

FROM CUBA TO FERGUSON: A REFLECTION ON MEMORY AS A BRIDGE ACROSS COMMUNITIES OF STRUGGLE

“The American black ‘leader’s’ most critical problem is lack of imagination... and the first thing the American power structure doesn’t want any Negroes to start is thinking *internationally*.”

Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

As I sit here writing in the quiet solitude of the library at a historically white university on a warm August morning, hundreds of miles away in the small town of Ferguson a battle is raging. This battle is being fought on two fronts, simultaneously and imperceptibly. On the one hand, there is quite literally a military occupation of the city by the National Guard, local specialized police units, and protestors from across the country and political spectrum. The state has interned over 150 protestors, while some journalists are being detained and others are being prosecuted for failing to comply with police orders. Meanwhile, white militia groups roam the streets with impunity, assault rifles prominently displayed, conjuring images of the slave patrols that once enforced the Fugitive Slave Act. More serious than any of these actions is the tragic police shooting of Tyrone Harris, a former friend of Michael Brown, now in critical condition and facing criminal charges for his involvement in the shootout. With all of this happening as I sit here contemplating the past, I cannot help but marvel at the second battle, the battle over memory, taking place before my eyes.

While the events in Ferguson have thrown the local community into chaos and sparked a national conversation about contemporary racism, I contend that the international dimensions of Ferguson have been overshadowed in mainstream discussions. Looking over my work on Assata Shakur, I am overwhelmed by her story’s relevance to Ferguson, and the ability of her narrative to unite resistance movements across geographic and temporal boundaries. Shakur’s involvement with the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army in the early 1970s ultimately led to her imprisonment in the United States, and her subsequent escape took her to socialist Cuba, where she resides to this day. Shakur’s experience as an American activist, fighting against the very conditions of poverty and police brutality that led to the events in Ferguson, provides a critical link between contemporary and historical forms of Black resistance. More crucially, Shakur’s exile in Cuba demonstrates the power that American activists fighting for social justice can harness when they find international allies to legally, politically, and physically support that fight. Assata Shakur’s memory ought to be carefully nurtured by contemporary activists so as to link their fight to a broader history of Black resistance, a resistance that has always had important international dimensions.

The fact that there is a state of emergency in Ferguson on the one-year anniversary of Brown’s death indicates the power of his memory and the need for those committed to justice to sustain and protect his narrative, using it as a catalyst for resistance. That people are moving into the streets to fight police violence, only to be met with a massive show of force on the part of the state, underscores a brutal irony that the

government remembers last year's "riots" while falling deathly silent on addressing the context from which resistance emerged. My research project has helped me realize how historical context comes to shape, or distort, collective memory.

The memory of Assata Shakur cannot, and should not, be separated from the context in which she acted. Ignoring the historical milieu in which sources on Shakur were created, a highly controlled media with known ties to the FBI and a rabidly anti-communist government, distorts the reading of the sources. If we take media and governmental sources from this era at face value, it would be akin to constructing a history of slavery through only the sources left by slave owners, politicians, or white-controlled newspapers. When we remember the context of chattel-bondage in which maroon slaves acted, or the repressive Cold War context of Assata Shakur's actions, we must ultimately confront the context of our own times, which might be well understood as the "terror" era. In the post 9/11 terror era, state violence is always cast in terms of "national security." This has become the key discursive tool of the government to carry out violent repression against not only foreign "terrorists," but also domestic dissidents, both of which are cast by the state as threats to nation.

In this era, the massive uprising in Ferguson is officially described as a "state of emergency." But what is the emergency? Is it Black people being killed by law enforcement, or their purported supporters, every 28 hours? Is it historically unprecedented rates of incarceration that confine a higher percentage of Black people than the height of the South African Apartheid regime? No. People stopping traffic, occupying the courthouse, and generally seeking to disrupt the flow of everyday life that occurs against a backdrop of constant violence aimed at Black bodies; that is the emergency that has mobilized the national guard, police, and white vigilantes as agents of repression. There *is* an emergency in Ferguson, but it is not the community that has caused it. The emergency in Ferguson is the endemic racism of police practices that resulted in Brown's death, that continue to kill and confine African Americans, and that have now descended full force on those rising up to confront them.

