

Reading Assata Shakur's Black Revolutionary Radicalism in Palestine

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I've known about Angela Davis since I was a teenager. But I didn't know who Assata Shakur was until I moved to New York City in the 1980s. I heard about her from my friend, Rosemari Mealy, a former Black Panther and the first UN representative of the National Alliance of Third World Journalists, who reintroduced Assata Shakur and her struggle to the movement.

Growing up under Israeli occupation of Palestine, I clearly recall my mother pointing to Angela Davis's picture in the local paper and declaring emphatically, "She is framed." My father, more of a perhaps-and-maybe person than my mother ever was, turned to her, asking, "What makes you so sure that she is framed?" Without skipping a beat, she replied, "She is Black. Of course she is framed." My mother was affirming what we grew up knowing with absolute certainty about the United States: It was founded as a settler colonial state that, like Israel, sought (but failed) to erase the existence of Indigenous communities, and consolidated this settler colonial project by first kidnapping and enslaving Africans, and institutionalizing racist discrimination. In our minds, these conditions resonated with the stories of Palestinian uprootedness and dispossession that we heard daily. Neither abstract nor distant, these stories of Black and Indigenous struggle were part of our families' histories. My aunt Um Khalil had barely survived the 1948 Nakba seventy years ago; her sister, Fatima, nicknamed *Um el Fedayeen* (or "mother of the freedom fighters") was expelled from her job at the Jordanian Ministry of Social Affairs following Black September, only a couple of months before she was due to retire. My cousins, like a million other Palestinians, were incarcerated in Israeli military prisons. My uncle

Reading Assata in Palestine

I read Assata Shakur's "To My People" (1973) as a text that converses with an anti-colonial radical Palestinian imaginary in a call and response praxis. Here, I am thinking of Palestine both as a transnational imaginary as well as an embodied physical geography. As we crossed one Israeli checkpoint after another on our recent Teaching Palestine trip,¹ Shakur's reference that "the Turnpike is a checkpoint where black people are stopped, searched, harassed and assaulted" came up again and again. However, in responding to Shakur's call, I wish to explicitly avoid conflating and flattening this treatise on Black liberation struggle, or engaging in simplistic rhetoric such as "it's all the same oppression and all resistance movements are the same."

While "To My People" raises multiple issues, I will limit my discussion to three questions that most urgently call for a Palestinian response. First, what does speaking on our own terms entail both in the heart of the U.S. Empire and the Israeli settler colonial state, and what does such praxis require in terms of questions of identification, radicalism, identity politics, and coalition building? Second, how do we think through and frame violence and nonviolence as strategies of resistance? And third, what is the relationship between the individual and the collective, and what implications does such framing have for possibilities of accountability and radical social change?

Rejecting Domestication, Assimilation, and Settler Colonialism

Shakur identifies herself as a Black revolutionary, a third world-identified woman. Referring to the U.S. as "amerikkka," Shakur saw white supremacy of the KKK as constitutive of the formation and development of settler colonialism in the U.S. rather than an exception. Identifying as a field "n—," Shakur was clearly rejecting internalized colonialism.

Invoking Black revolution as intimately linked to third world revolution, Shakur connected the Black struggle in the U.S. to the oppressed in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Mozambique, Angola, and South Africa. Shakur thus challenged the foreign/domestic dichotomy (Abdulhadi 2014) and argued against internalized colonialism and the assimilationist politics

However, the oral histories of the Black Power movement clearly emphasize a strong anti-Zionist commitment, and such commitments have become much more pronounced today.

Violence and Nonviolence

“We are the victims. The victims and not the criminals,” Shakur reminds us, as she discusses the criminalization of the Black Liberation Army as violent and its labeling as terrorist. Shakur’s assessment of the denial of victimhood to Black people by the state recalls a similar construction of Palestinian militants such as Ramea Odeh by Israel. Indeed, this colonialist, racist, and sexist construction of militant women is not limited to Assata Shakur or Ramea Odeh. The recent construction of the young Ahed Tamimi as a terrorist in the making because she exercised agency in slapping an Israeli occupying soldier recalls how Shakur herself was vilified and targeted by the New Jersey State Police and, more recently, by the FBI that tried to frame her on bank robberies for which she was found not guilty. She was only convicted after the case was brought before an all-white jury (Law Office of Arthur Heitzer).

