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“Yo soy de los estados unidos, pero no soy yankee (I am from the united states, but I am not a yankee)”

-Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, explaining her nationality from her space of exile in Cuba.

This project arose from a curious confluence of pedagogical pursuits. I bought Assata Shakur’s autobiography as an optional book in my African-American Women in American history class, which I took alongside a Cuba-U.S. travel seminar class. As it was optional reading, the African-American Women class did not actually assign the book, but merely encouraged those of us with the curiosity to read it to do so. After the end of the semester, and before embarking for Cuba with my class, I had a lot of free time and little to read, so I picked up Shakur’s autobiography. Once in Cuba, I read the book voraciously, hoping to read about Shakur’s own experience on the island in order to give me a critical voice with which to address the speakers we were presented with. However, Shakur spent only the last chapter of her book writing about Cuba, and by the time I finished I was back on a plane to Mexico. As I finished the book at the same time that I finished my trip, it struck me that our class had managed to spend months analyzing the history of Cuban-U.S. relations in the political, social, and cultural spheres yet the name Assata Shakur had never come up. I had been in the same city as her, yet she seemed worlds away from the class I had just taken. How could this be? How could such a looming figure, who so prominently displayed the complexity of Cuban-U.S. relations, be relegated to the margins of history? This marginality was my way into the borderlands between Cuba and the United States.

As I contemplated the silencing that had occurred in my pedagogical interaction with Cuba, by no means the result of deliberate or malicious acts by my professors, I was struck by the salience of power as it shapes our history and our relationships to the past. I thought about what we had learned in class, about the exiles from Cuba, about the hostility of the U.S. government towards the nascent regime, about political and economic transformations within Cuba society, and about Cuba's radical interventionist foreign policy. I thought about where Shakur's story fit into these various narratives, and I realized that our history had been bound; that the nation was keeping us locked into predicable and comfortable narratives. Shakur's story would not fit snugly into any of these predetermined categories, and thus her story was lost to history, or at least confined to some other history. This did not sit well with me. It seemed clear to me that this person's story represented a significant transnational experience that demanded accounting for an examination of U.S.-Cuban relations, yet somehow this story fell through the cracks of history. It was the desire to probe the margins, to fill the gaps of history, which ultimately led me to examine Shakur's memory and imagination as a way to expose an obscured and overlooked borderland.

Born in 1947, Assata Shakur grew up in both New York and segregated Wilmington, North Carolina. Shakur attended college at Manhattan Community College, a school of primarily students of color during the politically charged late 1960s, and became transformed through her participation in political and social movements. She eventually joined the Black Panther Party at a time when the federal government was engaged in covert operations against the group, this state

repression would eventually force Shakur into exile in the socialist republic of Cuba. Although born and raised in the United States, Shakur felt a deep sense of alienation from the country that stole her ancestors from African, stole her history, and attempted to steal her life. Shakur's transformation into what I term the imaginative space of the maroon was rooted in an experience of counterinsurgent terror that placed her in a tradition of Black Americans who "reached a point of profound pessimism and began deeply to question their allegiance to and identification with the United States."¹ By placing Shakur in this tradition, particularly by aligning her with the figure of the escaped slave or maroon, her story takes on transnational dimensions that provide new ways of imagining the first woman the FBI has put on their "Most Wanted Terrorists" list.² The liminal space Shakur occupies as a Black American exiled in Cuba positions her in the imaginative terrain of the borderlands, a framing that at once recognizes and takes seriously the rootless experience of exile, and breaks a cycle of historical blindness created by innate assumptions of the natural and neutral usage of the nation-state as a unit of historical analysis.

Borderlands scholarship challenges the conception of national identity and allegiance, and looks to the past to see how these ideas are constructed, challenged, and used by different actors. One of the most critical interventions of this scholarship is the restoration of voices silenced by the power of the nation to dissolve difference and present itself as a natural and neutral form of society. Borderlands scholars seek out the voices of native people's caught between imperial

¹ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 18.

² https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/wanted_terrorists

projects, those who challenge linguistic, gendered, and racial boundaries of the nation, and the voices of enslaved people whose actions and words invested meaning into the border and the spaces on either side of it. It was this last category that convinced me that borderlands was a useful tool for understanding the meaning Shakur attached to space, and the ways in which she went about imagining herself and her relation to different conditions.

By defining and imagining herself as a maroon, Shakur revives memories of transnational slave resistance that are silenced by national histories unable to account for these actors who, while clearly justified in their resistance, were violently opposed to the national or colonial status quo. This view of the violence done to borderlands subjects by nationalist history draws on Nicole Guidotti-Hernández' tracing of Ranajit Guha's concept of the "prose of counterinsurgency," wherein "a doubled sense of movement is 'linked at the same time to a system of power and the particular manner of its representation,'" and thus the representations "both advocate violence as a response to that insurgency and function to silence that violence."³ Within this conception, Shakur and the maroon both fall victim to the doubled sense of movement in which the means of violence and representation are hegemonically wielded by the state. By assuming neutrality in the sources produced through nationalist discourses, historians may be unwittingly contributors to the counterinsurgency of prose by perpetuating the

³ Nicole Guidotti-Hernández, *Unspeakable Violence: Remapping U.S. and Mexican National Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 4.

“national narrative of ‘bordering’” that “does violence to smaller, but equally persistent, borderlands histories.”⁴

While the topic of Revolutionary Cuba and the U.S. Black Panther Party has received notable scholarly attention, the lived experience of Black Panthers who have been forced into exile has elicited silence. One of the main causes for the silencing of the exiles themselves, while including them in larger narratives of the Cuban state’s Cold War prerogatives or Black Panther international diplomacy, is the need to fit these stories into coherent nationalist narratives. While there have been valuable histories that attempt to explain the connections between Revolutionary Cuba and U.S. Black Panthers, these histories stop short of explaining how Panther exiles actually lived out a transnational revolutionary solidarity, and what this experience meant for their membership in the various “imagined communities” they moved between.⁵ Too often these encounters have been framed as disputes between nation-states, denying the agency of exiles who used borders and national sovereignties to elude capture and thwart the designs of both their spaces of confinement, and often, their spaces of refuge.

By recognizing the imagined nature of borders and national communities generally, a borderlands approach places agency on exiled actors as they enact a challenge to state power through their use of borders and national sovereignty. In my exploration of history, memory, and imagination through the figure of Assata Shakur, I will first look at her memories of terror within the U.S, discuss the

⁴ James David Nichols, “The Line of Liberty: Runaway Slaves and Fugitive Peons in the Texas-Mexico Borderlands,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 44 (2013): 416.

⁵Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).

ethnocentric process of becoming an American, and finally examine how her experience in the borderlands affects her memory and imagination.

Memories of Terror

“I feel like a maroon woman, I feel like an escaped slave. Because what I saw in U.S. prisons was slavery. It was Black people with chains... I’ll never forget. I’ll never forget what I’ve lived through. I’ll never forget what my people have lived through.”
Assata Shakur, “Eyes of the Rainbow,” reflecting on U.S. prisons from Cuba.

Memory and history are distinct, yet mutually constitutive. Toni Morrison tells us that, “the act of imagination is bound up with memory.”⁶ Though history and memory interact to give shape to the past, memory acts as “a bond tying us to the eternal present,” while “history is a representation of the past.”⁷ Through imaginative acts that blur the boundaries of past and present, memory brings our past into the present, while history draws a line between what is and what has been. Conventional historiography expects subjects to fit neatly into particular historical eras and for historians to remain within the boundaries of their delineated, usually nationally defined, field. In contemporary American society, history is given the stamp of authority, as memory is often thought of as subjective or “biased,” in contrast to the supposed neutrality of an institutionalized, empirically verifiable past. However, this outlook displays an innate assumption of the objective nature of history and the role of historians “to reveal the past, to discover or, at least,

⁶ Toni Morrison, “The site of memory,” in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, 2d ed., ed. William Zinsser (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 98.

