

Freeing Assato



Introduction

Making this zine started for me as a vague desire to know how Assata Shakur escaped from prison. I had enjoyed reading her autobiography “Assata” and I was left wanting to know more. One chapter ends with her declaring that she was done with being locked up, and the next begins with her living in Cuba if I remember correctly. I mostly moved on, focusing on other things. More recently a friend mentioned that they had heard of a book about the Shakur family that went into the details of the liberation. The book in question was *An Amerikan Family: The Shakurs And The Nation They Created* by Santi Elijah Holley. I sought out the book and found a text that not only went into the details of Assata’s liberation but provided context about who all took part, the social movements and underground networks they were a part of and a whole set of histories that intrigued me.

I decided to only reprint the parts that explicitly deal with the liberation of Assata Shakur from prison and her transit to Havana, Cuba. The rest is worth reading in my opinion, as well as Assata’s own autobiography which gives context to Assata’s life path and freedom struggle, and Russel Maroon Shoatz’s *I Am Maroon* which also documents prison escapes, life on the run, and life underground from a Black liberation perspective. The idea that prisons are impenetrable, inescapable is demonstrably false and these histories are proof of that (as are the escapes that continue to take place today)! This bootleg reprint is only a snippet of a larger history of experimentation in collective and individual liberation that I feel Black anarchists and other revolutionaries could benefit from familiarizing ourselves with and learning from.

In the wake of the genocide taking place in Palestine at the hands of the zionist entity numerous calls have gone out for escalation and also — though less well circulated — for (re)building the underground in today’s movements for decolonization and liberation. Today’s undergrounds will look different from those of the 1970s and 1980s, yet there is still much we can learn from them. We are already seeing waves of

soldiers believed that by liberating Assata they would gain prestige for themselves while also recharging the moribund liberation struggle, they were soon disappointed. Few people outside of their immediate circle knew exactly who was responsible for the prison break. Even Kamau Bayette, who had been Mutulu’s loyal acolyte since training under him at Lincoln Detox, was kept out of the loop. After the escape, Bayette showed Mutulu and Mtayari Shabaka Sundiata a newspaper article reporting on the prison break. “This is a big thing that happened. I’m sure it’ll shake people up,” Bayette excitedly told the two men, not knowing that each of them had taken part.

Responsibility for Assata’s liberation was claimed by the Black Liberation Army, but this BLA bore little resemblance to the BLA that had been active nearly a decade earlier—not least because this new group consisted of several White people. Mutulu defended the use of Whites in the group. “Some of them are good people,” he told the others. “Some of the crackers really do help us out with jobs.”

**This group, referred to by the state and media as “the family,” consisted of various former Black Panthers, Black Liberation Army soldiers, members of the Weather Underground Organization, and other unaffiliated individuals. This network of people was involved in expropriations, establishing safe houses, and carrying out attacks.*

***Assata Shakur is a political fugitive living in Cuba. A veteran of the Black Liberation Army, and a former Black Panther, she was the subject of a series of high profile court cases where she was accused of robberies, attacks, the murder of a police officer, and being the leader of the Black Liberation Army.*

****The Black Liberation Army was a network of guerrilla cells that consisted of many former Black Panthers and others. They carried out robberies and attacks in support of the Black liberation struggle. They were most notorious for shooting police officers.*

*****Lincoln Detox was a political drug addiction treatment program in New York City run by members of the Young Lords, Black Panthers, members of the Republic of New Afrika, and other radicals and healers. Mutulu Shakur was a leading figure in Lincoln Detox and went on to be one of the pioneers of using acupuncture to treat heroin addiction.*

Members of the group that freed her, the so-called Family, gave her \$50,000—half of the proceeds from the Paramus armored truck robbery—and asked her what she wanted to do next, if she'd like to be set up with an apartment somewhere in the United States. She said no, she wanted to leave the country for Libya, Angola, Cuba, or China. The Family purchased a ticket for her in August 1980 and created false identification for her, and one week later she was on a plane ferrying her from John F. Kennedy International Airport to the Bahamas, where she made the connecting flight that would take her to her new home in Havana, Cuba.

In the fall of 1980, a Lincoln Detox**** veteran and close friend of the Family, Nehanda Abiodun, was trusted with flying to Cuba for the first post-exile meeting with Assata. Assata's security detail met Abiodun at the airport and escorted her to the three-story home where Assata had been put up. Assata had regrown her Afro, and she carried a snub-nosed .38 for protection. She handed Abiodun a cassette tape, on which she'd recorded a message for her supporters back in the United States. Her recorded speech was transcribed, printed in a leaflet, and distributed among supporters, with the title, "From Somewhere in the World: Assata Shakur Speaks—A Message to the New Afrikan Nation." "Sisters and brothers, nobody on the face of this earth has more of a right to a nation than We do," she declares. She continues:

We are not citizens of amerika. We are victims of amerika. And We have a right to determine our own destiny. And anyone who says that We don't is either the worst kind of racist dog or the worst kind of Uncle Tom. When Black people, New Afrikans, get serious about our liberation there is nothing that can stop us.

