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The Exile of Assata Shakur: Marronage
and American Borders

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“The Exile of Assata Shakur: Marronage and American Borders”

Assata Shakur is by her own definition “a 20th-century escaped slave.”¹ A member of the U.S. Black Panther Party during the height of the American domestic repression, she was sentenced to life in prison by an all-white jury for the alleged killing of a police officer in 1977. After serving a short part of her sentence, during which time she constantly feared for her life, Shakur was broken out of prison by radical leftists convinced of her innocence, and managed to make her way to Cuba where she has lived in exile ever since. While the story of Shakur’s trial has been taken up by observers across the political spectrum to alternately demonize the Black Liberation Movement or condemn the U.S. government’s repression of the movement, the overall effect of this controversy is to end her story once she crosses beyond the landed borders of the United States. What is lost in the focus on Shakur’s experience in the U.S. alone is her “construction of a symbolic political language that represented black political struggle along an internationalist rather than a nationalist axis,”² developed during her exile. By foregrounding Shakur’s voice from her space of refuge, her story takes on the dimensions of a borderlands maroon; a racialized subject who uses borders to both elude capture and create alternative ways of understanding space and self that challenge state power. Viewing Shakur’s story from this perspective grounds her transnational experience within a Black diasporic history that has allowed her to reimagine her Black identity amidst a shifting national context.

¹ Assata Shakur, “Untitled,” *Canadian Dimension* 32 (1998): 17.

² Michelle Stephens, “Re-imagining the Shape and Borders of Black Political Space,” *Radical History Review* 87 (2003): 174.

This paper makes a critical contribution to literature on Black Panther internationalism, as well as enriching emergent borderlands scholarship which looks at the intersection of Black life and borders. While there is a wealth of scholarship on the Black Panther's internationalist ideology, and some good work connecting Panthers to Cuba, the literature is limited by the unproblematic adoption of frameworks that privilege the nation-state as the primary vehicle by which to gauge the Panther's global reach. Due to this methodological blindness, Panther exile narratives are often cut off once the Panther in question leaves the bounds of the United States. Alternatively, studies that do follow Panthers beyond the borders of the United States often marginalize these actors by more critically engaging the governmental response to their presence rather than their actual lived experience abroad. By focusing on Assata Shakur's experience in Cuba, and how it allowed her to form a transnational identity rooted in a diasporic imaginary, this work offers a dynamic new perspective on the lived experience of Panthers in exile.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, borderlands history has focused an increasing amount of attention on people of African descent.³ These studies have been important contributions to a literature that reveals the complexity of identity in liminal spaces, yet this work has been conscribed by a number of factors. Firstly,

³ James David Nichol's "The Line of Liberty: Runaways Slaves and Fugitive Peons in the Texas-Mexico Borderlands," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 44 (2013) is one of the most incisive recent examinations of slaves as border crossers. While Karl Jacoby's "Between North and South: The Alternative Borderlands of William H. Ellis and the African American Colony of 1895," in *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History* (2004) is one of the few works to examine Black life at the border outside of the context of slavery.

scholars looking at the intersection of Blackness and the border have tended to ground their work in the context of slavery, resulting in a dearth of scholarship on Black life in the borderlands outside of this spatio-temporal framework. Secondly, scholars have tended to limit examination to the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. While this has been a crucial site of Black mobility and meaning-making, the exclusive focus on the U.S.-Mexico borderlands obscures the role of Black diasporic communities throughout the Americas in facilitating Black transnational migration and community formation. Tracing the process by which a Black woman from the United States reimagined space and self as she crossed national boundaries, this work explores the nexus of diasporic and transnational community while challenging nation-state-centric histories of U.S. political dissidents.

Trans-historical Marronage

“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.”⁴
Assata Shakur from the film “Eyes of the Rainbow”

Assata Shakur’s experience of confinement, flight, and forced exile are the basis for her self-construction as a maroon, or escaped slave. Adopting this identity allows her to construct “the institution of slavery as a framework for understanding contemporary experiences of surveillance, policing, and criminalization,”⁵ as well as to ground her own actions within a tradition of resistance. By bringing this figure from the past to bear on her own identity, Shakur makes visible “the continuities

⁴ Assata Shakur, Gloria Rolando, *Eyes of the Rainbow*, video, 47 min, 1997, <http://eyesoftherainbow.com/>

⁵ Julia Sudbury, “Maroon Abolitionists,” *Meridians* 9 (2009): 9.

between ideologies and practices of slavery and mass incarceration.”⁶ The maroon construction highlights several aspects of Shakur’s experience: confinement, flight, and the search for freedom in a new space. By engaging these features of Black resistance, Shakur attaches interpretive significance to her experience, her space of confinement, and her space of refuge. In doing so, she demonstrates the utility of reimagined mappings of North American space that reveal the constructed nature of borders, while showing how the continuities between colonial and national history continue to structure modern Western life.