⁷ Pierre Nora, “Les Lieux De Memoire,” in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, ed. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 285.

approximate the truth. Within that viewpoint, power is unproblematic, irrelevant to the construction of the narrative as such.”⁸ What this view overlooks is precisely what concerns this work, namely, that history is a process that is subject to teleological distortions, which serve to legitimize contemporary expressions of power as natural and neutral by making “some narratives possible and silenc(ing) others.”⁹ History is thus revealed to be neither neutral, nor a natural process of fact collection. In fact, given this formulation of history, the whole concept succumbs to the very arguments that privilege it over memory.

This work attempts to deconstruct these distinct conceptions of the past by going beyond binary arguments that seek to elevate one approach to the past above the other. By probing the lived experience of historical subjects that can shed light on the process by which people come to imagine themselves and their place in the world, this work will show how memory can rearticulate histories that contain and constrain certain actors. This work will examine the life of Assata Shakur as a way to explore the role played by memory in her conception of herself, her spaces of confinement, and her space of refuge. Additionally, this work will depart from a statecentric history, forwarding the voice of Shakur to show how memory can fill the gaps left by a statecentric approach to history.

This section probes the imaginative workings of a Black Panther exile as she bound her personal experience to memory, thus embodying the “collective, plural

⁸Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 5.

⁹ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 25.

and yet individual,”¹⁰ nature of memory theorized by Pierre Nora. To understand how and why Shakur would come to imagine herself as a maroon woman, it is necessary to take a moment to remember the terror which marooned Blacks had to navigate in the Americas, and to relate that world to Shakur’s own experience. Shakur recalls that growing up she understood the dangers involved in fighting white supremacy, having spent large parts of her childhood in segregated Virginia, an experience she has likened to Apartheid, and that the “price of standing up could be death.”¹¹ Despite the known dangers involved in fighting a system sustained through massive violence and terror, Shakur saw the struggle for freedom as the only way to survive the crushing inhumanity imposed on her by a white supremacist society. In her subsequent struggle against racism she would be subject to the same forces of terror that characterized the relations between the slavocracy and Black maroons.

Terror was an absolutely essential aspect of Black life in American slave society. Indeed, Kenneth Stampp has argued, “without the power to punish, which the state conferred upon the master, bondage could not have existed.”¹² American slavery can be viewed as nothing other than a system of terror, founded upon the coercion of Black labor through intimidation and the constant threat of violence. This conception of slavery is given even greater relevance when one considers that the FBI defines terrorism as acts “intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian

¹⁰ Nora, “Les Lieux de Mémoire,” 286.

¹¹ Assata Shakur, Gloria Rolando, *Eyes of the Rainbow*, video, 47 min, 1997, <http://eyesoftherainbow.com/>

¹² Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery and the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Knopf, 1956), 171.

population.”¹³ By both the standards of the time and contemporary evaluation, slavery was a system rooted in and upheld by terrorism. Slaves determined to escape from these brutal conditions were, if captured, subject to immense repression through a variety of means including, “terror, physical abuse, prolonged solitary confinement, separation from family, social degradation and humiliation.”¹⁴ Shakur states that her imprisonment “was a new kind of plantation” where she was beaten, tortured, and left in solitary confinement for two and a half years.¹⁵ From slavery to the point in time in which Shakur would stage her resistance, the use of terror as a means of control had remained fundamentally intact, although the power to punish had shifted from master to the state.

It is essential that we remember the terror of slavery if we are to fully understand the conditions in which marronage occurred, and to see how a twentieth century activist could come to imagine herself in such terms. To get a sense of the historical precedent for the terror aimed at Assata Shakur in the 1970s, I would like to take an instance of the terror she experienced at the hands of the state and compare it with racial terror over other eras of Black history.

One of the most terrifying events that Shakur recalls during her confinement by the state occurred just after she was taken to the hospital following the shootout

¹³ “Definitions of Terrorism in the U.S. Code,” accessed September 20, 2015, <https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/terrorism/terrorism-definition>.

¹⁴ Alvin Thompson, *Flight to Freedom: African Runaways and Maroons in the Americas* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 161.

¹⁵ Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Zed Books, 1987), 66- In 1979, Assata’s case was highlighted by a seven member panel from the U.N. Commission on Human Rights which stated, “One of the worst cases is that of Assata Shakur, who spent over twenty months in solitary confinement in two separate men’s prisons subject to conditions totally unbecoming any prisoner.”

on the turnpike. Badly injured, and under the control of police, she was taken on a stretcher to a room in the hospital where she was placed next to the corpse of her good friend Zayd Malik Shakur and told, “That’s what’s going to happen to you before the night is over if you don’t tell us what we want to know.”¹⁶ This tactic was used to intimidate, or rather terrify, Shakur and force her into a state of mental anguish to the point that she would be compliant with authorities. While this event is absolutely horrible, and perhaps seems unthinkable, it fits comfortably within a history of terror tactics that the forces of white supremacy have employed to quell Black resistance. Examples from two earlier eras in the Americas will flesh out this legacy of terror that has characterized the life of white supremacy, and help make visible the links across time that enabled Shakur to enter the imaginative space of the maroon.

An instance from the Cuban slave past reveals shocking connections between Shakur’s experience and the experience of the maroon. Cuba, during the nineteenth century was one of the world’s primary producers of sugar. A planter elite, who used massive quantities of slave labor to produce the valuable commodity, dominated the sugar economy. Due to the vast size of the enslaved population, the grueling conditions of sugar plantations, and the relative weakness of the colonial state, Cuba was also home to some of the largest maroon communities, and witnessed some of the most massive slave resistances, in the Americas.

One such slave uprising, at a sugar mill in Matanzas province in 1835, was triggered by an act of terror on the part of the overseers. In “an attempt to

¹⁶ Shakur, *An Autobiography*, 6.

intimidate” new slaves brought to the plantation, the slaves “were compelled to work after being forced to view the bodies of two of their companions who had committed suicide the day before.”¹⁷ Like the police that sought to break Shakur’s spirit by forcing her to view a deceased comrade, the plantation owners hoped that this terror tactic would produce the behavior they desired from their slaves. In both cases, the results were not achieved. Shakur remained defiant despite being terrorized, and the Matanzas slaves rose up to fight their cruel overseers. In both cases the act of marronage was precipitated by the experience of terror, with Black people responding to this violence by actively fighting to find a safe space for themselves through the act of marronage. Shakur came to see herself as a maroon because she knew that her response to the terror she was subject to, “the impulse toward separatism... the desire to leave the place of oppression for... a new land,” was “rooted in maroonage.”¹⁸

It is impossible to talk about the history of terror in the United States without discussing the legacy lynching as a tool to enforce a racial order. The legacy of lynching was a crucial link in Shakur’s understanding of her subjection to terror, giving her the historical capital to describe her experience in U.S. courts as a “legal lynching.” The U.S. reconstruction era saw the replication, and expansion, of terror techniques that now sought to enforce the racial order in a post-slavery society. In this new political-economy, social control through terror remained the chief instrument ensuring white economic, political, and social supremacy. Terror-

¹⁷Manuel Barcia, “Revolts Among Enslaved Africans in Nineteenth Century Cuba: A New Look to an Old Problem,” *The Journal of Caribbean History* 39, no 2 (2005): 184.

¹⁸Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 17.

lynchings often singled out individuals for ritualistic torture, but behind these acts of mob violence enacted on an individual was a collective assertion of superiority and domination intended to condition the entire Black community to accept white supremacy.

An episode from Tennessee in 1918 highlights the way that terror-lynching was used to instill fear and subservience in the Black population. After killing a Black man, Thomas Devert, accused of kidnapping a young white girl, the lynch mob then dragged Devert's body to the Black section of town and "then rounded up all sixty African American residents and forced the men, women, and children to watch the corpse burn."¹⁹ Terror-lynching was by its very nature visible, public, and intended as spectacle. It effectively created an atmosphere of terror that, despite the formal abolition of slavery, retained the white monopoly on the "power to punish." Just as terror compelled many slaves to rebel against their inhumane overseers, the terror-lynching era likewise inspired in many African Americans "the desire to leave the place of oppression for a new land." Lynching was one of the main motives propelling mass migration from South to North at the outset of the twentieth century, and the constant threat of terror and violence left many Black people questioning the nature of freedom in the United States. In response to her own "legal lynching," Shakur was propelled into exile in another land, in search of a life free from terror.