While the 1970s had been a turbulent and disastrous decade for the Black liberation struggle as a whole—the violent dissolution of the Black Panther Party, and the incarceration and deaths of numerous leaders—Mutulu and his clique could at least claim a victory with Assata's liberation and close the decade on a triumphant note. But if Mutulu and his

political repression attempting to capture, pacify, eject, and domesticate rebels from the George Floyd revolts, the struggles to stop the construction of cop city in Atlanta, and the struggles in solidarity with Palestinians fighting for liberation. Unfortunately we are already seeing a new generation of political prisoners and exiles. Of course it is inevitable that some will be locked up as long as liberation struggles haven't destroyed the cages. By learning from the struggles that came before us we can be better equipped to make the state's work as hard as possible. Some of my goals for reprinting and circulating this account of Assata Shakur's liberation from prison are to exercise our collective imagination of what is possible and contribute to dialogues about escalation, building undergrounds, and facing state repression.

Another goal of spreading this story is a fear that many stories of this kind, especially the illegal ones, will be lost. Either buried with the aging revolutionaries who made them happen, locked behind tight lips to ensure the safety and anonymity of the guilty, or neatly entombed in academic or historical literature that few will have the patience and position to read. To me these histories are not meant to be left in the dirt or hidden away in sleepy archives accessible with a student ID, they are part of our struggles today, weapons to be used to free ourselves, and by freeing ourselves free the dead who wrote these histories with their own sweat and blood. We can remember and tell these stories as part of our own race toward liberation and freedom now.

More selfishly, I am excited to be adding a little something to a growing tendency of Black anarchist struggles. Anecdotally it seems there are more Black anarchists than before and that more approaches to Black liberation are imagining freedom through an anti-authoritarian lens. The former Black Panthers and Black Liberation Army soldiers who advocated anarchic visions of freedom and struggle, during and after the decline of the Black Panther Party have paved the way for Black radicals to understand anarchy as a vision of freedom we can hold as our own. Russel 'Maroon' Shoatz, Kuwasi Balagoon, Ashanti Alston, Lorenzo Komboa Ervin, and Martin Sostre are coming up more in the

anarchist space, as well as the dialogues of Black revolutionaries. The last decade has seen a number of anarchically oriented Black liberation groups and projects that explore the synchronicity between Black freedom and anarchy. Salish Sea Black Autonomists, Afro-Futurist Abolitionists of the Americas, various zines, a handful of small gatherings, dialogues across geographies, increased interest in anarchists in Africa generally.

The text below is part of a longer book that goes into the history of the Shakur family. While I do not agree with the author's position that the Shakurs aimed to improve amerika I have found the information useful nonetheless. I have added a few of my own notes to the text and added complete names in brackets to give context to readers who may not be familiar with the history of the Black Liberation Army, Assata Shakur, or other aspects of the struggles taking place at the time of Assata's escape from prison. Again I encourage readers to dig deeper, to learn about the Black liberation struggles, guerrilla groups, and social movements that the people involved in Assata's liberation were part of.

that this "heroic deed will be told and retold around a million years to come . . . where Black people gather together to reminisce about heroes and heroines, great acts of courage and daring acts of courage and daring deeds, their exploits will be remembered."

Assata's escape also received international publicity, with the South China Morning Post declaring, "Top terror woman escapes," and the Times of India reporting that "diehards" from the Black Liberation Army had engineered the prison break. In the January 5 edition of the Amsterdam News, a half-page advertisement, taken out by "the Black Community," wished "Peace to Assata Shakur (a.k.a. Joanne Chesimard)," encouraged her to "Stay Strong and Free," and closed with "Long Live Assata Shakur. Long Live the Black Liberation Struggle."

But while her escape was being hailed by supporters, the FBI and the NYPD had initiated a massive manhunt, raiding and ransacking the homes of anyone with even a marginal connection or resemblance to Assata. This collaboration between the FBI and local law enforcement led to the expansion of the Joint Terrorism Task Force, which would soon be implemented in numerous cities across the nation. In response to the manhunt, Black enclaves in New York were decorated with posters declaring, "Assata Shakur Is Welcome Here," with a large black-and-white photo of a young Assata smiling beneath a tall Afro.

