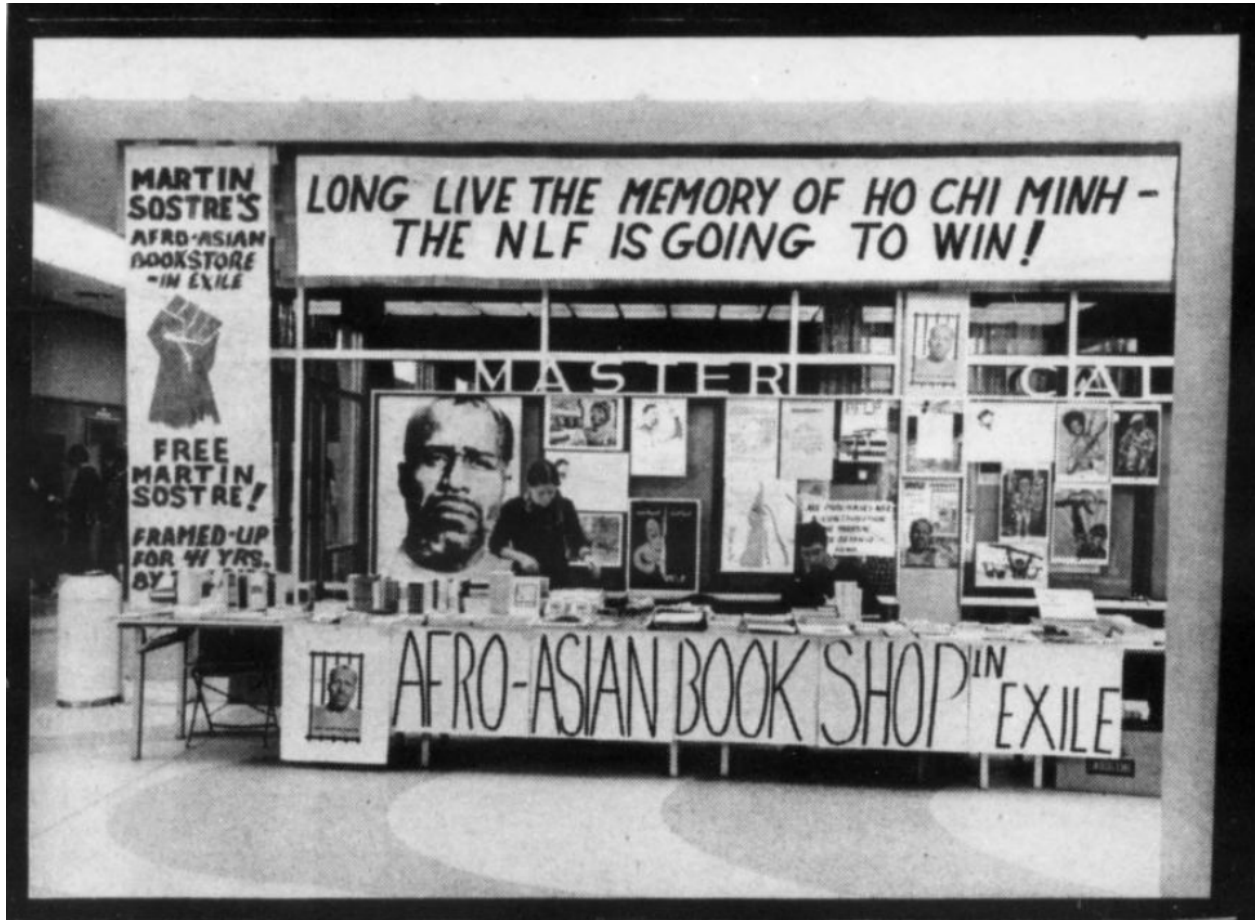
burned. He suspected it was intentional, but nevertheless turned the boarded-up windows into a community bulletin board where anyone in the neighborhood could post newspaper clippings. Several weeks later, police and the FBI raided the bookstore and arrested Sostre and his partner Geraldine Robinson, framing them with a \$15 bag of heroin.

The establishment of the Afro-Asian Bookshop-in-Exile (AABE) was among Sostre's wishes as he went to prison. Begun as a makeshift way of raising money and collecting and disseminating radical literature, it became a hub of his defense campaign. His friend and the chair of the Martin Sostre Defense Committee, Jerry Gross, recalled that it began as "just a table or two in the student union [at University of Buffalo] piled with books." Defense-committee members often staffed the table with Sostre's codefendant, Geraldine Robinson, who was out on bail before her trial.