Journalists, academics, and ordinary black citizens are being rounded up and confined, while the state presses charges against a teenager who was shot by five separate police officers. With the state increasing its repression against protestors (who are protesting that very repression!), it brings to mind an exchange Amiri Baraka had with a Black Cuban official who asked about the condition of musician Miles Davis after he was a victim of police brutality. In 1960 this Cuban man listened to Baraka and then sadly stated, with absolutely no sense of irony, "Wow, that place is really turning into a police state."<sup>1</sup>

This Cuban's view of the U.S. as a police state reveals the intertwined nature of foreign and domestic policy. Since that Afro-Cuban jazz fan made his passing comment about the brutal nature of American law-enforcement the prison population has more than

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<sup>1</sup> Amiri Baraka, "Cuba Libre," in Home.

quintupled,<sup>2</sup> while police units are increasingly outfitted with military grade weaponry, and the media continues to feed mass hysteria by consistently playing up the threat of criminals and terrorists. At the same time, on a level unseen for some time, racism is being directly confronted. Remembering Shakur's story helps us understand the dynamics between foreign and domestic policy, as the government seeks to secure the status quo in both spheres, while resistance to state power must understand the dialectic between the two.

Cuba, as a state and a space, is uniquely situated to launch a withering critique of U.S. policy in both the foreign and domestic spheres, and may be able to put pressure on U.S. domestic policy through its diplomacy. Conversely, protestors in Ferguson can gain a sympathetic international ear through the Cuban state, one that has historically lent support to Black claims of political and economic oppression, embodied in Assata Shakur's political asylum. With Cuba and the United States opening relations in July 2015, yet still unclear on such important issues as Guantanamo, the blockade, and extradition agreements, there will undoubtedly have to be concessions from both sides.

As Brenda Gayle Plummer reminds us, the U.S. has historically used its sovereign borders to preclude any kind of outside investigation into domestic human rights abuses. However, given the centrality of Shakur's situation regarding extradition treaties, the Cuban's adamant position that she is a political refugee, and the current racial dynamics of the United States, this tactic may be seriously challenged in coming years. In pressuring the U.S. to reexamine its human rights record, Cuba can point to genocidal levels of minority incarceration within American borders, and simultaneously to the horrors of Guantanamo Bay within its own. There is no doubt that an extradition agreement that ended up sending Shakur back to a U.S. prison would be met with massive resistance by grassroots organizers, and the Cuban government.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, with a Black president on his way out of office and the chances for receiving a presidential pardon fading, rapper Murs' entreaty that "Obama free Assata," becomes ever more salient.

Assata Shakur's exile in Cuba provides an important historical linkage between communities of struggle within and beyond U.S. borders. As police brutality and events like Ferguson inspire increasing resistance from Black communities struggling for justice, Cuba stands on the verge of reconciliation with the U.S. Assata Shakur's centrality within the nexus of U.S. domestic and foreign affairs should be seen as an opportunity to bridge the gap between these seemingly disparate developments. Remembering that Shakur was granted asylum status on the island reveals the Cuban state's potential as an international ally for Black activists. As a country which has historically lent support to African American claims of mistreatment by the state, activist groups in the U.S. may be able to influence the diplomatic concessions Cuba seeks in its negotiations with the U.S. Demands for an end to mass incarceration and police brutality,

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, according to the Justice Policy Institute's analysis of U.S. Department of Justice data, the incarcerated population has gone from about 300,000 in 1960 to its current level of over 2 million people. [http://www.justicepolicy.org/images/upload/00-05\\_rep\\_punishingdecade\\_ac.pdf](http://www.justicepolicy.org/images/upload/00-05_rep_punishingdecade_ac.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> In my time in Cuba I was assured (to the point of indignation) that as a sovereign country, Cuba can, and will, determine whom it considers a political refugee, and no outside opinion or pressure will change that.

as well as amnesty for political prisoners like Shakur, could become important prerequisites to full scale diplomatic normalization. This transnational coalition of the Cuban state and Black justice activists in the U.S. could then simultaneously exert pressure on U.S. policy through diplomacy and direct action, respectively. Thus, memories like the story of Shakur's exile in Cuba can create powerful imagined communities of struggle unbounded by national borders.