As law enforcement searched in all directions for the escaped fugitive, following dead-end tips and reports that took them everywhere from New York and New Jersey to Florida and Mississippi to as far away as California, Assata was secured away in Sekou Odinga's safe house in Pittsburgh. She had been taken to Pittsburgh—hidden in the trunk of a Lincoln Continental driven by Marilyn Buck and accompanied by Odinga—after spending the first two nights immediately following her escape in Buck's own safe house in East Orange, New Jersey. While in Pittsburgh, Assata used the name Mary Davis, straightened her hair, and visited a dentist, Dr. Ralph Cato, to have her teeth fixed.

international governing body to hold the United States accountable for committing “gross human rights violations and genocide” against Black Americans. This year’s rally was co-organized by the National Coalition for Black Human Rights, with assistance from Mutulu and Afeni Shakur, who were both national coordinators for the National Black Task Force for Cointelpro Litigation and Research.

Besides Russell, other speakers at the rally included such dignitaries as the esteemed reparations advocate and Garveyite elder “Queen Mother” Moore; civil rights activist and chairman of the National Black United Front Reverend Herbert Daughtry; and the Detroit-born Chokwe Lumumba, lawyer and Minister of Justice of the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika.

The most notable moment of the rally came during Muntu Matsimela’s speech. The Bronx-raised Black nationalist and activist took the stage and, before thousands of onlookers, read a communiqué prepared by the Coordinating Committee of the Black Liberation Army:

Comrade-Sister Assata Shakur was freed from racist captivity in anticipation of Black Solidarity Day, November 5, and in order to express to the world the need to Free All Black Prisoners in the u.s. The Freedom of Black Political Prisoners is of fundamental importance to the protection of Black Human Rights in general. The brutal and callous Treatment by prison administrators of our captured comrades cannot be allowed to continue unnoticed by the Black Community. In freeing Comrade-Sister Assata we have made it clear that such treatment and the “criminal” guilt or innocence of a Black freedom fighter is irrelevant when measured by our people’s history of struggle against racist u.s. domination.

The announcement of Assata’s escape was greeted enthusiastically in progressive circles throughout New York. Reverend Daughtry published an opinion piece in the Amsterdam News with the headline “Run Hard Sister, Run Hard” and applauds Assata’s anonymous liberators, writing

To read more about anarchy, Black liberation, and anti-prison struggles I recommend:

- A Soldier’s Story: Revolutionary Writings by a New Afrikan Anarchist by Kuwasi Balagoon
- Adios Prisons: Tales of Spectacular Escapes by Juan Jose Garfia
- An Amerikan Family: The Shakurs And The Nation They Created by Santi Elijah Holley
- Assata: An Autobiography by Assata Shakur
- Black Anarchism and the Black Radical Tradition: Moving Beyond Racial Capitalism by Atticus Bagby-Williams and Nsambu Za Suekama
- I Am Maroon by Russell ‘Maroon’ Shoatz
- Maroon The Implacable: The Collected Writings of Russell Maroon Shoatz by Russell ‘Maroon’ Shoatz

Useful websites for those interested in escalating and building undergrounds:

- anarsec.guide
- notrace.how
- unravel.noblogs.org (has a section with links to various local counter-information websites)

Freeing Assata

(Excerpt from An Amerikan Family: The Shakurs And The Nation They Created by Santi Elijah Holley)

Though each robbery had been perfectly executed, the group* was by now eager for something more significant than stickups. They were seasoned radicals and veteran soldiers in an anti-imperialist struggle, after all, not common criminals and hoodlums. They needed to do something big, an action that would draw attention, earn respect, and stimulate the moribund movement. They needed to rescue one of their fallen soldiers—someone who had become one of the most famous political prisoners in the country, whose name itself represented defiance; someone who, over the last few years, had come to represent not only the Black liberation movement but the movement for anti-imperialist freedom fighters all over the world. It was time to free Assata Shakur**.

The decision to liberate Assata didn't come naturally. It was true that her conviction for the shooting of New Jersey State Troopers Werner Foerster and James Harper was widely acknowledged by supporters as fraudulent and unjust, but she was one of many captured soldiers. Other comrades might've seemed like more deserving candidates to be freed. Sundiata Acoli, apprehended after the incident on the turnpike, had been an integral member of the Black Panther Party's Harlem chapter almost since its founding and was now sitting in a New Jersey state prison, serving out a life sentence. Geronimo "Ji-Jaga" Pratt, godfather to the clandestine Black liberation struggle and inspiration to the New York Panthers, was also serving a life sentence for what was clearly a deceptive, targeted COINTELPRO operation. An early leader of the New York Panthers and BLA*** organizer, Dhoruba bin Wahad was now on the eighth year of his life sentence, in what appeared to be another example of COINTELPRO harassment. So why did this group of fewer than a dozen soldiers decide that Assata was the one to be liberated from prison, with all the risks that this involved?

