

Interview

Assata Shakur: "The Continuity of Struggle"

On May 2, 1973, three members of the Black Panther Party, including Assata Shakur, were stopped by state police officers on the New Jersey Turnpike. A gun battle ensued, leaving one state trooper and one Black Panther killed. According to Shakur, she was shot once with her hands in the air and was subsequently shot in the back while she was on the ground.

Shakur says, "Finally, when it was obvious that I was not going to die right then, I was taken to a hospital, where I was chained to a bed. I was beaten, tortured, kept incommunicado for four or five days, and I was denied any rights to see a lawyer." She was tried and found guilty of murder by an all-white jury, receiving a sentence of life, plus an additional thirty years and thirty days.

In all, Shakur spent a total of six years in U.S. prisons. During two of those years, she was held in solitary confinement inside a men's prison.

With outside assistance, Shakur managed to escape. After living underground for a time, she emerged in Cuba, where she was granted political asylum.

In 1998, the case of Assata Shakur returned to the headlines. New Jersey Republican governor Christine Todd Whitman launched a public relations campaign to "capture" Shakur and return her to the state to face imprisonment. Writing to the State Department, Governor Whitman requested that the U.S. government should refuse to "normalize" relations with Cuba so long as Shakur was

permitted to live there. A bounty of \$50,000 was offered by the State of New Jersey for anyone who could secure her return to the state.

Hundreds of African-American leaders and activists were outraged by the attempt to extradite Shakur from Cuba. In a public statement of support, a group of black supporters declared that

the stellar example of Assata's commitment to the liberty of people of African descent in the United States places her in the company of not only Harriet Tubman but also Paul Robeson, Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcolm X, and the thousands of other known and unknown warriors in the fight for the liberation of black people in the United States. . . . Assata is our Sister and we stand in absolute solidarity with her right to live free from bondage in Cuba.

During the Columbia University African-American Studies delegation's visit to Cuba in June 1997, we had the opportunity to meet with Assata several times. The following interview was recorded late one evening, as part of a lively marathon conversation between Cubans and black Americans. What comes through in this transcript is the intelligence and creativity of an activist who retains a passionate commitment to social justice for her people.

M.M.

All Go on Survival: Race and Revolution

When I came to Cuba, at first people were very reluctant to deal or to talk about race, to talk about racism. You could talk to anybody; they would say, "Well, there is no such thing. It's been eliminated." And what I think they meant was that all laws that upheld segrega-

tion in terms of housing and neighborhoods had been virtually eliminated. That doesn't mean that some historic segregation doesn't exist. In other words, old Havana had a huge number of African people and all of them have not moved to other areas. In areas that were historically black, there are still a lot of black people living there. But I think that the nature

Portrait of Assata Shakur at her home in Cuba. Photo by Delphine A. Fawundu.

of neighborhoods has changed completely and areas that were completely white before are now very mixed.

Two seconds after the revolution took power, all hell broke loose, and they [revolutionary leaders] were under the gun on every side of the question. So the

issue was unity. The consciousness that existed at that time was the consciousness that pretty well existed all around the world, the U.S. included. In terms of socialist theory at that time, you [would] give everybody the right health care, education, etc., [and] the conditions were going to make racism automatically disappear. Also, what was considered racism at that time was "White Only" signs [or] being forbidden from work in certain places. So, those things having been eliminated, there was this perception of "all Cubans." The national character of Cuba was never considered unmixed; it was considered that there's no Cuban that's all European and there's no Cuban that's all African. It was a popular saying here, the saying that there were no pure whites in Cuba.

Of course Cuba inherited a racist mentality of white supremacy that existed for hundreds of years. This was one of the last places where slavery was abolished, in 1886. All the racist ideas that upheld slavery, that justified slavery, were present here. There was a systematic whitening process that was institutionalized in the Spanish form of colonialism. You could buy, for [a] certain amount of [money], a paper that declared you white. If you wanted to be a don or a doña, someone who had power in the



society, all you had to do was get a white father to say you didn't know who your mother was and you could buy a paper that purified your blood. Also, in order to work in certain areas if you were a so-called freed slave, you could work in [certain] areas if you had a paper that said you were white. And people bought those papers for their children so that their children could have a future.

Those attitudes did not disappear after the revolution. In fact, I think that many people felt that the revolution gave them more of a possibility. To many people, especially those who had college degrees, a white partner made them even much more of a contributor to the struggle against racism. I think that there was a whole sense of "Everything is going to be fine with Cubans together, white and black." [There was a feeling that] there were no differences until the Third Congress of the Cuban Communist Party, when Raúl and Fidel said that "Look, number one, the power structures in the country have got to reflect the ratio of the composition of the country." They talked about race, they talked about gender, and they also talked about young people. And there were changes made in terms of people being promoted to vice ministers. There were a lot of black vice ministers—and when I say that I'm



not saying it in a sarcastic way. I'm saying that the old guard, those who fought in the mountains, you don't get rid of those people easy. So it was a big shift, moving [black] people into positions [of power].