Neil Roberts tells us, “marronage is a normative concept forged in a historical milieu, yet,” due largely to the ideological and practical continuities between the eras of slavery and mass incarceration, the term has “trans-historical utility.”⁷ In short, marronage retains its utility as a framework by which to analyze Black life in the Americas because Black freedom has been restrictive and elusive. Given that for Africans in the Americas, “the desire to leave the place of oppression for... a new land,” is “rooted in maroonage,”⁸ marronage will continue to serve as a useful framework by which to view Black resistance strategies, so long as Black economic, social, and political oppression remains a reality. In order to locate Assata Shakur within this framework, it is necessary to show the trans-historical links between her experience and that of maroons. I will focus this section on Shakur’s experience of

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 4.

⁸ Robin Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 17.

confinement to demonstrate the terrifying trans-historical conditions under which Black bodies have been surveilled, controlled, and punished.

In order to understand how Shakur could liken her experience in U.S. confinement to slavery, it is worth investigating some of the tactics used against her by the state and comparing these across time. In her autobiography, Shakur opens with a shocking example of the terrorizing actions used against her by agents of the state. After being shot several times and taken to the hospital, Shakur was wheeled into a dark room and placed next to the dead body of her good friend and political comrade, Zayd Malik Shakur. As she realized the horror of the scene before her, she was told by a trooper, “that’s what’s gonna happen to you before the night is over if you don’t tell us what we want to know.”⁹ As horrifying and disturbing as this encounter was, it was a common practice used by the slavocracy to intimidate and control slaves and maroons.

Among the punishments slaveholders reserved for would-be maroons Alvin Thompson identifies, “terror, physical abuse, prolonged solitary confinement, separation from family, social degradation and humiliation.”¹⁰ While Shakur undoubtedly faced several of these forces, it is significant that Thompson goes on to note that, “even the dead (or rather their bodies) were often subject to exemplary ‘punishments’ by displaying them in public places... in order to intimidate would-be deserters.”¹¹ The display of dead bodies as a terror tactic to control Black populations and crush resistance was developed under slavery, but as Shakur’s

⁹ Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987), 6.

¹⁰ Alvin Thompson, *Flight to Freedom: African Runaways and Maroons in the Americas* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 161.

¹¹ Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 167.

experience demonstrates the practice continued well beyond the demise of slavery as an economic system. Given the historical roots of racial terror in slavery, it is fitting that Shakur should see her resistance to these forces in terms that resonate with its origins.

Beyond this singular tactic, the U.N. Commission on Human Rights found that during her time in confinement Shakur spent, “over twenty months in solitary confinement in two separate men’s prisons subject to conditions totally unbecoming any prisoner.”¹² Solitary confinement is another of the tactics of punishment outlined by Thompson, and he goes on to note that dungeons “were constructed on all plantations in the French Caribbean that had more than 150 enslaved persons.”¹³ Thus solitary confinement is another legacy of the slavocracy that Shakur was forced to contend with. While solitary confinement is a form of torture that is often considered a human rights violation, other, perhaps more routinized, forms of plantation control continue to live on in the prison system in ways that have gendered, as well as racial, historical resonance.

When she was moved to Riker’s Island prison, Shakur was subject to the routine sexual violation that is part and parcel of both the prison and plantation systems. Shakur knew about the process of strip searches from other Panthers who had been imprisoned, and when she asked what happened to those who refused the search she was told, “they lock you in the hole and they don’t let you out until you consent to be searched internally.”¹⁴ According to Shakur, the threat of solitary was

¹² Shakur, *An Autobiography*, 66.

¹³ Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 167.

¹⁴ Shakur, *An Autobiography*, 83.

enough to coerce her into granting the search, “I thought about refusing, but i sure as hell didn’t want to be in the hole. I had had enough of solitary. The ‘internal search’ was as humiliating and disgusting as it sounded.”¹⁵ Here we see Shakur’s experience with what could easily fit into the categories of humiliation and physical abuse, yet it also brings in a gendered dimension to punishment that Thompson’s analysis neglects; the threat of rape or sexual violence.

In her published interviews in *Abolition Democracy*, Angela Davis asks us to imagine a scene where,

“uniforms are replaced with civilian clothes... then the act of strip searching would look exactly like the sexual violence that is experienced by the prisoner... In the case of vaginal and rectal searches... this continuum of sexual violence is even more obvious.”¹⁶

With this simple call for empathy, Davis reveals how institutionalized practices of sexual abuse, rooted in slavery, are rerouted and reinscribed in modern penal culture. The sexual invasion and humiliation imprisoned women experience is seen as a necessary routine, just as the abuse and humiliation enslaved women were subjected to was not considered rape by the dominant ideological and legal structures of the time. It is crucial that we examine these continuities between slavery and mass incarceration if we are to understand the basis for Assata Shakur’s configuration of herself as a maroon slave.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Angela Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 62.