"In a way, we were tired of just doing robberies," Tyrone Rison later tes-

boring counties and the prison was sealed off. State troopers raced across the interstate as police issued a forty-eight-state alarm. Their search would ultimately lead nowhere. In under ten minutes, without a single shot fired, this small, ragtag group had liberated Assata Shakur and disappeared into the night.

"It was such a dynamic act that went off without a real hitch," Odinga recalled years later. "It was well planned, and well carried out. At the time we had a pretty tight structure."

They still needed to coordinate safe houses, disguises, travel arrangements. They knew the FBI would very soon be kicking down a lot of doors, rounding up a lot of associates, friends, allies, relatives. But now wasn't the time to think about all of that. Now was the time to celebrate, and to announce their victory to the world.

[...]

The sky was clear and the air was crisp but not too cold on the afternoon of Monday, November 5, 1979. Hundreds of Black New Yorkers gathered in Harlem at the corner of 125th Street and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard, before marching five miles to Midtown Manhattan, where they joined thousands of other demonstrators at Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza, near the United Nations headquarters. The demonstrators carried red, black, and green liberation flags and large banners that read, "Free the Land," "Black People Charge Genocide," "Human Rights Is the Right to Self-Determination," and "Take Command: Fight for Human Rights." Some estimates put the crowd at up to five thousand attendees.

The occasion was the tenth-anniversary celebration of Black Solidarity Day, an annual event co-founded in 1969 by Afro-Panamanian activist and scholar Carlos E. Russell, intended as "a general protest against the intensifying repression that threatens the very existence of black people in America." Speakers articulated a list of demands to be presented to the secretary general of the United Nations and called for the

for South Hall.” He drove back to the trailer and found two Black men in their midthirties patiently waiting. Again, Ravettina didn’t search the men before they climbed into the van, one in the back seat, the other in the passenger seat. They had driven only a short distance up the road when the man in the passenger seat, Mtayari Shabaka Sundiata, pulled out a .45-caliber handgun, held it to Ravettina’s neck, and ordered him out of the van. The man in the back seat, Kokayi, also withdrew a pistol. Born Winston Patrick Patterson, Kokayi was an acupuncture apprentice from Washington, D.C., who had been recruited only the night before, after Larry Mack had backed out. The three men walked the remaining distance up the road to South Hall, approached Anderson in the guard booth, and told her to open the gate. She hesitated for a moment but was then surprised to turn and see Odinga and Assata on the opposite side of the gate, pointing the .357 in her direction. She opened the gate.

The three men handcuffed Anderson and Ravettina together and ordered them to walk back down the road to the prison van. The small group jumped into the van and Kokayi took the wheel. Nervous and ill-prepared, Kokayi made a wrong turn down a dead-end road, then backed up, orbited the parking lot, and drove headfirst into a grassy knoll, jarring the van’s occupants. Finally, Kokayi managed to steer the van to the switch point in the parking lot of the nearby Hunterdon State School. Two cars were waiting—a white Lincoln Continental and a blue compact car—along with [Marilyn] Buck, [Silvia] Baraldini, and Rosenberg. Mutulu [Shakur] and Rison pulled up in a blue van, to be used as an auxiliary getaway vehicle, which proved unnecessary. Assata and Odinga crawled into the trunk of the Lincoln and Baraldini and Buck peeled off onto the interstate, followed at a short distance by Mutulu in the van. The two hostages, Anderson and Ravettina, were left behind in the prison van, still handcuffed but unharmed.

Mutulu soon pulled into the Laneco Shopping Center parking lot, where he and Rison ditched the van and jumped into a new getaway car, piloted by Judy Clark. Seven minutes had passed before prison officials discovered the escape and set off an alarm. Roadblocks went up in neigh-

tified. “We were about more than just robbing money.” Rison went on to describe how they’d drawn up a list of political prisoners whose escape would be widely publicized, and they landed on Assata because she “already had national coverage for being leader of the Black Liberation Army.”

By 1979, after six years of numerous trials and accusations, Assata had grown into a symbol of resistance against the racist and patriarchal justice system. To liberate Assata would significantly raise the stature of this small group of veteran soldiers, who had thus far succeeded only in carrying out a handful of bank robberies. Though [Sekou] Odinga and Assata had known each other for only a brief time—a few months in 1973 between his return from Algerian exile and her capture on the turnpike—he would later describe her as “definitely one of my heroes.”

