Sacrifice, Love, and Resistance: The Hip Hop Legacy of Assata Shakur
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Abstract: This essay examines the mythification of former Black Panther and Black Liberation Army member Assata Shakur by hip hop artists Paris, Common, Mos Def, Tuiya Autry and Walidah Imanisha and provides a framework for understanding the importance of the “love ethic” in the black liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s as well as today. It argues that the “love talk” of Common and Paris provide conflicting accounts of Shakur’s activism and legacy, though she is heroized as a living martyr who continues to inspire revolutionary black activism, particularly among women.

At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality. Perhaps it is one of the great dramas of the leader that he or she must combine a passionate spirit with a cold intelligence and make painful decisions without flinching. Our vanguard revolutionaries must idealize this love of the people, of the most sacred causes, and make it one and indivisible. They cannot descend, with small doses of daily affection, to the level where ordinary people put their love into practice.

The leaders of the revolution have children just beginning to talk, who are not learning to say “daddy”; their wives, too, must be part of the general sacrifice of their lives in order to take the revolution to its destiny. The circle of their friends is limited strictly to the circle of comrades in the revolution. There is no life outside of it.

- - Ernesto “Che” Guevara, “Socialism and Man,” 1965

In his explanation of the relationship between revolutionary action and love, guerrilla leader Che Guevara underscores the importance of idealizing love of “the people” as well as the centrality of sacrifice within the revolutionary family to the work of vanguard social movements. As one of the most well-recognized icons of revolutionary thought and action, Guevara points to a relationship between love and resistance in his writings that has been overlooked by many scholars, particularly in the way that this relationship frames the heroism and martyrdom that provide the contours of many social movements for liberation.

Likewise, Guevara’s commentary on the sacrifices of families enmeshed in revolutionary politics highlights the role of reproduction in the creation and maintenance of vanguard ideology. Developed primarily as a rejection of modernity and the machinations of capitalism, Guevara’s comments on revolutionary ideology were influenced by and contributed to the revolutionary theory of Third World writers like Franz Fanon, Paulo Frriere, Aimé Césaire and other theorists of color. This body of theory attempted to understand how populations could resist neocolonialism in productive ways, though Guevara’s initial comments on revolution in his 1965 letter “Socialism and Man in Cuba” articulated a masculine conception of resistance. Hazel Carby writes,

Clearly, in the general political and social imagination the birth of future generations is most frequently feminized, while revolution is often represented as a homosocial act of reproduction: a social and political upheaval in which men confront each other to give birth to a new nation, a struggle frequently conceived of in terms of sex and sexuality. (127)

This gender dynamic, hinted at in Guevara’s epigraph, and expanded in Carby’s work, illustrates how it is that we come to understand men as true revolutionaries and women as those who must make sacrifices in their roles as wives and mothers. This conception of revolution -- which sees men as the true revolutionaries and only acknowledges the singular role women can play as mothers of new generations of activists -- is reductionist and erases the women who are active participants in social justice movements as guerrillas, whether or not they are also mothers and wives.

This essay seeks to explore the ways in which revolutionary love is described in terms of sacrifice, heroism, martyrdom, and, in particular, the gendered production of these terms by black revolutionaries. It also examines the heroization and martyring of former Black Panther and Black Liberation Army member Assata Shakur by hip hop artists to understand how she is positioned in the history of black revolutionary resistance. I argue that rapper Paris utilizes an immature form of love-talk to praise Shakur’s strength as a black woman, which reduces Shakur’s revolutionary black activism to the general struggles that women of color face every day. Although these struggles often form the basis for collective action by black women, his lyrics fail to either demand or acknowledge black revolutionary women who go beyond daily struggle. On the other hand, rapper Common’s more mature love-talk characterizes Shakur outside of Guevara’s gender binary as a revolutionary figure, a living martyr, and hero because she is a self-sacrificing revolutionary guerrilla and mother leading a liberation movement against racism, brutality, and the prison-industrial complex. As this kind of leader, Shakur can continue to inspire social justice activism from exile to new generations of black activists working towards black liberation, though she is not placed in a context of other historical black women who have struggled for black liberation. Finally, I argue that slam poets Tuiya
Autry and Walidah Imarisha articulate the ideal love-talk encompassing revolutionary love. Autry and Imarisha utilize the language of black female poets in their love-talk describing Shakur in terms of her guerrilla activism, her strength, and, most importantly, her connections to revolutionary black liberation women across the ages.

By analyzing these artists, we see how difficult it is for the revolutionary black female activist to be recognized as a leader in social justice movements and how important it is for hip hop artists to use love-talk to recover a revolutionary black past for a Black Power leader like Assata Shakur, who can help to regenerate and reproduce black liberation activism.