Assata Shakur’s unapologetic reference to becoming “free by any means necessary” also signals a simultaneous refusal to denounce armed resistance or to relinquish the right of oppressed communities to self-defense and criticize nonviolent resistance. Palestinian resistance groups have likewise articulated comprehensive strategies of resistance, including both armed and unarmed, theoretical and political. At a recent rally in Gaza, a large banner displaying the images of Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Mahatma Gandhi served as a backdrop for the Great March of Return, a six-week mobilization from Land Day on March 30 to Nakba Day on May 15. The Great March of Return demanded lifting the ten-year devastating blockade of Gaza and affirming the right of Palestinian refugees to return to the homes of their ancestors. A *New York Times* article covering the rally claimed that the depiction of the three leaders from Asia, Africa, and U.S. Black communities was opportunistic (Halbfinger 2018). The *Times* dismissed at least a hundred years of Palestinian resistance in which all forms of struggle were employed in different contexts, political moments, and constituencies. Palestinians did not posit nonviolent

was intentional—to signal third worldist solidarities in the struggle for freedom rather than a “nonviolent” protest. The anti-Apartheid struggle was also fought by a mix of violent and nonviolent means.

Individual and Collective Accountability

Shakur’s articulation of the dialectical relationship between the role of the individual and that of the collective evoked a question posed by sister/comrade Margo Okazawa-Rey in 2018: “On whose shoulders do you stand?”²

“To My People” distills over forty years of calls for accountability, bringing into conversation Margo, Angela, Assata, the Combahee River Collective, and Palestine. Palestinian militants refuse to exceptionalize their own individual roles, insisting that “my experience is nothing. It is representative of those of other strugglers.”³ During a two-hour meeting on our Teaching Palestine: Palestine: Pedagogical Praxis and the Indivisibility of Justice trip, members of the delegation had to press Palestinian feminist Haneen Zoabi four times before she agreed to discuss her own personal experience of being silenced and sanctioned by her Zionist colleagues in the Israeli Knesset. We’ve heard similar sentiments expressed over the years by activists, community members, and academics too numerous to mention here. As evident in “To My People” and Palestinian resistance narratives, this specific feminist praxis links the individual with the collective, and is a reaffirmation of a particular understanding of feminism that is accountable, relevant, context specific, and grounded in the indivisibility of justice (Abdulhadi 2012) rather than building careers at the expense of the lived experiences of marginalized communities. Within the context specificity and community-groundedness of Black liberation struggle against the U.S. settler colonial state, Assata Shakur tackles dilemmas that lie at the heart of Palestinian transformative politics and cultures of resistance against the Israeli settler colonial regime (Abdulhadi 2000). I want to pass on Shakur’s “To My People” to every single Palestinian comrade, to analyze; discuss its framing, for whom and to whom she speaks and how she navigates multiple audiences; what she argues for or against. In transnational Palestine, “To My People” delivers a message in the spirit of the indivisibility of justice and the praxis of resistance and liberation.

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Notes

1. Teaching Palestine: Pedagogical Praxis and the Indivisibility of Justice is a project I initiated at AMED Studies at SFSU and co-organized with two major Palestinian universities, An-Najah and Birzeit, after which participants from around the world traveled throughout Palestine meeting Palestinian communities who are struggling not only to survive but to build an alternative to Israeli settler colonialism, racism and occupation.
2. Okazawa-Rey was not only a coauthor of the Combahee River Collective but she also has been working for years in Palestine in collaboration/in praxis with the late Palestinian feminist Maha Abu-Dayyeh at the Jerusalem Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling.
3. Palestinians use *strugglers* to refer to those who commit their lives to the struggle, as opposed to militants, activists, leaders, advocates, organizers, or NGO *practitioners*.

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