The biggest advocates for Assata’s liberation, however, probably came from the White women in the group, who had been the most active during her murder trial—demonstrating outside the courthouse, organizing fundraisers, and, in [Susan] Rosenberg’s case, being arrested and fined for hanging “Free Assata Shakur” signs in New Brunswick. Regardless of how the decision came about or who made the final call, Assata’s escape could not have happened if not for a sequence of favorable events.

After her guilty verdict, Assata was first sent to the Clinton Correctional Facility for Women in New Jersey, but after ten days she was transferred to the all-male state prison in Yardville, New Jersey, where security was tighter. She was again transferred, on April 8, 1978, to the federal correctional facility for women in Alderson, West Virginia, where she was held in a maximum-security unit for inmates considered a flight risk. Alderson’s maximum-security unit was soon declared unconstitutional, and on February 20, 1979, Assata was transferred back to the Clinton Correctional Facility.

Two hundred yards south of Interstate 78, in a rural, hilly area of New

Jersey, near the scenic Spruce Run Reservoir and Recreation Area, the minimum-security facility was referred to by some guards and county residents as “the country club,” due not only to its idyllic and unobtrusive setting, but for its less-than-stringent security. Many guards went unarmed. One dormitory in the prison, South Hall, was considered maximum security, but “security” at Clinton was more or less subjective.

Assata’s mother, Doris, visited her at Clinton, bringing with her Assata’s daughter. Kakuya was already four years old, and her relationship with Assata was strained. Raised by Doris, Kakuya could only interact with Assata during these brief visitations. Kakuya’s first reaction was hesitation and aloofness, followed by anger. She cried and screamed and punched at her mother, accusing her of remaining in prison by choice. Overcome with emotion and feelings of powerlessness, Assata told Kakuya to go over and try to open the barred doors of the visitation room. Kakuya pulled at and attacked the bars until she fell defeated to the floor. Assata picked her up and consoled her. Soon the guard came in and announced visiting time was over. After one last hug, Assata watched her daughter turn to walk away.

“She waves good-bye to me, her face clouded and worried, looking like a little adult,” Assata recalled. “I go back to my cage and cry until I vomit. I decide that it is time to leave.”

Through a network of friends, Assata managed to get the word out to Odinga. Not only did she wish to escape, but the lax security at Clinton offered as close to a perfect condition for a jailbreak as they were going to get. They spent nine months preparing for the escape. The Paramus armored car robbery that September was carried out, in part, to finance Assata’s escape.

The group kept their plans confidential to a small circle, referring to Assata by the code name “Cleo.” She continued to receive visitors, but Odinga was the only Black member of the group to risk a visit to the prison. A brief moment of inattentiveness on October 29 almost ruined

everything, including the escape plans. After visiting with Assata, Odinga was driving home on Interstate 78 when he was pulled over by a New Jersey state trooper. Trooper Gene Keith Ledder approached the driver of the car—a red 1979 Oldsmobile, acquired the year before by Marilyn Buck—requested his license and registration, and asked if he knew why he’d been pulled over. No stranger to police encounters and no doubt prepared for anything, Odinga replied diplomatically: “Why don’t you tell me why you stopped me?”

Ledder said that he’d been driving seventy-three miles an hour.

“I thought I was going sixty,” Odinga replied. He handed over a phony New Jersey driver’s license with the name Edward Holmes and an address of 116 Prospect Street in East Orange. Ledder issued Odinga—or Edward Holmes—a speeding ticket and let him go, but this encounter was too close for comfort. Odinga would have to be more careful. But there wasn’t much time for self-castigation. They were only four days away from the planned day of liberation.

On the afternoon of November 2, just before 3:00, a car stopped at a trailer near the prison entrance that was used as a reception area. After signing in with a fake name that Assata had approved earlier, Odinga waited for the arrival of the prison van, which transported visitors to and from the prison’s maximum security wing. The driver of the van, thirty-one-year-old Stephen Ravettina, collected Odinga without bothering to check him for weapons. Ravettina chaperoned the visitor through the prison grounds to South Hall, where the lone guard on duty was Helen Anderson, an elderly, kindhearted woman with a heart condition, known around Clinton as “Mama A.” After Anderson buzzed Ravettina and Odinga through the gate, Assata came up to hug Odinga, and, as the two embraced, he discreetly slipped her the .357 Magnum he’d concealed in the small of his back.

As Ravettina climbed back into the van, a message came over the radio from the lieutenant on duty: “Rav, there’s more visitors at the gate