Understanding the links between U.S. mass incarceration and the slave past exposes how ideologies and practices born in colonial institutions continue to shape modern society. Because the modes of confinement, surveillance, and punishment of Black bodies continue to function in our current political and social structures, the models for resistance to these forces remain salient. Thus, Shakur's trans-historical self-construction as a maroon positions her as a "political criminal according to the state law, but a freedom fighter according to natural law."¹⁷ The next section will unpack a particular mode of maroon resistance in relation to Shakur's experience. By focusing on Shakur's use of borders as a means of escaping surveillance and confinement, she will be put in conversation with other borderland maroons who manipulated national boundaries in ways that subverted the dominant reading of borders as natural divisions between distinct peoples.

Maroons as Borderlands Actors

Borderlands are spaces where power is projected and contested in a never ending tension between the ambitions of state actors and marginalized groups on the ground. While surveillance and violence are definite features of the borderlands, actors on the ground challenge these expressions of state power by using the border as a means to evade capture or secure protection from state violence. As ambiguous sites where "boundaries are also crossroads," and "stories take unpredictable turns and rarely end as expected,"¹⁸ borderlands scholarship provides a useful

¹⁷ Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 160.

¹⁸ Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, "On Borderlands," *The Journal of American History* 98 (2011), 339.

methodology for understanding the actions of racially marginalized groups. Maroon slaves are one of the most prominent examples of marginal actors who have challenged state power at the border through manipulation of state sovereignty and counterhegemonic meaning making. By investing borders with a significance directly tied to their freedom, escaped slaves, like Assata Shakur, have consistently and defiantly viewed borders not as fixed boundaries, but as “a gateway from oppression to freedom.”¹⁹

To understand how and why maroons have been some of history’s most persistent border crossers, it is essential to recognize national borders as “political constructs, imagined projections of territorial power,” where people oftentimes, “take advantage of borders in ways that are not intended or anticipated by their creators.”²⁰ As projections of territorial power, borders represent both the reach of a state’s power as well as the limits of that power. In the case of maroons, borders mark hard distinctions in legal systems that slaves have attempted to manipulate in their own interests, even as they simultaneously treat the physical space as porous and permeable. Thus, the meanings that maroons have historically attached to borderlands spaces run counter to hegemonic readings of borders as fixed demarcations of where one does, or does not, belong.

¹⁹ Karl Jacoby, “Between North and South: The Alternative Borderlands of William H. Ellis and the African American Colony of 1895,” in *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History*, ed. Samuel Truett and Elliot Young (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 218.

²⁰ Michiel Baud and Willem Van Schendel, “A Comparative Approach to Boderlands,” in *Major Problems in the History of North American Borderlands*, ed. Pekka Hämäläinen and Benjamin H. Johnson (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012), 3.

The history of slavery in the Texas-Mexico Borderlands is particularly illustrative of the counterhegemonic readings of borders that maroons have employed to aid them in their quest for freedom. According to Sean Kelley, enslaved Texans “invested the border with liberationist significance,”²¹ that induced many slaves to flee South of the border to escape a life of servitude. The liberationist significance that enslaved Black people attached to the border was the result of divergent policies on slavery between North and South. In the “interpretive communities” of Texas slaves Mexico was seen as a land of freedom, and thus, “the drawing of a clear border between slavery and non-slavery only inspired more flight toward the Rio Grande.”²² As the legal and political boundaries between the two nations solidified following the incorporation of Texas into the United States, the border actually became more porous for exploited laborers who saw greater opportunity on the other side under a different, and seemingly more egalitarian, sovereignty.

In the case of Assata Shakur, the ideological, geographic, and geopolitical boundaries between the U.S. and Cuba would at first appear to be impediments to her crossing between the two nations. However, James David Nichols argues that, “when boundaries ossify spatial divides, they sometimes reveal essential ideological distinctions between one place and another,” and, “as a result, borders can provide

²¹ Sean Kelley, “Slavery and the Texas-Mexico Border, 1810-1860,” in *Major Problems in the History of North American Borderlands*, ed. Pekka Hämäläinen and Benjamin H. Johnson (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012), 322.

²² Ibid

clear alternatives to mobile peoples.”²³ For Shakur, it is clear that the ideological distinctions between the U.S. and Cuba have actually improved her chances of surviving in these alternative borderlands. Providing asylum to Shakur has given Cuba the chance to assert its sovereignty within a relationship often marked by imperialist posturing by the U.S. Furthermore, the absence of an extradition agreement between the two countries is a key legal protection that Shakur has been able to manipulate to her advantage. Cuba’s position is akin to the role Mexico played in the lives of enslaved Texans before the Civil War when “Mexico rejected all efforts to negotiate a treaty permitting the extradition of escaped slaves back to the United States.”²⁴ Maroons in both instances were well aware of the imperialistic history, and subsequent political divides, between the U.S. and its Southern neighbors. Maroons skillfully manipulated these national antagonisms to create spaces in the nations of the south, which they endowed with liberatory significance, where they could escape surveillance and confinement in the United States.