Terror has always been a key tactic upholding white supremacy. Of course, white supremacy has undergone changes and morphed to fit the times in which it

¹⁹Equal Justice Initiative, "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror-Report Summary" (Montgomery, Alabama, 2015).

finds itself. In a Post-Nazi, Cold War era where the winds of change were sweeping away colonialism, white supremacy was no longer a legitimate public policy goal. According to Gerald Horne, in a context where explicitly racialized argumentation was no longer possible, the newly created communist enemy “gave white supremacy a new lease on life.”²⁰ In such an environment, opposition to the status quo of American society, be it anti-capitalist, anti-racist, or anti-war, was viewed as subversion, and any and all means were employed by the state to preserve the status quo of white supremacist domination and exploitation. The government targeted Shakur and the Panthers, who were committed to a socialist vision of international Third World solidarity that opposed U.S. imperialist foreign policy, as the consummate subversives, demanding federally sanctioned surveillance and disruption. From the depths of this dark and mysterious time in American history arose one of the most powerful programs of repression ever to be documented, and subsequently forgotten, in human history, COINTELPRO.

COINTELPRO was a massive, covert counter intelligence program conducted by the FBI during the height of the Cold War. COINTELPRO was a consolidation of FBI infiltration programs already in place, and its first efforts were directed at the Socialist Worker’s Party and the Puerto Rican independence movement. While all leftist groups in the sixties were targeted for surveillance, including Student’s for a Democratic Society, the Communist Party USA, and various university groups, the most violent repression would fall on groups struggling against the racial status quo

²⁰Gerald Horne, “Race from Power: U.S. Foreign Policy and the General Crisis of White Supremacy,” in *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs 1945-1988*, ed. Brenda Gayle Plummer (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 54.

as “racial equality was assumed to be a communist creation.”²¹ Within this context, the Black Panther Party was subject to the full force of state terror, and, with the collusion of FBI media contacts, simultaneously assaulted by a propaganda campaign intended to “disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize,” their struggle for justice.²² Though undertaken as a covert operation, the power to punish remained firmly in the hands of the state through a variety of legal and illegal COINTELPRO activities including the use of agent provocateurs, bad-jacketing, assassination, and also eavesdropping, propaganda, and harassment arrest.²³ Shakur’s case is one of the most prominent examples of these last three tactics.

Black Panther political prisoner, Mumia Abu-Jamal, aptly sums up Shakur’s personal experience under COINTELPRO, claiming “she was terrorized by a system that wanted to punish her for daring to rebel.”²⁴ Abu-Jamal speaks these words from experience, having also been terrorized by an unjust court system, another “legal lynching,” for rebelling against the status quo of white supremacy. Shakur and the Black Panthers understood the inherent danger of challenging the racial status quo of the United States, yet the level of repression they faced through COINTELPRO was unprecedented in terms of its sophistication, efficiency, and invisibility. To get a sense of the terror that COINTELPRO represented, I would like to present Shakur’s

²¹ Davis, Angela. *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 119.

²² COINTELPRO, Aug 25, 1967.

²³ Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI’s Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement*. Boston: South End Press, 1988.

²⁴ Mumia Abu-Jamal, “Assata: Terrorist, or Survivor of Terrorism?” *Mumia Audio Transcript*, May 13, 2005, http://assatashakur.org/mumia_transcript.htm.

experience of terror under COINTELPRO alongside the voices of other Panther victims.

COINTELPRO was not merely a fact-gathering mission, it was a systematic form of terror that was intended to hound, intimidate, and isolate dissenters. Constant trails by FBI agents, wiretaps, and infiltration created a toxic environment within the party as “the easy, friendly openness... (was) replaced by fear and paranoia.”²⁵ One day, while recording herself in preparation for a speech, Shakur received an anonymous call that told her to “stop making tapes,” eventually she says, “I was scared to death to talk in my own house.”²⁶ Shakur was never safe from the surveillance of the FBI, even in her own home. The intimacy of the surveillance was intended to create an atmosphere of distrust and paranoia in the targets, and was clearly an intimidation tactic used to show the Panthers that the state still maintained the ultimate power to punish.

Huey Newton, co-founder of the Party, was perhaps targeted by COINTELPRO more than any other individual within the ranks of the BPP. Of the COINTELPRO against him, the Party leader recalled in 1978, “their blatant lack of discretion would be difficult to exaggerate.”²⁷ In an interview published in *Oui* magazine after his return from exile, Newton responded to the question of what prompted him to leave in the first place, saying, “I had been tailed for most of my adult life, and the effect was both exhausting and terrifying.”²⁸ There is no doubt that a government that intimately monitors its citizens in this way is involved in a

²⁵ Shakur, *An Autobiography*, 231.

²⁶ *Ibid*

²⁷ Ken Kelley, “A Conversation With Huey Newton,” *Oui Magazine*, March, 1978, 72.

²⁸ Kelly, “A Conversation With Huey Newton,” 71.

campaign to “intimidate or coerce a civilian population,” by its own definition, a campaign of terror. Not only do the actions of the government reveal the continued reliance on terror tactics, the response of its victims, to flee from the place of terror to a new land, confirms that the tactics were intimidating and coercive.

COINTELPRO was ostensibly coordinated to prevent violence and domestic upheaval, but often FBI actions were designed to incite violence in order to justify the subsequent repressive backlash. A particularly blatant example from the COINTELPRO files that has survived FBI deletions, is a memo from the San Diego office to the director of the FBI titled “tangible results” which claims, “shootings, beatings, and high degree of unrest continues to prevail in the ghetto area of southeast San Diego. Although no specific counterintelligence action can be credited... a substantial amount of the unrest is directly attributable to this program.”²⁹ Rather than securing peace and safety, the FBI was interested in framing Black resistance as violent and dangerous in order to bring public opinion into line with its violent program of repression. The numerous trumped up charges against Shakur before her eventual conviction by an all white jury,³⁰ testify to the FBI’s desire and capacity to fulfill this objective.

COINTELPRO unleashed massive violence on individual Black people, and entire communities, while simultaneously using media ties to portray these victimized people and communities as violent. In an era in which domestic deviation

²⁹ Noam Chomsky, “Domestic Terrorism: Notes on the State System of Oppression,” *New Political Science* 21 (1999).

³⁰ Shakur, *An Autobiography*, XIX. Between May 3, 1973 and November 22, 1977 Shakur was tried for six crimes other than the one she would eventually be convicted of. Three were dismissed for lack of evidence, and she was acquitted of the other three charges.

from the status quo was construed as a menace to “American society,” those marked by the state as criminals, terrorists, or communists were subject to the full force of state terror, with the tacit sanction of the American public. One need only think of the continuing human rights violations occurring in Guantanamo Bay to understand Angela Davis’ conclusion that against America’s perceived enemies “virtually anything is acceptable-torture, brutality, vast expenditures of public funds-as long as it is done in the name of public safety.”³¹ By casting the victims of state violence as the nation’s collective enemy, COINTELPRO created curious conditions in which “the rhetoric... of ‘combatting terrorism’ (was) regularly affected by some of the world’s leading terrorist commanders.”³² While violence has been reciprocal, history and memory provide us with the evidence needed to undo this tangled knot of blame.

In an address made on July 4, 1973, entitled “To my People,” Shakur appealed to memory and history to reframe the way she had been portrayed by COINTELPRO propaganda. Taking aim at media that had likened her to gangsters like John Dillinger and Ma Barker, Shakur forcefully asserted that “it must be clear to anyone who can think, see, or hear, that we are the victims... It should be clear to us by now who the real criminals are. Nixon and his crime partners have murdered hundreds of Third World brothers and sisters.”³³ This reversal of blame is one of the key experiences that allowed Shakur to access memories of the marooned slave, who

³¹ Angela Davis, “Race and Criminalization,” in *The House That Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon, 1997), 270.

³² Noam Chomsky, *The Culture of Terrorism* (Chicago: Haymarket, 1988), 310.