That movement, or that effort, was short-lived. It was short-lived in the sense that shortly thereafter the socialist camp in Europe started to crumble and the revolution was looking at basic, bare survival. It was life or death and they were up shit's creek without paddle, between a rock and a hard place. That was the reality. [Cubans] lost like 80-something percent of their ability to import and their ability to export. There was not enough of anything. The price of sugar was in the pits and controlled completely by capitalist markets. The socialist camp did not honor trade agreements with Cuba. Not only did they not honor agreements, but diplomatically, economically, they became hostile toward Cuba. And every other place said, "We don't owe you anything. And those papers that we signed? That's your problem." And that's the position that Cuba found itself in. All of the focus of the revolution for three, four, five years at the beginning of the Special Period was on survival. The [official] position was: "We don't have time to argue about anything else. One percent of nothing is nothing. One hundred percent of nothing is nothing. So right now we've got to preserve our revolution." And the perception of black people in Cuba was the same. It was, like: All go on survival.

A Boxing Ring, 24-7: Tourism and Cuba in the Global Economy

I don't think that any place in the history of the planet has ever built as many hotels, as many tourist installations, in the six years that we're talking about than Cuba has. Everything goes back on tourism. At the same time the focus on women, the focus on black people was, like, "That's not our problem. The problem is food, shelter, clothing." There was some discussion of affirmative action in the sense of "How do you have a policy of affirmative action when you don't have [anything]?" My position is that you can't. You cannot. If you do not have enough stuff for all the population, if you don't have enough food for the whole population, you cannot have an economic affirmative action program. But you can do things that make a difference. You can deal with the educational system. You can deal with the cultural aspects—what is on television, on radio. You can deal with how teachers, how professionals, are trained. There are things I believe that can be done.

As the tourist industry began to grow and prosper and as the joint ventures, the joint business ventures, began to become more and more common in Cuba, what I began to see was blondes in bikinis on all the travel brochures. The African people, when they were presented, were presented in the folklore mode, dressed up like *changó* with a knife between their teeth. There was a commercialization of the African religions. There was, and still is, a generalized perception by the public that corporations tend to have a preference for light-skinned Cubans. Tourism has brought all of these Europeans and South Americans and Mexicans with their racist ideas and the racist attitudes about the natives. And they come here, many of them, condoms in hand, looking for black pussy.

The Cuban government has really made an effort to try to promote what they call sane and

healthy family tourism. Easier said than done. They have either tried to make regulations for the hotels where Cubans had prostitutes [so that prostitutes] would have difficulty going into hotels. They tried to have health tourism, ecology tourism, political tourism, healing tourism—all kinds of tourism to try to evade the money tourism. People come down here with big money, with big money attitudes, and no respect for the people, no respect for the revolution. They're coming down here for sun, sand, women and men, or whatever. And so the change is evident. It is evident in my opinion not only [in that] the tourism is there [but in] attitudes. You will find young women who are proud of going out with an Italian, Spaniard, whatever. [You find] people who want to know them, befriend them, who want to rediscover their Spanish roots: the resurrection of the Galician Association, the Catalanian Association, the Spanish Club. Because people say, "I may get some money in this. Let me reestablish my connections." So the tourism industry makes a kind of attitude that does not do anything but reinforce white supremacist values, mentality, relations, and power relations. You don't see a lot of black tourists come into Cuba. It's economic, so that power is associated with white people. Those that speed around Havana in fast cars are white people. [Cubans] look at television, they look at U.S. films, and they are affected by all this. You can't see all this around you and be unaffected by it. So there is the tendency for people to feel, "Well, maybe Europe isn't so bad. Maybe the States aren't so bad."

I think it is a mistake to think that the attitudes around race are totally separated from the attitudes around class, around gender. The resurgence of the woman as a sex object is more and more easy to see. When I came to Cuba, there was a national pride that was: "We're Socialists." I'm not saying that that national pride has disappeared or evaporated, but what I am saying is that the contradictions that

are in the society are more evident. And you cannot have contradictions in how people live, what people see, without people having ideological problems, ideological questions. And the real bottom line is that when there are less crumbs on the table, the fight gets a little raunchy. The middle-management administrators in many cases tended to be white and not completely beyond helping each other at the expense of African people. I mean, they aren't going to come out and say that they're doing it. They try to hide it. They try to be slick about it. But there is in my opinion a group of white folks that look out for their own. Black folks are again observing, making sharper criticisms—and also in certain places dealing and saying, "Wait a minute. Hold on. There need to be changes. There need to be things that are addressed."