Despite maroons’ ability to manipulate national borders to their advantage, the maroon’s life was in constant danger from agents of the slavocracy determined to revoke their newly won freedom. It would be impossible to fully connect Shakur’s experience to these figures without this linkage, and indeed Shakur has lived a tenuous existence marked by official attempts to return her to confinement in the U.S. Her experience in the borderlands is both a testament to her determination and

²³ James David Nichols, “The Line of Liberty: Runaway Slaves and Fugitive Peons in the Texas-Mexico Borderlands,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 44 (2013): 433.

²⁴ Jacoby, “Between North and South,” 217.

creative reimagining of space, as well as to U.S. efforts to ignore Cuban sovereignty and recover its escaped slave.

In his sweeping examination of marronage, Alvin Thomspson claims that “bounties on captured and killed Maroons were an important aspect of the authoritarian state’s strategy to destroy their communities.”²⁵ Bounties were an effective part of capturing maroons because they effectively deputized all free individuals to kill or apprehend escaped slaves. In the borderlands this policy held true, despite disputes around extradition and the mobility of slave catchers. While Mexico officially refused to return escaped slaves, bounty hunters were quite active and, “most towns along the border suffered at least one attack from a slave hunter in pursuit of a runaway.”²⁶ While Shakur remains safe in her “palenque,” this is a testament to Cuba’s ability to enforce its borders rather than American respect for Cuban sovereignty or Shakur’s asylum status.

On the fortieth anniversary of Shakur’s alleged crime, the FBI elevated her to their Ten Most Wanted Terrorist list and increased the bounty on her to 1 million dollars.²⁷ In an interview with Democracy Now! after the release of this information, Angela Davis pointed out that, “actually this is an invitation for anyone to travel to Cuba illegally and to kidnap her... if not to shoot her dead.”²⁸ The bounty on Shakur functions in the same way that bounties on Maroons functioned historically. By reducing her to simply a sum of money available to anyone willing to commit an act

²⁵ Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 154.

²⁶ Nichols, “Line of Liberty,” 427.

²⁷ FBI website, https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/wanted_terrorists.

²⁸ Angela Davis, “Angela Davis and Assata Shakur’s Lawyer Denounce FBI’s Adding of Exiled Activist to Terrorists List.” Democracy Now!

of violence, the state has attempted to deputize common citizens to do its dirty work.

Years before her addition to the terrorist list Shakur was well aware of the bounty on her, and the historical resonance behind it. In her piece in the *Crisis* in 2000, Shakur quoted a member of the New Jersey police who aired the idea that “there are individuals out there; I guess they call themselves ‘soldiers of fortune’ who might be interested in doing something, in turning her over to us.”²⁹ Shakur forcefully called out this invitation to violence for what it was, saying, “well, in the old days they used to call them slave catchers, trackers or patterrollers; now they call them mercenaries.”³⁰ By calling attention to the continuity between her bounty and the bounties imposed on maroons, Shakur reaffirms the links between forms of social control under slavery and her own experience. Unlike maroons in the Texas-Mexico borderlands however, Cuba’s Revolutionary history of asserting its sovereignty against the U.S. has provided Shakur with a level of protection unmatched by a land based, loosely administered borderland.

While the freedom that maroons have been able to make for themselves by manipulating national sovereignty offer inspiring stories of resistance, despite their limitations, there is also an often-overlooked ambivalence to this freedom. In the act of escaping oppression, maroons also had to separate themselves from their homes, their families, and their previous lives. In his oft-cited interaction with an escaped slave in the Northern Mexican borderlands, Frederick Law Olmstead reported that a

²⁹ Assata Shakur, “Profiled and on the Run,” *The Crisis*, November/December, 2000, 25.

³⁰ Ibid.

Black Virginian ex-slave that he talked to “would like right well to see old Virginia again, that he would-*if he could be free*.”³¹ This text is the most common piece of evidence tying escaped slaves to the U.S.-Mexico border, yet this particular passage is rarely reflected on. Although a small part of Olmstead’s narrative, it gives us a glimpse into the inner life of this Black man that Olmstead felt compelled to write about, but not to identify by name. What it reveals is an irony about the nature of freedom through flight. While this man had increased his mobility, economic prospects, and removed himself from the terror of slavery, he still felt a deep attachment to his former home. Pain of separation is an inevitable, yet often ignored, aspect of marronage, and it is one of the key aspects of Assata Shakur’s experience in Cuba tying her to this history.