³³ Assata, *An Autobiography*, 50.

“was a kind of political criminal according to state law, but a freedom fighter according to natural law.”³⁴

In the COINTELPRO period of the Cold War, the political climate of the U.S. nation-state positioned Shakur as a criminal and terrorist for opposing national policies that were taking the lives of untold numbers of people of color at home and abroad. If one remembers that “the rulers of this country... have committed some of the most brutal, vicious crimes in history,”³⁵ Shakur’s flight from the United States criminal justice system can be seen in the tradition of the maroons who “were fugitives, not from justice but from injustice.”³⁶ It is crucial that we remember the words of Mumia Abu Jamal if we are to understand the context of terror and propaganda in which Shakur was tried and convicted. It is equally important that we remember how power affects the production of history to understand how our current administration continues to produce a narrative of Shakur as a terrorist. This narrative continues to define challenges to the white supremacist status quo as a threat to national security, a conception that has “ancient roots in the early Republic when the specter of servile revolt unnerved the founding fathers.”³⁷ At the heart of this longstanding American fear of Black resistance to white supremacist domination is an ethnocentric national imagination.

The Ethnocentrism of American Memory and Imagination

“The schools we go to are reflections of the society that created them... Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true heroes, if they

³⁴ Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 160.

³⁵ Assata, *An Autobiography*, 51.

³⁶ Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 14.

³⁷ Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 4.

know that that knowledge will help set you free. Schools in amerika are interested in brainwashing people with amerikanism..."

Assata Shakur, "Assata: An Autobiography," reflecting on U.S. schools from Cuba.

In his 1975 stand-up record, "Is it Something I Said," Richard Pryor uses humor to make a poignant statement about the complex, and often unexpected, manifestations of ethnocentrism in the construction of American identity. In U.S. prison camps, he says, the Vietnamese are "taking tests and stuff, learning how to say nigger. So that they can become good citizens."³⁸ This theme of race and citizenship has also been at the core of actual social movements such as the Texas-based League of United Latin American Citizens, who sought to prove that Latinos were, "the best, purest and most perfect type of true and loyal citizen of the United States."³⁹ LULAC was active during the years of Jim Crow segregation in Texas, but "instead of mounting an attack on segregation itself," LULAC found more success arguing "against the segregation of Mexican-descended people on the grounds that they were 'white.'"⁴⁰

I use these disparate examples of the paradoxical complicity of peoples of color in perpetuating ethnocentric nationalism through the process of *becoming* American to underscore Edward Said's assertion that, "to a certain extent modern and primitive societies... derive a sense of their identities negatively."⁴¹ In other words, modern nations know themselves because borders separate "us" from the

³⁸ Richard Pryor, *Is it Something I Said?*, Youtube, 47 min, 1975, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTDL5J57YOk>.

³⁹ Lorena Oropeza, "Antiwar Aztlán: The Chicano Movement Opposes U.S. Intervention in Vietnam," in *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs 1945-1988*, ed. Brenda Gayle Plummer (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003): 204.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 205.

⁴¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978), 54.

ubiquitous “them.” Such a conception of the American nation then creates racialized borders when we consider that “in its first words on the subject of citizenship, Congress in 1790 limited naturalization to ‘white persons,’” and that “this racial prerequisite to citizenship endured for over a century-and-a-half.”⁴²

Toni Morrison constructs a parallel argument to Said’s identification of Europe’s negative identity formation in the American context by discursively shifting the “other” from the ‘Orient’ to the ‘African.’ From the country’s origins, “Africanism,” Morrison tells us, “is inextricable from the definition of Americanness.”⁴³ Africanism, as described by Morrison, functions as a way to understand the complex composition of the ethnocentric national imagination. In a nation that has defined itself through freedom, Blackness, as a marker of unfreedom, marked a racialized border around the nation’s imagination. Historically, Blackness has provided the terrain upon which America’s imagined internal enemies were mapped in infinitely threatening forms: the maroon, the rapist, the communist, the criminal, and the terrorist. Assata Shakur’s story is a striking example of how the state continues to mobilize national fears of a racialized enemy to suppress dissent, and how transnational spaces shed light on the extent to which American pedagogy is responsible for “redefining *White America*, as simply *America*.”⁴⁴

⁴² Ian Haney López, “White by Law,” in *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 626.

⁴³ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 65.

⁴⁴ Sylvia Wynter, “Forum NHI: Knowledge for the 21st Century,” *Knowledge on Trial* 1 (1994): 57.

To understand how Shakur's story has been squeezed out of national history it is useful to observe how national history and memory have treated Blackness in different contexts, and how the nation's historical imagination has reproduced the conflation of whiteness and Americanness in opposition to threatening Blackness. What makes the ethnocentrism of history and pedagogy salient in this study is the importance Shakur attached to her memories of American education, and the continuing effects of an entrenched pedagogical anti-Blackness that continues to distort her legacy in American history and memory. To clarify my terms, I proceed with a definition of the nation as "an imagined political community," that is "both inherently limited and sovereign,"⁴⁵ which captures my concern with the centrality of bordering and power in the construction of national identity.

Shakur realized the ethnocentric nature of her American education when she discovered the silences in history that had erased the presence of Black resistance. The importance of Nat Turner on Shakur's memory is evident in her autobiography, and this instance of slave resistance was essential in allowing her to enter the imaginative space of the maroon. Shakur recalls that, "the day I found out about Nat Turner I was affected so strongly it was physical."⁴⁶ After describing her transformative experience learning about Turner, Shakur says that she went home and poured through all of her mother's books, never once encountering the name Nat Turner. Her discovery of Turner, during a meeting of the Black organization on her college campus, forced her to reflect on the nature of American public schooling with the conclusion that, "many of us have misconceptions about Black history in

⁴⁵Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

⁴⁶ Shakur, *An Autobiography*, 175.

amerika... belief in these myths can cause us to make serious mistakes in analyzing our current situation and in planning future action.”⁴⁷ This tale of widespread Black resistance to the terrifying conditions of slavery exploded the ethnocentric national history Shakur received in American public schools, which had caused her to grow up “believing the slaves hadn’t fought back,”⁴⁸ and forced her to reassess her current situation in a different era of white supremacist domination.

The treatment of slavery in American history has distorted the national memory of this past in order to alleviate the guilt of the nation through imagined representations of slave life that erase the terror it inflicted on Black people. Early histories of Turner tended to repeat the views of early nineteenth century Virginians such as, “the slave legislature of Virginia was efficient and mild,” that, “an affection existed between master and slave,” and, “no slave insurrection would have occurred in Virginia but for the abolition movement in other sections.”⁴⁹ In this author’s historical imagination, writing in 1900 Virginia, slavery was a mild institution that created a bond between master and servant, and, if not for trouble-making abolitionists, a peaceful coexistence would have been maintained. Power entered the narrative from multiple angles in this historical production, principally through ethnocentric source production, which relied on an internal Africanist logic to produce a narrative that served the national interest of white reconciliation after the Civil War.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 176.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 175.

⁴⁹ William Drewry, “The Southampton Insurrection,” in *Nat Turner: Great Lives Observed*, ed. Eric Foner (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 156-7.

William Drewry, drew on interviews with “former slaves, masters, and relatives of Turner’s victims,” and from “other contemporary sources.”⁵⁰ Drewry, a white man, conducted his interviews at a time when southern whites were waging a terror campaign designed to maintain the racial order established under slavery. Within the context of a society held hostage by terror lynching, the interviews he conducted with former slaves could not have produced honest responses about the horrors of slavery that contradicted the hegemonic white southern memory of benevolent paternalism without the threat of physical punishment. In the white southern imagination, the best days of the south were gone, and the memory of slavery represented a longed for idyllic past. Such a view necessarily silenced or distorted Black voices, like Turner’s, which would have exposed how the white monopoly over the power to punish created an atmosphere of terror, not affection, on the part of the slaves. In 1900, Africanist discourse allowed this white man to bypass the thoughts and feelings of the Black actors involved, rather, he could draw on “an internally structured archive,” built to “shape the language, perception, and form of the encounter,” to fit his own conception of the past.⁵¹ In the white southern imagination the voice of the slave did not matter, paternalistic plantation ideology had already placed slaves according to its internally structured logic, and thus Drewry could write off the insurrection with the simple declaration that “Nat was a complete fanatic,”⁵² a violent aberration in an otherwise bucolic slavocracy.