I believe that it would be historically impossible for this situation that I'm looking at now not to have occurred. I think it is historically inevitable because I think that when a country happens to put all its efforts on bare survival, they don't have time to rest. I mean, it's not like they're sitting there saying, "Oh my God, what do we talk about today?" This is basic survival with the raunchiest, most vicious enemy blockading you, trying to accelerate the blockade. You're trying to get a hand in but also at the same time trying to get an economic handle [and] that undermines the ideological, philosophical aspect of the revolution. Practically not one of the people investing in Cuba is doing so because they want to benefit and uphold the revolution. In a situation where [Cuba's] allies are the kind of allies that hang out with wolves and can barely make it to the UN to vote no on the blockade, it's been hard. This is no joke here. I mean, the U.S. has battered and bullied and knocked people down to the point that you got these whole little countries shaking in their boots. [These countries] will not even come out to make a [UN] vote unless everybody else has decided on it. In

terms of economic integration, the English-speaking Caribbean is still running after the queen, and French Caribbeans think they're French men and women, so we have a real sick situation in terms of the worldwide vision. So Cuba has had to really be in a boxing ring 24-7. When you're in a boxing ring, it doesn't give you a lot of space and time to sit and concentrate on your internal problems and solve them.

Our Communities Are Sick: Healing Alienation

I hope that the revolution at this moment will pay more attention to not just serving the health system, the education system, but [to] dealing with the democratic functions in the country and relating that to what is going on in terms of race, in terms of gender, in terms of class. Saturday night in Cuba they see movies, and usually the movies come from the States. You have to put on whatever films you can put on. And 99 percent of what comes out of the States or out of Brazil is ideological poison. People think that this is how life is. Someone thirty years ago said, "Wow, I want a nice house and I want a house to have a bedroom, a bathroom." Now they want a kitchen with a little island in it, a sunken tub, a house with a deck. This is the image of what, materially, people should aspire to. And so [you find] the problems of ideological struggle in terms of just changing the whole focus of Eurocentrist fuckers that are part of every education system.

If you were to take every book you ever read and put them in piles and put the European pile on one hand and the Latin American, the Asian piles, you know what a distorted picture you would have. So can you imagine that even though socialism has been able to do something to reduce the Eurocentrism, it has not been able to accomplish that much? The Soviets claimed they knew everything. [They

claimed] they had everything under control and had solved everything. Therefore, their line was "the line." And all this discussion about race was: You got a doctor, a free education and [racism] would evaporate. The Cubans got it from the West and they got it from the East. So that [now] they are faced with the task that every single country in the world with people of color [is] faced with: How can we de-Eurocentrize our system? Struggling against racism is I think very much connected to struggling to end Eurocentrism, [to end] the strict view that we can just take Marx and Engels and Lenin and have what they said become a coloring book—and we just color in the colors. I think that vision of social change is no longer applicable, if it ever was.

If we don't change the lifestyle that we are living right now—what we do in the morning to what we do at night, how we relate to other people, how our families are structured—I don't think we will be able to deal social justice. Because there's no way that this planet can offer a chicken in every pot, a computer in every den, a Mercedes-Benz in every garage. I don't think that the material reality exists on this planet for that. Our values and what we are fighting for have to change, and how we live and relate to each other has to change. The Cubans are looking at all this stuff. Anybody that is dealing with social change now better start looking at it. Because people are in a tremendous amount of pain, the pain is not just from not having enough food, not just [from not] having access to medical care. It is also because we have to live in [a] state of almost universal alienation. We do not have community. Our communities are sick. Our families are sick, and healing is needed in order for us to live in a society where we're not afraid to look somebody in the eyes and say good morning. We've got to change some real things other than material struggle. And so I think the world revolutionary movement, those

who are struggling to make social justice on this planet, have got to rethink a lot of things about where we're going to go in the next millennium. I think we have to rethink our material focus. I think we have to think about how we see ourselves and what vision is our vision of liberation.