Assata Shakur identifies separation as an essential feature of being African in the Americas. In her 1998 interview with Christian Parenti, Shakur reflects, “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.’”³² For Shakur, exile meant not only separation from the land in which she was born, it meant the inability to be with her young daughter, her aging mother and grandmother, and her political comrades. In a piece published in 2000, Shakur poignantly shares, “the pain of being torn away from everybody I love... I have never had the opportunity to see or hold my grandchild... the way I have suffered in my

³¹ Frederick Law Olmstead, “Journey Through Texas,” in *Major Problems in the History of North American Borderlands*, ed. Pekka Hämäläinen and Benjamin H. Johnson 307-308 (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012), 308.

³² Christian Parenti, “Postmodern Maroon in the Ultimate Palenque,” *Peace Review* 10 (1998): 421.

lifetime, only God can bear witness to.”³³ Separation from family, friends, and community is one of the essential features of marronage that is too often ignored by historians who piece these stories together, often without direct input from the actors they study. The hints from Olmstead’s account suggest that many maroons shared this experience, and clearly this has been one of the most difficult aspects of exile for Shakur. In the quest to find “a place where freedom means something,”³⁴ Shakur, and her maroon ancestors before her, have had to make tremendous personal sacrifices as they performed a complex counter-reading of space and sovereignty.

Assata Shakur as Borderlands Figure

In Selma and San Juan.
Mozambique. Mississippi.
In Brazil and in Boston,
We carried it on...
Carried on the tradition.
Carried a strong tradition.
Carried a proud tradition.
Carried a Black tradition.³⁵

Assata Shakur, excerpt from “The Tradition,” in *Assata: An Autobiography*

Assata Shakur’s story is as often invoked by right-wing ideologues who want to connect Castro’s Cuba with “terrorism,” as it is by those on the left who point to the dubious circumstances surrounding her arrest as evidence of the government’s foul play during the era of Cold War repression. The continuous telling and retelling of her story in the United States is important for keeping alive the memory of a figure that continues to have relevance to contemporary domestic issues. While the

³³ Shakur, “Profiled and on the Run,” 25.

³⁴ Shakur, “Eyes of the Rainbow.”

³⁵ Shakur, *An Autobiography*,

focus on her trial and unjust imprisonment is certainly well warranted given its relevance to the government's odious COINTELPRO operations against domestic dissent, even this narrative obscures the fact that almost half of her life has been spent in Cuba. By omitting this significant portion of Shakur's adult life, the terms of the popular debate over Shakur's memory prevent the full examination of her resistance to state violence.

Analyzing Shakur's exile from a borderlands perspective forwards her experience living out this exile, and gives weight to "the mental categories with which people have historically made sense of their worlds."³⁶ Looking at the diasporic history of marronage that Shakur drew on in her "creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it,"³⁷ reveals how her racial consciousness allowed her to reimagine her identity in shifting national spaces. It is Shakur's liminal existence where "neither home nor exile serve as the privileged site of identity formation,"³⁸ that firmly establishes her identity in the borderlands. Shakur's Black internationalist perspective at once opposed U.S. domestic and foreign policies that inflicted violence on populations of color, while simultaneously contesting colorblind Revolutionary Cuban racial discourse rooted in nationalist myths of *mestizaje*. Additionally, Shakur's diasporic consciousness has allowed her to adopt aspects of Cuban culture that connect her to her African

³⁶ Jared Orsi, "Construction and Contestation: Toward a Unifying Methodology for Borderlands History," *History Compass* 12 (2014): 433.

³⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987), 81.

³⁸ Stephens, "Black Political Space," 172.

ancestor while retaining important ties to African American communities of struggle.³⁹

In an interview with Gloria Rolando in her film, "Eyes of the Rainbow," Shakur discusses how the Black Liberation Movement's racial lens by which it critiqued U.S. imperialist policies in the Third World positioned it as a threat to the U.S. government. Along with the war in Vietnam and the blockade against Cuba, Shakur says that the Panthers vehemently "opposed the United States' policies of supporting Apartheid in South Africa."⁴⁰ Shakur and the Panthers demonstrated their commitment to international Black solidarity through their outspoken critiques of U.S. foreign policies that supported the global subjugation of people of color. The conflicting stance toward Apartheid is a particularly glaring example of how Cuban and the U.S. foreign policy diverged, and how the actions of the respective governments influenced Shakur's identification with, or denunciation of, the nations.

In a 1988 interview with Essence Magazine, Shakur discussed her time in Cuba and what she thought about the socialist nation compared to the United States. Tellingly, one of the first things Shakur mentions when talking about the adjustment to life in Cuba is the Cuban involvement in Southern Africa. "If for no other reason," Shakur said, "the fact that I saw Cubans who were willing to risk their lives to fight against the racism of the South African regime made me love Cuba and made me

³⁹ I use the term "African American" to refer to Black people in the United States. Unless otherwise noted I use "Black" to refer to people of African descent regardless of nationality.