⁵⁰ Drewry, *The Southampton Insurrection*, 152.

⁵¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 58.

⁵² Drewry, *The Southampton Insurrection*, 153.

While this account is clearly white supremacist, in the way that it draws on an internally structured logic of benevolent paternalism rooted in a belief of white biological superiority, it receives an added narrative dimension from the force of American nationalism. In an incredibly telling passage at the end of Drewry's study, he draws out explicit links between white supremacy, pedagogy, and national interest, saying, "the negro, conscious of his inferiority... will make a peaceful and useful *citizen* (emphasis mine). But educated for the highest offices... he will remain a source of disturbance and insurrection."⁵³ Within the internal logic of the white supremacist imagination, where "slaves were the happiest laboring class in the world,"⁵⁴ insurrection was not caused by ill treatment, much less terror, but by Black people not being properly induced to accept servitude. Drewry makes the case here, not to return Blacks to a non-citizen status such as slavery, but for the inclusion of Blacks as citizens, so long as they are taught to remain on the bottom of the social hierarchy. Drewry draws on over 100 years of slave apologists' Africanist discourse to misrepresent servile revolt as uncommon and fanatical, displaying how the interests of an ethnocentric nationalism come to bear on historical production. Over fifty years later, ethnocentric nationalism squeezed Turner's resistance out of Shakur's education, and her discovery of what the nation had stolen from her catalyzed her activism, ultimately positioning her as a victim to these same forces.

I focus on this historical treatment of Nat Turner to expose the extent to which power is inherent in the production of history, and specifically how white supremacy and nationalism have been twin dynamos in the misrepresentation of

⁵³ Ibid, 157.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 152-3.

the slave past. In relation to Shakur, Turner is important because her discovery of his story revolutionized her thinking about the history and nature of Black resistance “here in amerika,”⁵⁵ and the exclusion of Turner from her education reveals how American pedagogy reproduced an Africanist discourse that would provide the terrain upon which she herself would be constructed as a national threat.

By the time Shakur was of school age, in the late 1950s and 60s, the retrospective significance of Nat Turner was largely written out of history because the possible narratives his story produced did not fit into the contemporary national project at work. This was a time in which international pressure was bearing down on American domestic human rights abuses in the south. Events such as the “Kissing Case,” in which two young Black children were arrested for being kissed by a white girl, and other outrageous acts of racism condoned by the state began drawing international criticism in the new post-Nazi world and fueled Soviet propaganda during the early stages of the Cold War. Within the nexus of domestic activism and increasing international condemnation, the United States began a legislative process by which to fulfill the broken emancipation promise of full citizenship rights for Black Americans. Of course, this process was enacted under the shadow of the Cold War, when internal enemies were being hunted ruthlessly, forcing the state to strike a balance between “reaffirming the civil *rights* of black Americans with their need to limit the civil *liberties* of those who dissented from the racial status quo.”⁵⁶ It was in this context, when Black incorporation into American life was becoming official

⁵⁵ Shakur, *An Autobiography*, 175.

⁵⁶ Plummer, *Rising Wind*, 4.

government policy, albeit in ways reminiscent of Drewry's proscription for Black citizenship, that Shakur's story was shaped and distorted by the media to fit the nation's Cold War interests.

Any scholarship that deals with the case of Shakur must be tuned in to both the context of the nation at the time, legislating on civil rights while shamelessly hunting potential subversives, and the national history of Africanist discourse reproduced through ethnocentric pedagogy. The Cold War provided a specific context for Africanism to work in, allowing the state to mobilize "collective fear in ways that recapitulate and consolidate previous ideologies of the national enemy."⁵⁷ While the state had a long history of collective fear of the African presence, rooted in the fear of slave rebellion, to draw on in its formulation of Shakur as a terrorist, the means by which it carried out this framing of Shakur were greatly expanded during the Cold War thanks to COINTELPRO. While the mechanism by which Shakur was positioned as an enemy was in some ways novel, the parallels between her own misrepresentation and that of Nat Turner point to the power of Africanist discourse to shape the contours of the national imagination. By denying the voice of Black actors, dismissing resistance as an aberration in an otherwise equitable and peaceful society, national memory has carried the punishment of Black resistance from the body to the page.

Edward Said demonstrates how imagination affects perception of the "other," and his example can help us understand how the national Africanist imagination has distorted the national memory of the panthers generally, and Shakur specifically.

⁵⁷ Angela Davis, *Abolition Democracy*, 119.

Speaking of the European imagination, he says, “it was with very great reluctance that what Muslims said Muslims believed was accepted as what they did believe.”⁵⁸ This logic was essential to William Drewry’s history of Nat Turner, and it would be crucial for COINTELPRO’s counterinsurgent mission to disrupt and isolate its targets.

While very much a terroristic enterprise, COINTELPRO produced one of the most elaborate propaganda campaigns in American history; designed to frame Black resistance in ways that could mobilize public fear. Edward P. Morgan explains how public memory of the BPP has been distorted by the media’s role in COINTELPRO, claiming that, “by ‘orchestrating false and derogatory stories’ and racial stereotypes in the news media, via a network of some three hundred ‘cooperating journalists,’ COINTELPRO aimed to discredit the Panthers in the eyes of the broader public.”⁵⁹ By relying on “racial stereotypes” in their attempts to discredit the BPP, COINTELPRO media sources were digging into the fertile ground of Africanist representation to discredit Black resistance in the eyes of a presumed white national audience. The ways COINTELPRO interpreted the views of Black people went beyond Said’s charge of reluctance to believe; COINTELPRO sought to fundamentally misrepresent the beliefs of Black people to fit the nation’s Cold War imperatives.

In 1968 the “Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders,” better known as the Kerner Commission, was released in an attempt to explain the

⁵⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 61.

⁵⁹ Edward P. Morgan, “Media Culture and the Public Memory of the Black Panther Party,” in *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*, ed. Jama Lazerow and Yohuru Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 330.

causes of domestic rebellions in Black urban areas across the country. After extensive study, and interviews in the Black communities in question, the report famously concluded that the “nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white-separate and unequal.”⁶⁰ The Commission noted that there was “a widespread belief among Negroes in the existence of police brutality and in a ‘double standard’ of justice and protection,” which was “reflected in alienation and hostility toward the institutions of law and government and the white society which controls them.”⁶¹ The Commission was a stunning example of the potential for political elites to take into account, and address, the feelings and needs of the general public. However, the report was not only ignored by the president that commissioned it, COINTELPRO activities actively sought to disrupt and discredit a report from their own government!

A mere two weeks after the Kerner Commission was released, a memo was sent from the Houston chapter of the FBI to the director suggesting that a false report be created to contradict the Commission’s findings. Proposing “field-wide counterintelligence action” the memo claimed that “a poll by a legitimate (or non-legitimate) organization, either a true poll or a false poll, should be published, and given nation-wide ‘bulletin-type coverage’ in all news media.”⁶² Not only did this memo attempt to contradict the voices of the Black community, it hoped to actually change them. The memo goes on to say that “a counterattack emphasizing that the

⁶⁰ *United States, Kerner Commission, Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968).*

⁶¹ *Ibid*

⁶² COINTELPRO, Memo to Director, 3/15/1968.

large majority of Negroes oppose this type technique should somewhat counteract the apparent license given the Negro community to embark on future riots.”⁶³

The parallels between COINTELPRO and Drewry’s history are striking, and they demonstrate how Africanism has historically worked to secure ethnocentric nationalist objectives. The first significant commonality is the idea that outside agitation is behind Black resistance, as if Black people were passively accepting of their conditions until white liberals gave them “license” to revolt. COINTELPRO’s treatment of the Kerner Commission is hauntingly similar to Drewry’s treatment of white abolitionists, in that both refuse to recognize the agency of the Black actors involved. Perhaps less apparently, but arguably even more important, the two sources both try to erase the conditions under which Black people lived, which ultimately produced the resistance in the first place. Drewry presented an imagined bucolic slavery, in which all parties got along peacefully. COINTELPRO claimed that Black revolutionary groups “continually and falsely allege police brutality,”⁶⁴ denying the terror of police brutality behind the formation of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense.