Monsterism: Youth and the Culture of Violence

One of the problems I have with young people, they do not understand what we mean when we say we were fighting for freedom. A lot of times we cannot articulate what our vision of freedom is, so how can we expect them to continue something that we can't express? They're talking about the youth culture, the violence, and some people say that, "Well, rap creates violence." I think our consciousness creates what comes out of our mouths and what comes out of our mouths reflects our consciousness. Big business uses what comes out of young African people's mouths to pollute other young African people with ideas that are very capitalist. Most [rappers] are saying, "We want the shit, we want the sneakers, we want the gold, we want everything. You told us we can't have shit, so we're going to be gangsters." [They're] illegitimate capitalists. That is the only difference. They say, "You told us we could be capitalists, we could go to school. I can't get into school. I could barely make it in school, but I could sell these rocks out here and I could make it." You look at all the videos and you see models making \$50 a day shaking their butts around a swimming pool in a big old house, somebody with their pants hanging down and drawers sticking out, and people think that's keeping it real. That is selling the capitalist dream to people who cannot even sniff at it. They're going to jail and can't even make commissary money. I spent big time in

jail and I know what's in there. There ain't no Rockefellers or gangsters up there. But there is a dream that's being sold just like *The Godfather*.

We watch it on TV; we can't escape from it. Nor can we escape from monsterism. My daughter laughs at me because I'm scared. I look at some monster pictures and I get upset. I feel that these people who kill everybody just take over my consciousness for an hour and a half. And I'm, like, "Damn, how many monsters are these people going to create?" They got a human monster, animal monster, plant monster, mineral monster. It is a society that is innovative with monsters but is creating real live monsters. You know how little kids have baseball cards—you know, back in the old days, my day? Now they have mass murderer cards that kids trade. So the violence of the society is big business. And they're exporting it so that the Cubas of the world and any other process that wants to build a revolution has got not only to deal with the material—how you build a health clinic, how you do this—but: How do you build new values? How do you build new human relationships?

They talk about black women being with the families and stuff like that. And all I can think of is: If every guy walked off a video, if one day all these guys came talking, "Bitch, come get the money, ho, hood rat," etc., if all these guys walked off the videos and tried to marry somebody, can you imagine what the relationship would be like? Can you imagine that this is some way for human beings to live in and raise a family? I saw Snoop Doggy Dog, he was on video, and he had his little baby saying, "Hey, little motherfucker, pimp motherfucker." If we consider political change in more than a structural way, in more than a power way, I don't see how we're going to get social justice, 'cause who is going to live in the society of Snoop Doggy Dog?

Are You Part Whatever? The Limits of Multiculturalism

I think social change can't be limited to the way that we have approached things in the past. I think it's got to be related to a lot of healing, 'cause we got people out there that are just too crazy to struggle. I'm serious. We got a lot of crazy people out there, people out of their minds. And dysfunctional families. I'm not talking about dysfunctional families in terms of African families. I'm talking about a dysfunctional world and how you raise a sane family in a dysfunctional world. The racism in the United States right now, everything is a code word. It is a racist agenda. It's saying to you, "Segregation for another hundred years. We [gave you] some affirmative action that was never very active or very affirmative, we gave you some rights that weren't too civil or too right, so what you got to complain about? You better get a job even though there aren't any." I mean, our future is a serious one. I mean, they got African people in England and in Holland, they represent a small percentage of the population, and they've become the number one enemy. They have a country like Denmark where they have two Africans, and one of them has got a suitcase on the way out—and you got people there convinced that those two Africans are the problem!

So in the States what's happening now with the multiculturalism, everybody's talking about, "I'm part Egyptian and part whatever." And I appreciate people discovering that about themselves and discovering aspects of who they are. But that is not political activity. The police are not going to ask you as they shoot you down, "Oh, are you part whatever?" The census is not going to change the district 'cause you are one-fifth Cherokee or whatever.

I think that we have to take a new look at what globalization means in terms of gender is-

sues, in terms of race issues, and to rethink very seriously the kinds of not only structures that we deal with in terms of building social justice but the kinds of lives we live and the kinds of examples we're setting for those people who follow us. Because unless we make our lives as people who are dedicated to social change attractive so people are attracted to it, they feel good, they feel warm, they feel a sense of community, we're going to lose a majority of our youth. Because I think that in our style of political work, political activism has left a lot to be desired. I think a lot of people struggled for a lot of years without forming some kind of family or creating warm relationships. I think this has meaning. [Without this], I think we haven't discovered a new way of humanity.