⁴⁰ Shakur, "Eyes of the Rainbow."

love Cubans.”⁴¹ Shakur is referencing the Cuban involvement in Angola’s independence war where Cuban troops were key to defeating the Portuguese colonizers, who received support from South Africa and the United States. Shakur’s Black internationalist philosophy, and its dovetail with Cuba’s Revolutionary interventionist foreign policy, meant that her space of refuge provided her with the novel experience of “find(ing) myself in a place where I agreed with the government.”⁴² While Shakur found Cuba’s foreign policy in accord with her own world views encompassing Black solidarity and liberation, this should not suggest that she suddenly became Cuban. Rather, her subtle challenges to Cuba’s domestic racial ideology firmly establishes her identity within a borderlands framework where she has developed “a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity.”⁴³

While Cuba offered Shakur both a refuge from violence and a political atmosphere more conducive to her worldviews, the essentially colorblind nature of Cuban official racial discourse was unpalatable to Shakur’s deeply rooted Black identity. In her time in Cuba, Shakur adopted aspects of the African culture that she saw as “reclaiming just another piece that was stolen from me.”⁴⁴ By identifying with the Afro-Cuban culture that she was exposed to in Cuba, and recognizing it as essentially African rather than Cuban, Shakur not only overcame the United States’ efforts to alienate her from her ancestral heritage, she also resisted Cuban national narratives that “avoid... the subject of race in order to maintain a form of

⁴¹ Cheryll Greene, “Word From A Sister in Exile,” *Essence*, February, 1988, 62.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 79.

⁴⁴ Shakur, “Eyes of the Rainbow.”

harmonious social coexistence.”⁴⁵ By appropriating the Cuban language of marronage and expanding its utility to encompass her own twentieth century transnational exile, Shakur contested the Cuban national narrative of race that consigned its significance to the colonial period.

As alluded to earlier, Shakur’s Panther internationalism grounded in a global Black identity ultimately separates her from the masses of Cubans who, while boasting a population among whom about half have African ancestry, do not generally have a strong racial identification. In the short time Shakur spends in her autobiography discussing Cuba, she includes a perplexing encounter in which she explains to her Afro-Cuban friend that it is “the duty of Africans everywhere on this planet to struggle to reverse the historical patterns created by slavery and imperialism.”⁴⁶ While her friend agreed with the assertion, “he quickly informed me that he didn’t think of himself as an African. ‘Yo soy Cubano.’”⁴⁷ Here Shakur was confronted with the fact that many Cubans of African descent do not think of themselves in the racialized terms so common to Black people across the Anglophone world. She reflects that, “the Black pride movement had been very important in helping Black people in the u.s. and in other English-speaking countries to view their African heritage in a positive light.”⁴⁸ Since Cuba lacked an analogous movement committed to reversing historical patterns of racism, Shakur felt that

⁴⁵ Esteban Morales Domínguez, *Race in Cuba: Essays on the Revolution and Racial Inequality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013), 28.

⁴⁶ Shakur, *An Autobiography*, 270.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Shakur, *An Autobiography*, 271.

Afro-Cubans were deprived of the solidarity of resistance at the core of her own identity and experience.

Shakur's maroon identity contests Revolutionary Cuba's official racial rhetoric which declares that race is no longer a salient factor in contemporary Cuban life. One of the key ways that the Revolution has propagated a narrative of racial equality and suppressed difference is by relegating racism to a colonial past wiped away by the triumph of the Revolution. In the section "Cuba's Record" in Fidel Castro's "Second Declaration of Havana," he briefly mentions race only to play up the role of the Revolution in "suppressing discrimination due to race or sex."⁴⁹ While Castro elides the role of Blacks in bringing about the Revolution, he makes it a point to include them as a group that has benefitted from the Revolution. This passage exemplifies the official Cuban goal of incorporating Black subjects into the Revolution, while simultaneously suppressing any sort of racial identification that might fracture national unity in the face of North American hostility.

In his examination of Cuban racial discourse and politics, Alejandro de la Fuente claims that under the Revolution, "racism was presented as an undesirable legacy of the colonial and 'semicolonial' past, one that had been wiped out with the obliteration of 'privileges' and class differences."⁵⁰ Thus, Revolutionary Cuban discourse has refuted the salience of race within the Revolution by framing racism as a problem of a bygone colonial era. The idea of Cuba as a racially inclusive nation was crucial to the Revolutionary state's legitimacy, but it is important to note that

⁴⁹ Fidel Castro, *The Second Declaration of Havana* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1962), 14.