Shakur speaks directly to these misperceptions of Black resistance in her address, “To my People,” stating, “Black revolutionaries do not drop from the moon. We are created by our conditions. Shaped by our oppression. We are being manufactured in droves in the ghetto streets, places like attica, san quentin, bedford hills, leavenworth, and sing sing.”⁶⁵ When Black voices are able to speak, the

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Chomsky, “Domestic Terrorism.”

⁶⁵ Assata, *An Autobiography*, 52.

conditions in which resistance is produced become the primary vehicle for understanding its machinations. Ethnocentric nationalism marginalizes the voices of Black actors, rendering the conditions in which they act invisible, and Africanist discourse ultimately gives shape to the encounter in the national imagination. Thus, Maroons become “common delinquent(s) given over to rapine and robbery,”⁶⁶ Nat Turner becomes “a fanatic,” and Shakur becomes a “terrorist” in the decontextualized, ethnocentric imagination.

Memory in the Imagined Borderlands

“I come from a tradition of women maroons, cimmarons, who didn’t just try to escape from oppression, but were totally... mind, body, spirit, committed to resisting.”

Assata Shakur, “Eyes of the Rainbow,” reflecting on her identity from Cuba.

“My Chicana identity is grounded in the Indian woman’s history of resistance.”

Gloria Anzaldúa, “Borderlands/La Frontera.”

Gloria Anzaldúa penned her influential work *La Frontera* in 1987, the same year that “*Assata: An Autobiography*” was published. The borderlands scholarship that Anzaldúa pioneered has grown into a bold field offering new ways to imagine the nation and examine how actors on the ground resist, implement, and respond to power. Anzaldúa defines the borderlands as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.”⁶⁷ Later scholars have come to understand the borderlands in terms of “spatial mobility, situational identity, local contingency, and the ambiguities of power,” and as “places where

⁶⁶ Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 28.

⁶⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands-La Frontera* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987), 3.

stories take unpredictable turns and rarely end as expected.”⁶⁸ Assata Shakur’s story, as a forbidden transnational subject, a maroon and a border crosser, should be seen in terms of borderlands history because her experience demonstrates the ambiguity of power and the complexity of identity at the core of this scholarship.

By adopting this approach, I will show how borderlands scholarship can allow for greater voice to be brought out of a variety of transnational subjects, and how memory and imagination play critical roles in national allegiance and belonging. Moving outside of a nation-based history throws the ethnocentrism of American nationalism and national security into stark relief, and exposes the forces of power at the nexus of race and nationality that have been at work in the U.S. nation state’s construction of Shakur as a “terrorist.” Essential to this work then is an investigation of Shakur’s memory and imagination, as it has been shaped by an experience of border crossing, moving her in and out of “imagined communities,” and the historical grounding in which her borderland imagination lies.

In a series of lectures on the nature of history and freedom, Theodor Adorno says this about the nature of modern nations, “the delusion is that a form of association that is essentially dynamic... and historical misunderstands itself as a natural formation.”⁶⁹ Here, Adorno points to the complex interplay of memory and forgetting at the core of nationalisms that present themselves as natural products disconnected from history and power. Similarly Benedict Anderson, whose definition of the nation lies at the core of this study, identifies in national identity a

⁶⁸ Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, “On Borderlands,” *The Journal of American History* 98 (2011), 338.

⁶⁹ Theodor Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 106.

process of “having to ‘have already forgotten’ tragedies of which one needs unceasingly to be ‘reminded,” as a “a characteristic device in the later construction of national genealogies,” driven by a “vast pedagogical industry.”⁷⁰ In the last section, I talked about the ethnocentric understanding of the nation in terms of foreigners becoming American, but we must understand that because nations are not inherently natural forms of association, even people born in America must become Americans. This process is accomplished chiefly through pedagogy, and the ethnocentrism that foreigners absorb as they integrate into American society is duplicated by the American educational system.

The construction of national genealogies encourages American school children to think of the nation’s first rulers as their founding fathers. From Cuba, Shakur remembers being taught about George Washington thusly, “here they had this old craka slavemaster, who didn’t give a damn about Black people, and they had me, an unwitting little Black child, doing a play in his honor.”⁷¹ The nation called on Shakur to remember Washington in a familial way, a founding father, but in doing so it also called on her to forget the way Washington thought about and treated Black people. In the borderlands, Shakur accessed her memories of what slavery meant, the dehumanization of Black people, the rape of Black women, and the terrorism used by slaveholders to imagine Washington not as a hero, but as “some rich white boy,” who “had once sold a slave for a keg of rum.”⁷² By shifting the angle from which Washington is viewed, Shakur’s racial positioning allows her to recreate an

⁷⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 201.

⁷¹ Shakur, *An Autobiography*, 33.

⁷² *Ibid*

utterly different picture of the first president, where different pieces of evidence become salient, than what she was presented with in American schooling. The borderlands, as a space where imagined communities come into contact, serve as a site of contestation over memory and imagination, destabilizing the conception of the nation as either neutral or natural. Through her lived experience as a border crosser, Shakur could access memories from the past that shaped her identity along racial lines, transcending national history and boundaries, and thwarting state power.

As sites that reveal the “ambiguities of power,” the borderlands often produce histories that reverse the usual assumptions about state power and individual agency. Michiel Baud and Willem Van Schendel’s essay, “A Comparative Approach to Borderlands,” brilliantly captures the contentious nature of borders, and the centrality of power and imagination inherent in their construction. They argue, “national borders are... imagined projections of territorial power,” and that when it benefits individuals they will “take advantage of borders in ways that are not intended or anticipated by their creators.”⁷³ This conception of borders reveals the complexities of power that play out in the borderlands as state designs compete with individuals who seek to elude, capitalize on, or resist national policies and practices.

While statesmen imagine borders as fixed and impenetrable boundaries, separating “us” from the ubiquitous “them,” the reality is that many people on the

⁷³Michiel Baud and Willem Van Schendel, “A Comparative Approach to Borderlands,” in *Major Problems in the History of North American Borderlands*, ed. Pekka Hämäläinen and Benjamin Johnson (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012): 3.

ground, especially those who deviate from the nation's status quo, do not see borders this way, and accordingly treat them as fluid rather than fixed. Baud and Van Schendel discuss several of the "unintended and often subversive consequences" of bordering, significantly identifying "revolutionaries (who) hide behind them, seeking the protection of another sovereignty."⁷⁴ While the authors were probably thinking about dissidents in the Mexican Revolution when they wrote this, it undoubtedly speaks to the experience of Shakur, and other Panther exiles, who took advantage of Cuba's sovereign space to find refuge from American terror. In fact, borders have been key sites for Black people to achieve a sense of freedom and thwart state power dating back to the days of plantation slavery. Shakur's imagination thus becomes central to understanding the complexity of borderlands identity. She makes meaning out of her lived experience by imagining herself as a maroon, an escaped slave, embodying a central figure in borderlands scholarship that reframes the conception of the nation as it intersects with race.