Relating Politically and Personally: Toward a New Style of Politics

It's almost impossible for us not to have a double consciousness in terms of class, in terms of gender, our vision of family. Most of us go for what we know, and what we know is some historical model that is not applicable today. But we haven't been able to substitute all of it. We've substituted part of it. I mean, I can read whoever—Marx, this, that, and the other—then say, "Damn, I wish I was near a swimming pool." There is a bourgeois side to our consciousness because we were raised in a bourgeois society. I remember in the Seventies after we finished dissing everyone, we started talking about humanism and unity and democracy. Not only were we imitating Europeans—that's one thing—but we were unaware completely about our double consciousness, our internal contradictions, and of the pact we had individually of fighting against those things. Because you cannot fight against something that you don't talk about and you don't admit. [Back then], everybody was more revolutionary than everybody else and everybody's mind

was more correct than everybody else's. I think that this time if we talk about the things that shaped us, our values, etc., and they are full of contradiction, then we can start to go somewhere else and move to somewhere else. But the arrogance, the dishonesty that so many of us have had . . .

I don't mean we're bad people because of it, because I think it was a political style that we inherited. I thought being a good revolutionary was being like that or trying to be a talking head or . . . I had millions of powerful images of what being active in a movement for social change meant. Now I'm in another place in my life—and maybe this is a touchy-feely stage that I'm going through—but I like the idea of people relating politically and relating personally, of communion, coming together, having picnics, of people talking about themselves as human beings and not just about social change in the abstract. Because I think that what happens when you talk about social change in the abstract, what happens is that you see the social being in the theoretical phase as one type of being. [But] the diversity of the social being is almost infinite. And in order to take into consideration those small people who had different visions, who have different needs, who have different whatever from the big picture, we have to stop and sympathize in terms of the social relationships we're trying to create. Because I don't think that the general is enough.

Change Is a Way of Life: Looking to the Future

I also feel very optimistic. I think a lot of dead weight has been removed from the back of social change. Creativity is part of the struggle—it is one of the most important parts. When people talk about sacrifice—you know, sacrifices that people made in the Sixties—I feel almost very weird. Had I not become involved in

the struggle, I would be tagging along with some kind of needle stuck somewhere or some fate worse than that. So I think that the movement has done much more for me than I'll ever be able to do for the movement. [Even] with all of the boring, terrible, miserable experiences I've had, this has been a lifesaving experience intellectually, spiritually, socially. I don't think I would've met the kind of beautiful people I've been lucky enough to have met in life. So I feel very fortunate to have not *chosen* this path—but to have stumbled, fallen, into it.

I think the continuity of struggle is something we pay a lot more attention to in terms of being aware of people that struggled before. I think we have sometimes forgotten the continuity, thought that the struggle was going to be five minutes and, after, we could all go to the movies. I think that when we understand the world is not going to change in five minutes, we can be part of that change, and being part of that change is a way of life. It is something that I like. I look at the Clintons and, I mean, these are grotesque people. They really are. I just don't like them.

I'm one of those people who had to piece my life together with Band-Aids. And I mean that physically, mentally, and every other way. So I don't look at the U.S. as being my country. Maybe my daughter or my grand-something will look at it another way. I'm one of those people that has been alienated. I am a victim. I feel like Malcolm. And until there is another "Savior," my attitude is going to be the same. But I understand that this is a process, and what's going on with us has to become connected with what's going on in Africa, what's going on in the Caribbean. Because I do see us winning, not by ourselves and not with just looking at the United States as this isolated place, but looking at our African ancestors—whether they are in Cuba, whether they are here—and our spiritual ancestors, whoever they may be.

Poem

"Sierra Maestra"

Melba Joyce Boyd

*the macaw flew
three revolutions
around the avocado
meadows. the roaring
clouds fell into the ocean.
you retreated into
the purple shadows
of the Sierra Maestra,
behind the dark
curtains of Cubano Negroes
grazing on a covenant
with Taino ghosts.*

*you, Fidel and Raul
made camp
with words of Martí
and Guillen
in the black stronghold
of the sons and daughters
of slavery's long misery,
with history's avengers
biding time
between tobacco leaves
and sugar stalks
melding the flame
that lit the dark.*

*you ate the fire.
returned it
to the mother's belly,
the Congo,
where you braced
fingers with Lumumba
and disappeared into
smoke signals
sent to Angola.*

*for two years
assassins licked your*

*steps, filled
your tracks with arson,
plastered mouths
of peasants with
U.S. dollars and
food stamped
with red stripes.
they poisoned the rivers
where you fished.
they ran herds of
innocent sheep
over cliffs,
hounded your trail
into a calculated fate
at the crossroads
in Bolivia*

*it was 1967,
the year of the
Detroit Rebellion.
the calendar,
smoldering with
lit skies,
rebounded against
the North Star
onto your watch
seated in the high
grass wiping sweat
from your visage,
arms encircling
weary knees.
it was our
way to hold
you tightly,
to brace ourselves
in you before
the bullets lifted
you into the
dusty clouds.*

From *Letters to Ché* (Roosevelt, Mich.: Ridgeway Press, 1996), pp. 11-13.