⁵⁰ Alejandro de la Fuente, "Race, National Discourse, and Politics in Cuba: An Overview," *Latin American Perspectives* 25 (1998): 61.

this discourse was an outgrowth of mestizo conceptions of nationhood that had their roots in the early formation of Cuban nationalism.

Revolutionary Cuba's colorblind racial ideology built on longstanding nationalist narratives developed during Cuba's republican period when "Cuba was reconstructed as a mulatto or mestizo nation."⁵¹ The mestizo construction of the nation opened up important spaces of inclusion for Afro-Cubans, yet this same ideology portrayed racial identification or consciousness as unpatriotic and anti-Cuban. Shakur's reaction to Cuban notions of mulatto identity underscores how her racial consciousness, forged in the U.S, was at odds with official Cuban racial discourse. According to Shakur, "the first time someone called me a 'mulatta,'" she was furious, and as soon as she learned enough Spanish she informed people, "I'm not a mulatto, but a Black woman, and I'm proud to be Black."⁵² While some Cubans understood the distinction she was making, others were put off by her concern with racial identity. Shakur's rejection of the Cuban term 'mulatto' is an illuminating counterpoint to her adoption of the Cuban term 'cimarrón.' What it points to is the salience of historical resonances in her construction of a diasporic identity.

Shakur's conclusion "that the mulatto thing hindered Cubans from dealing with some of the negative ideas left over from slavery,"⁵³ reveals the importance of historical trajectories in determining what aspects of Cuban culture Shakur would incorporate into her diasporic identity, and which ones she would reject. While in Cuba 'mulatto' is not considered derogatory, and is in fact central to the nation's

⁵¹ Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth Century Cuba*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001, 3.

⁵² Shakur, *An Autobiography*, 271.

⁵³ Ibid.

self-representation, Shakur's Black female identity rejected this aspect of Cuban racial ideology. In Shakur's mind, the mulatto label not only precluded any sort of Afro-Cuban solidarity, it was also "impossible to separate the word from its history."⁵⁴ While to Cubans, "'mulatto' was just a color, like red, green, or blue," for Shakur, "all of my associations with the word 'mulatto' were negative. it represented slavery, slave owners raping Black women."⁵⁵ Shakur's experience of confinement in the U.S. influenced her alternate rejection and adoption of particular Cuban racial signifiers. Because her experience with sexual invasion and humiliation in the prison system gave her a visceral connection to the experiences of slave women, Shakur's gendered reading of the history of the term 'mulatto' caused her to reject the label. Alternatively, her escape from these slave-like conditions provided the basis for her to attach a particular significance to the Cuban term 'cimarrón.'

Within Cuba's deeply rooted ideology of racial harmony, the figure of the maroon plays an interesting role. While seen as "a source of Cuban character," the "cimarrón was held at a historical distance."⁵⁶ As a figure from the colonial era, the maroon (Cimarron in Spanish) is held up as an example of Cuban resistance to Spanish colonial oppression, but not necessarily as a figure of resistance to white supremacy. Cubans of all colors are called on to identify with the maroon, while simultaneously encouraged to think of the figure as a relic of the colonial era with no contemporary relevance to an island liberated from its subjugated past. Shakur, on the other hand, not only sees the maroon as relevant to her own experience; she

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Kristina Wirtz, *Performing Afro-Cuba: Image, Voice, Spectacle in the Making of Race and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 249.

makes this figure of Black resistance and mobility central to her diasporic identity. In centering her identity around this figure from the slavery era, but taking it out of the context in which the state frames it, Shakur challenges Cuba's colorblind national discourse, "transgressing the entire frame" of "the folkloric effort to keep such presences safely contained in the past."⁵⁷ By rejecting the folkloricized version of marronage that consigns it to a bygone era, Shakur has successfully appropriated Cuban language to craft a relevant identity for herself that reflects her experience of resistance against racialized oppression in the Americas.

By discovering aspects of the African past, such as dance, music, and religion that have been preserved in Cuba, Shakur has redefined her Black identity. At the same time, her life in Cuba should not suggest a clean break from U.S. communities of struggle in which she once participated. As discussed earlier, Shakur feels a deep sense of loss in being separated from her family, friends, and comrades in North America. The borderlands dimensions of Shakur's consciousness allow her to tolerate the ambiguity of opposing the U.S. state while feeling deeply connected to particular U.S. spaces, and to imagine herself within a diasporic community outside the purview of a particular national-state. Thus the maroon, as a figure with transnational diasporic significance, becomes a way to imagine a Black identity irrespective of national context, allowing Shakur to remain opposed to the U.S. state while firmly grounded in a Black U.S. community of struggle.