Travelling through the northern Mexican borderlands near Texas in 1857, Frederick Law Olmstead came across "two negroes," one of whom he struck up a conversation. According to Olmstead's account, the Black man divulged that "runaways were *constantly* (emphasis mine) arriving here," and that "if they chose to be industrious, they could live very comfortably."⁷⁵ The former slave was fluent in Spanish, and had apparently inserted himself comfortably into the culture and economy of Mexico, to his own personal benefit. Despite his newly won freedom,

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Frederick Law Olmstead, "Journey Through Texas," in *Major Problems in the History of North American Borderlands*, ed. Pekka Hämäläinen and Benjamin H. Johnson 307-309 (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012), 308.

this man still told Olmstead that “he would like right well to see old Virginia again, that he would-*if he could be free* (emphasis mine).”⁷⁶ This runaway slave, this maroon, although ostensibly free in anti-slavery Mexico still longed for his home, but was kept back by the inescapable reality of American racism. Like Assata Shakur, this Black man, whom Olmstead apparently didn’t feel the need to introduce with a name, had achieved expanded personal freedom by crossing a border into another political sovereignty that offered him greater rights and liberties. But beyond this, this man’s story reveals the ambivalence of freedom through exile at the heart of Shakur’s own experience. As Shakur reflects from Cuba, “a maroon, a runaway slave, has to- even in the act of freedom- adjust to the fact that being free or struggling for freedom means, ‘I’ll be separated from people I love.’”⁷⁷ Despite the pain of separation from family and homeland, and the dangers inherent in crossing, Black people have often been forced to make use of borders as a way to gain protection from the terror that lies on the other side. Persecuted Black people harnessed the subversive potential of borders to create their own counterhegemonic readings of these political constructs. In doing so, they enacted a challenge to the national imagination as it intersects with race in spaces where state power is most contested.

Shakur clearly felt out of place within an American society that treated both her body and her history with violence. Her opposition to America’s imperialist foreign policy during the Cold War was enough to earn her designation as a threat to

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Christian Parenti, “Postmodern Maroon in the Ultimate Palenque,” *Peace Review* 10 (1998): 421.

the state. However, just because she shared with Cuba an antipathy to American interventionism, does not mean that entering Cuba's imagined community was a given. In many ways, Cuba's own racial narratives have been just as problematic for Assata Shakur as America's own ethnocentrism. Living in this exiled space, Assata Shakur has remained deeply rooted in her African past, an African history of resistance, which is erased by American ethnocentrism and coopted by Cuban nationalism. Because she has remained anchored to her identity as a Black woman, she has had to straddle the very different conceptions of race in America and Cuba while seeking to position herself somewhere in this complex racial schema. To again use the words of Anzaldúa, she creates a space for herself because "not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else."⁷⁸

In an article Shakur wrote in response to an NBC interview she granted in the 1990s, she concluded with this phrase, "I send you Love and Revolutionary Greetings From Cuba, One of the Largest, Most Resistant and Most Courageous Palenques (Maroon Camps) That has ever existed on the Face of this Planet."⁷⁹ This characterization of her space of refuge is striking and significant. Firstly, this shows that her understanding of her space of refuge is grounded in the history of slave resistance, just like her maroon identity. But beyond this, it shows how Cuba, as the particular site of her refuge, played an especially significant role in reformulating her imagination.

⁷⁸ Anzaldúa, *La Frontera*, 79.

⁷⁹ Assata Shakur, "Critique of Interview of Assata Shakur with NBC journalist Ralph Penza," in *Covert Action Quarterly*, Oct 26, 1998, <http://www.assatashakur.org/nbc.htm>.

In America, Shakur struggled to find history that spoke to her of the extent of slave resistance. Before she discovered Nat Turner, Shakur says that “Harriet Tubman... had symbolized everything that was Black resistance for me.”⁸⁰ The discovery of Turner, and other figures of resistance such as Gabriel Prosser, helped revolutionize her politics. However, once in Cuba Shakur’s memory of slave resistance took on a transnational framework of slave resistance that encompassed all of the Americas, the experience of maronnage. Time helps demonstrate just how influential Cuba was in helping Shakur find the language she needed to understand her experience.

In her autobiography, published in 1987, three years after arriving in Cuba, Shakur likens her experience in U.S. prisons to slavery, yet she does not make the link to maronnage, not once. By the time she is interviewed in “Eyes of the Rainbow,” 1997, Shakur is steeped in the language of maronnage. Six minutes into the film she claims that she feels like an escaped slave “whether it was Nanny in Jamaica, who fought against the enslavers, whether it was Harriet Tubman, who helped free more than 700 slaves.”⁸¹ While it is clear that Tubman was still incredibly inspiring to Shakur, the inclusion of the Jamaican hero “Grandy Nanny” in her characterization of herself is a striking example of the transnational reach of maronnage that she acquired in her time in Cuba. Also, the idea of the Palenque was key to discovering this African past that had been hidden from her in America. Palenques were maroon communities where African people kept alive customs, religions, and languages brought with them from their homeland. Cuba’s

⁸⁰ Shakur, *An Autobiography*, 175.

⁸¹ Rolando, “Eyes of the Rainbow.”

preservation of African culture and resistance narratives resonated with Shakur and showed her,

“How much we-Black people in the U.S.-were robbed of. Here, they still know rituals preserved from slavery times. It was like finding another piece of myself. I had to find an African name. I’m still looking for pieces of that Africa I was torn from. I’ve found it here...”⁸²

In Cuba, Shakur’s search for her African name came to fruition, she found the maroon. The maroon so deeply captures her experience, fleeing an unjust society, African people’s proud history of resistance, and the drive to keep alive the culture of the ancestors, that Shakur was inevitably drawn to this language so common in Cuba and so hidden in the U.S. However, in adopting this language and applying it to her experience in exile, even as she praised Cuba for its preservation of this figure, Shakur was taking this concept out of the hands of the state and transgressing Cuba’s maroon narrative by using memory to bring the past into her present.

Just as Shakur has relied on history to give her experience meaning, the Cuban national imagination has been shaped by memories of slave past in ways that the Revolutionary state has attempted to use to bolster its own image and policy. On the verge of overrunning the Eastern city of Santiago in 1958, Fidel Castro boldly declared, “What happened in 1898 will not happen again, this time the *mambises* will advance on Santiago de Cuba!”⁸³ The mambises were mixed race groups of anti-Spanish colonial revolutionaries, many of whom were former slaves or maroons. By

⁸² Parenti, “Postmodern Maroon,” 422.

⁸³ Aviva Chomsky, *A History of the Cuban Revolution* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 39.

invoking this image, Castro sought to connect his struggle not only to national independence, but also to a vision of cross-racial unity as a model for the Revolution. While such rhetoric kept alive this important memory of Black resistance to both slavery and colonialism, the use to which it was put, significantly by a light skinned Cuban man, served not a Black narrative, but a nationalist narrative. The mobilization of this memory to reproduce a defiant nationalist narrative, as opposed to a narrative of Afro-Cuban resistance and perseverance, demonstrates “how the cimarrón figure was both invoked and contained,”⁸⁴ by the Revolutionary government.

Shakur quickly realized that the question of race in Cuba was very different from that in the U.S. and that “in order to really understand the situation I had to study Cuban history thoroughly.”⁸⁵ There is no doubt that in her study of Cuba’s racial history she discovered the cimarrón. However, in her discovery of this figure, Shakur would see how the memory of the maroon was treated to make them “guardians of the flag of liberation,”⁸⁶ a national figure of anti-colonialism whose only relevance to the present was as a figure of resistance to imperial domination, and not domestic racism. The history of racial cooperation, which silences the discrimination that Afro-Cubans have historically faced, began with the wars of independence from Spain, in which the mambises were essential to victory, and has

⁸⁴ Kristina Wirtz, *Performing Afro-Cuba: Image, Voice, Spectacle in the Making of Race and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 249.

⁸⁵ Shakur, *An Autobiography*, 271.

⁸⁶ José L. Franco, “Maroons and Slave Rebellions in the Spanish Territories,” in *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*, ed. Richard Price (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 48.

been taken up by the Revolutionary state. The idea that “unity could be achieved only if the nationalist discourse could reconcile race and nation,”⁸⁷ and that “racism was... an undesirable legacy of the colonial and ‘semicolonial’ past,”⁸⁸ runs deep in Cuban national identity and has allowed Cuba to take advantage of the slave past without fully engaging with its legacy. This was something that Shakur became aware of in her personal interactions.