Geraldine Robinson (now Pointer) and Jerry Gross (now Ross) staffing the AABE, William Worthy Papers, Johns Hopkins University.

Later versions of the bookstore-in-exile developed to include prominent backdrops, banners, and political posters, and copies of the *Black Panther* and other radical newspapers hung on the wall behind. Eventually, Martin's own writings were compiled and distributed to raise awareness about his case, raise money for his campaign, and spread his revolutionary ideas.



The Afro-Asian Bookshop-in-Exile, c. 1970, *The East Village Other*.

Just like its predecessor, the bookstore-in-exile was targeted and destroyed—but only temporarily. In July 1968, in what defense committee secretary Jeanette Merrill described as a “modern-day book burning,” boxes of pamphlets and books in storage were incinerated by a maintenance worker who claimed he thought they were garbage. In early 1969, the university resorted to more bureaucratic tactics to push it off campus. Citing a space shortage, the director of the student union ruled that only one table could be used per organization. In response, the Black Student Union, the Philosophical Society, and Youth Against War and Fascism pushed together their single allotments to continue the Afro-Asian Bookshop-in-Exile unabated. In 1969, a group of campus activists demanded the AABE be established as a “symbolic sanctuary” and the student government passed a resolution in solidarity with Sostre echoing the demand for permanent space for the bookstore on campus.

The demands—and the reply

1. We demand that students control 50% of the voting power and membership on all departmental and University decision making bodies, especially in matters concerning curriculum degree regulations and the hiring and firing of faculty and staff. We support the idea of a bicameral legislature in this University in which students also have veto power over the faculty and vice versa.

2. The students express solidarity with the Black Student Union on this campus and support their aims and goals. We believe in the right of self-determination of black people and in their right to seek fulfillment by being directly involved in all issues that are crucial to them.

3. We demand that Martin Sostre's Afro-Asian Bookstore in Exile be established at the State University of Buffalo in "symbolic sanctuary" and be provided with means for permanent operation. We also demand along with BUILD and other black community organizations that the Buffalo Police Commissioner be removed from office.

4. We demand an end to all contracting of defense research on this campus and that all present projects be stopped.

5. The students on the SUNYAB campus stand in solidarity with the Buffalo Nine and condemn the system that allows and perpetuates this sort of repression. We demand that all charges against the defendants be dropped immediately and that amnesty be granted to Bruce Beyer and Bruce Cline. We further urge that Martin Meyerson, as

president of the University, reflect in a public statement the views and feelings of the University community towards the Buffalo Nine.

6. We urge action on and express solidarity with graduate students in the English, Sociology, and Philosophy Departments who are demanding a legitimate role in the granting of tenure, wages, and other relevant departmental issues.

7. Resolved that the new campus at Amherst will not begin construction without a fully-integrated work force satisfactory to the minority groups and concerned organizations of the Buffalo community. We demand that the construction projects include: 1. the immediate establishment of a massive construction training program. 2. mechanism of access to jobs such as an open hiring hall. 3. a strong affirmative action contracts enabling compliance for a fully-integrated throughout the entire University construction project. If these conditions are not fulfilled, the students will virtually make a human cover across the new campus to prevent any construction efforts.

8. We demand that the University cooperate in no way with local, state, and federal narcotics and intelligence agents, and if they have knowledge of such, they make it public.

9. We demand the abolition of University accreditation for ROTC, and that the instructors of ROTC be stripped of academic rank. Reserve Officers Training Corps should sever ties with outside agencies and be reduced to the level of an extra-curricular club.

The Spectrum, March 3, 1969

The Afro-Asian Bookshop-in-Exile existed at the University at Buffalo for as many years as its brick-and-mortar predecessor. But like a hydra, the bookstore-in-exile had many heads. Other bookstores-in-exile popped up on campuses in Boston, New York, Milwaukee, and Cleveland. Sostre's defense committee set up at the infamous 1969 Students for a Democratic Society convention in Chicago to gather signatures for Sostre's release. Sostre himself even created a Black history lending library in prison under the auspices of the Afro-Asian Bookshop-in-Exile.