Like the escaped slave that Olmstead interviewed so long ago, Shakur has increased her mobility and improved her life through flight. Yet despite this newly

⁵⁷ Ibid.

won freedom, there is a persistent sense of camaraderie with those who have been left behind. Shakur is clear about what she misses about the U.S. "I don't... miss the U.S., *per se*. But black culture, black life in the U.S., that African American flavor... The language, the movements, the style, I get nostalgic about that."⁵⁸ Shakur reveals here that she does indeed miss aspects of the U.S., specifically the Black culture that has been forged in the same conditions which helped shape her racial consciousness. In Shakur's diasporic interpretation of space, the U.S. is coded as a place of violence and oppression. Yet these very conditions of separation and discrimination have produced the unique forms and spaces of African American resistance that she found so inspiring, dynamic, and beautiful as a young woman.

Cuba has exposed Shakur to a new perspective on the dimensions and salience of diaspora, enriching her understanding of being African in the Americas. Yet its lack of racial consciousness deprived her of the feelings of solidarity that emerge as a form of resistance to racial oppression. Shakur misses the small, quotidian forms of solidarity that form a part of being Black within a racist society. She says, for instance, "I miss the look of recognition Black women give each other, the understanding we express without saying a word."⁵⁹ Flight has removed Shakur from the conditions of surveillance, confinement, and violence that characterized her life in the U.S., yet it has also deprived her of the sense of common cause she shared with African Americans. While Cuba has facilitated a rediscovery of pieces of her African past, its colorblind ideology has suppressed an aspect of African life in

⁵⁸ Parenti, "Postmodern Maroon," 421.

⁵⁹ Nisa Muhammad, "Former Black Panther Assata Shakur Speaks to America from Cuba," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 13, 2002, 4.

the Americas that Shakur feels is just as important as cultural pride; solidarity in struggle.

Conclusion

Assata Shakur has reimagined her Black identity within a diasporic history of resistance to state power based on her experiences of confinement in the U.S. and her exile in Cuba. Shakur's identification with maroons such as "Nanny in Jamaica who fought against the enslavers" and "Harriet Tubman who helped to free more than seven hundred slaves,"⁶⁰ points to both the transnational historical resonance of marronage and her own ability to reconceptualize African American resistance within this diasporic tradition. According to Shakur, when she was growing up in the United States, Harriet Tubman "had symbolized everything that was Black resistance for me. But it had never occurred to me that hundreds of Black people had got together to fight for their freedom."⁶¹ Once in exile, Shakur was exposed to Cuba's history of slave revolt, marronage, and used this discourse to bring her childhood hero, as well as her own identity, into a diasporic framework. Juxtaposing Tubman with Jamaica's Grandy Nanny as maroons she has drawn inspiration from illustrates how Shakur's transnational experience provided her with the imaginative tools to "map a new world geography and world history, one which begins in the colonial world rather than in the once imperial metropolises."⁶²

The conceptual lens of the borderlands reveals how Shakur was able to reimagine herself and her spaces of confinement and exile. By using sovereign

⁶⁰ Shakur, "Eyes of the Rainbow."

⁶¹ Shakur, *An Autobiography*, 175.

⁶² Stephens, "Black Political Space," 170.

borders to elude confinement and contest state power, Shakur's flight across the boundaries of the United States resonates with the tactics of resistance employed by her enslaved ancestors. The border figures prominently in Shakur's ability to resist state power, but Shakur's adoption of the diasporic maroon identity while in exile also indicates the relevance of "*border mentalities* helpful in describing not just settlements but also movements across borders—identity formations that occur in the act of migration between two or more places."⁶³ A prominent example of Shakur's border mentality and reimagining of American space is her language. Not only is she bilingual due to her residence in Cuba, Shakur adopts interesting capitalization and spelling choices in her writing. For instance, the United States is referred to as "amerika," Black is capitalized, she writes "i" in lower case, and Cuba is capitalized. Though not a primary focus in this study, Shakur's oppositional grammar is another interesting example of her symbolic political language, and it more fully positions her within the alternative space of the borderlands where "ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity."⁶⁴

Shakur's borderlands identity, or border mentality, is most obviously manifested in her continued interest in and connection to African American communities of struggle. However, her resistance to state discourse in both the U.S. and Cuba has created complex circumstances. Shakur has rejected official Cuban racial discourse, including being called a "mulatta," but revered Cuba's ability to incorporate African practices into its national culture. Additionally, despite her antipathy towards the U.S. nation-state, Shakur remains committed to the African

⁶³ Stephens, "Black Political Space," 172.

⁶⁴ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 59.

American freedom struggle and retains an ironic attachment to particular U.S. spaces. Like Gloria Anzaldua's borderlands Chicana identity which "is grounded in the Indian woman's history of resistance,"⁶⁵ Shakur's maroon identity, grounded in a diasporic history of Black resistance, allows her to bridge these contradictions and create a new way of imaging space and self.

⁶⁵ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 21.

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