In a discussion with a Cuban friend Shakur proclaimed that “it was the duty of Africans everywhere on this planet to struggle to reverse the historical patterns created by slavery and imperialism,” only to be told “that he didn’t think of himself as an African. ‘Yo soy Cubano.’”⁸⁹ In Cuba, the nationalist sentiment is inculcated into people as youth, and racial consciousness is strictly avoided, at least officially. Within a context where “the cimarrón was held at a historical distance... as a source of Cuban character but not necessarily a role model for today,”⁹⁰ Shakur’s identification with the maroon as a transnational figure of Blackness transgressed the nationalist narrative that the maroon was inserted into. While invoking the space of Cuba as a Palenque where she could both secure protection from the U.S. and reconnect with her African ancestry, Shakur occupied a liminal imagined space rooted in an African spirit of resistance that her home country sought to erase and her country of refuge sought to coopt. In continuing to assert her identity through transnational African solidarity rooted in a history of oppression and resistance,

⁸⁷ Alejandro de la Fuente, “Race, National Discourse, and Politics in Cuba: An Overview,” *Latin American Perspectives* 25 (1998): 44.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁸⁹ Shakur, *An Autobiography*, 270

⁹⁰ Wirtz, *Performing Afro-Cuba*, 249.

Shakur has had to content with national imaginations that have alternately sought her destruction and her silence.

While Cuba offered Shakur the language and history she needed in order to ground her experience and space of exile in a historical context, she did so by transgressing the bounds of the Cuban national imagination. Ultimately her imagination lies in the liminal space of the borderlands, grounded in a U.S. Black Pride ethos incompatible with Cuba's colorblind nationalism, yet unwilling to claim Americanness because of the violence its ethnocentrism has inflicted on her. By reviving memories of the maroon slave and bringing them to bear on her identity, Shakur embodies Gloria Anzaldúa's call for a new way of life,

“On our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes. Or perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we might go another route.”⁹¹

Shakur creates a new route for herself. She crosses borders into a new territory, yet she retains her sense of racial identity forged in the dominant culture. As a Black American living in Cuba, she stands with Cuba against the racism of the U.S. and yet stands apart from Cuba's nationalist discourse that erases difference. By standing on both shores at once, Shakur's transnational maroon identity problematizes the

⁹¹ Anzaldúa, *La Frontera*, 77-78.

borders of both imagined communities and exposes the violence national narratives do to smaller, equally valuable, histories.

Conclusion: Countermemory and Contemporary Struggle

This paper, an examination of memory and imagination as they intersect with national and racial identity, has been forged in a critical historical moment in which memory has come to occupy center stage in battles over U.S. domestic and foreign policy. The U.S. government's recent elevation of Assata Shakur to the top ten "Most Wanted Terrorist" list and the move towards a normalization of relations between the U.S. and Cuba figure most prominently in this conception. But another moment struck me as truly bound up with the work of remembering, and as truly relevant in relation to Shakur, the first anniversary of Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, Missouri. My own memory of that day seems surreal; sitting thousands of miles away from Ferguson in the solitude of a library while a battle raged in the small town. This battle was fought on two fronts, simultaneously and imperceptibly. In one sense, there was 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 interned over 150 protestors including journalists, local residents, and even prominent academic activists like Cornel West. With all of this happening as I sat attempting to come to grips with history and memory, I could not help marveling at the second battle, the battle over memory, taking place before my eyes.

The fact that the anniversary of Brown's death elicited from the government a "State of Emergency" and the deployment of troops shows vividly the power of

memory. That the state has consistently responded to protests against police brutality with a show of military force is indicative of the times in which we live, and quite clearly shows the competing memories of the state and the people in the streets. 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 years “riots” while falling deathly silent on addressing the context from which resistance emerged.

This project has sought to highlight how context, both temporal and spatial, comes to shape, or distort, memory. The memory of Shakur cannot, and should not, be separated from the context in which she acted. Ignoring the context in which sources were created, a highly controlled national 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. Shakur’s story must remind us of how important it is to keep counter-memories alive to avoid complicity in the state’s counterinsurgency of prose. I would like to turn now to a few counter-memories that can help us understand the power of Shakur’s memory, and the importance her story has on struggles for justice right now and in the future.

Hip-hop has become a critical repository for counter-memories of Assata Shakur. From Chuck D’s famous identification as a “supporter of Chesimard!”⁹² to Common and Cee Lo Green’s poignant homage to Shakur in “A Song for Assata,”

⁹² Public Enemy, Chuck D, *Rebel Without a Pause*, audio CD, Def Jam, 1988.

Shakur has been cast as a hero, or in 2Pac's approving words, "amerikkka's worst nightmare."⁹³ While numerous songs have reclaimed Shakur's memory as a source of pride and inspiration, I think that an interview with rapper and actor Mos Def most aptly sums up the feelings of these artists and their need to provide a counter-memory of Shakur for young people to engage with. Commenting on the disconnect between state memory and Black community memory, he said,

When the federal government raised the bounty on her head this May 2, one official declared that Assata was merely '120 pounds of money.' For many of us in the Black community, she could never be so reduced. For many of us in the Black community, she was and remains, to use her own words, an 'escaped slave,' a heroine, not unlike Harriet Tubman.⁹⁴

Mos Def's characterization of Shakur in her own terms, as an escaped slave or maroon, and the link he makes to Harriet Tubman, shows how important historical memory is in understanding her experience. The conception of Shakur as a threat to U.S. national security is only possible if the state continues to define national security as the security of its white citizens. The posters that Mos Def recalls seeing in his Brooklyn community that read "Assata Shakur is welcome here,"⁹⁵ indicate the counterhegemonic potential that space can provide to create alternative routes of re-membering. By re-membering the maroon Palenques of Cuba along with Nat

⁹³ 2Pac, *Words of Wisdom*, audio CD, Interscope, 1991.

⁹⁴ Mos Def, *Assata Shakur: The government's terrorist is our community's heroine*, <http://www.assatashakur.org/mosdef.htm>.

⁹⁵ Ibid

Turner and Harriet Tubman, Shakur inhabits a transnational Black imagined community that moves freely across the borders of space and time.

What then, is the impact of this attachment to memory? Why should it matter that Assata Shakur provides us with a new way of imagining racial and national identity? In this present moment, I cannot but look to Ferguson and the explosion of competing memories at work there and see the need for the counter-memory, historical grounding, and hope that Shakur's story provides. The Ferguson uprisings are a manifestation of the contemporary period in which a Black Lives Matter movement must contend with an immensely powerful prison industrial complex, along with neutralizing rhetoric that disguises the violence of national security interests and colorblind racism. In this political climate, transnational spaces are crucial in bringing the violence on which American society and identity rest into the light of international and domestic condemnation. If we wish to elude the counterinsurgency of prose employed by operative hegemonies, borderlands spaces may help us to recognize often overlooked interrelations between domestic and foreign affairs. With this in mind, we must not decouple the recent opening of relations with Cuba from domestic imperatives to confront U.S. racial violence.

Cuba, as a state and a space, is specifically suited to launch a withering critique of U.S. policy in both the foreign and domestic spheres. That is, it should be able to put pressure on U.S. domestic policy through its diplomacy. Conversely, activists for racial justice in the U.S. can gain a sympathetic international ear through the Cuban state, one that has historically lent support to Black claims of political and economic oppression in the U.S. as embodied in Shakur's political

asylum. With Cuba and the United States opening relations, 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 its domestic human rights abuses. However, given the centrality of Assata's situation in regards to extradition treaties, the Cuban's adamant position that she is a political refugee, and the current racial dynamics of the United States, this policy may be seriously challenged in the 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 Assata back to a U.S. prison would be met with massive resistance by U.S. grassroots organizers, and also the Cuban government.⁹⁶ Additionally, with the U.S' first Black president on his way out of office, rapper Murs' entreaty that "Obama free Assata,"⁹⁷ becomes ever more salient. In a context where the U.S. is still beset by many of the same issues that gave rise to the Black Panther Party, it is crucial that we remember acts of "imaginative exteriorization,"⁹⁸ like Shakur's, that shine light on the perfidious nature of seemingly neutral institutions that reproduce and legitimize power.

⁹⁶ 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.

⁹⁷ 9th Wonder & Murs, Murs, *Tale of Two Cities*, audio CD, It's A Wonderful World Music Group/KGMG, 2012.

⁹⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 60.

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