Critical Memory, Heroes, Martyrs and Love

To understand heroism and its importance to social movements, we must understand the importance of how remembering heroes creates cultural identity, both from the perspective of the state and from the perspective of marginalized groups. One of the most important socializing functions of nation-states, for example, is “the collection, dispensing, and ultimately transformation of specific – but nonetheless popular-memories into national memories” (Hanchard 51). One important way that the nation-state creates identity through memory is in the elevation of icons that have been defeated. With this reification of the defeated, “[t]he vanquished, once viewed as dangerous, are transformed into totemic figures of wisdom, sagacity, and prescience” (51-52).

Remembering and (re)telling larger-than-life accounts of their service to a people helps transform these individuals into icons and martyrs (Reed 164). In this way, cultures and groups use memory to connect to the past in a process of “mythification” of heroes that entails “the crystallization of charismatic figures of political liberation as catalysts of new existential, historic, and symbolic legitimacies” (Kemedjio 91). These myths of charismatic martyrs and heroes travel through memory and they emphasize self-sacrifice for the good of their people, connecting those who struggle now to those who have struggled in the past. As Fisher observes, this process of mythification “is like falling in love” because it involves passion, which “comes from longing not only for what has not been given for also for what can be – the kind of passion we need to carry us over into the future, to the realization of only vaguely perceived ideals” (220). Social love for heroes and for “the people” contributes to the problematic nature of memory because it is so connected to both individual and collective identity and because the passion that fuels social love can be independent of history. Instead, this kind of social love is based upon ideals for how a people or culture should ideally be.

But memories also form the building blocks of history, especially for those who have been written out of or elided from official histories of the state for just as states use memory to produce heroic myths that give people icons to love and revere, so too, must those who resist the state produce competing heroes. For black Americans, in particular, public memory and myth often become the historical record because so often they have been elided from popular history. As the recollections of black Americans become history, collective public memory reminds black people “of the choices each generation must make when faced with the unbearable weight of racial and national oppression – accede or quit, fight or negotiate, just as their forebears did” (Hanchard 52). In the case where written history is absent or inaccessible, “memory may serve as a bulwark against the erasure, neglect, or elision of a memory as a potential source and opportunity for history” (52). Consequently, collective memory allows black activists to measure themselves against heroes of their past. Activists compare contemporary black heroes to martyrs who died for their cause, like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.; they circulate stories and anecdotes that mythologize martyrs like Malcolm and King to help inspire resistance to oppression. This circulation of political martyrs helps enhance the martyrdom of modern heroes, which often fuels new activism and creates contemporary role models.

Martyrs are important black cultural icons because they are the very definition of self-sacrifice in the name of social change. By very definition, martyrdom is an act of political suicide and is often quite literally the end of a political actor and their capacity for agency in the public sphere (Euben 6-7). And martyrs satisfy the “powerful longing for some one to guide us through the historical contradictions we face” (Fisher 218). Malcolm X has, of course, been the most referenced martyr of the Black Power movement because he was “adamant about the need for blacks to love themselves and to be proud of their heritage.... Malcolm taught blacks to love and respect themselves” (Burrow 16). Malcolm X is important as a black martyr because his assassination in 1965 “provided the black masses and a sizable number of young militant leaders with a significant martyr image for years to come,” though the state has still not embraced him as a wise, totemic leader (Gordon 49).

On the other hand, the state has embraced King’s nonviolence as the ideal form of racial social protest and King himself as the model dissenter, in part because his ideology of nonviolence embraced the Judeo-Christian principle social love, or agape, and the corresponding Gandhian principle of satyagraha. King’s love ethic demanded the “unconditional surrender to the ideal of redemption as exemplified by Jesus Christ” and that surrender involves loving even one’s enemies because they can always be redeemed (James 5). King is understood as a civil rights martyr by both the state and by those who dissent from the state because he was assassinated in 1968, because he seems to have presaged his own martyrdom in his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech and because for many people, “King’s death symbolized the death of his dream” for integration (James 49).

Although Malcolm championed black separation and King advocated integration, the martyrdom of both men mobilized black radicals to organize against white
supremacy because both men were committed to black liberation despite the differences in their strategy (Cone xviii). It is because both men were engaged in a dialectic with the black masses and with each other, that they created rhetorical and political strategies in the service of black love and liberation (Bennett 70). And, it is no coincidence that these two men are held up as martyrs because it was their eloquent public speaking that moved thousands to participate in black liberation. Malcolm and Martin held love and sacrifice as intrinsic to the self-esteem of black Americans since the black liberation movement in the United States has its roots in the Judeo-Christian "love ethic" (hooks, "Love," xix). Both men articulated this love ethic, though each emphasized different aspects of love in the context of black resistance. bell hooks writes, "While King had focused on loving our enemies, Malcolm called us back to ourselves, acknowledging that taking care of blackness was our central responsibility" ("Outlaw Culture," 245).

But although Malcolm's separatism and King's early support for integration were radical compared to the white supremacy of the status quo in the early 1960s, both men became black revolutionaries when they connected the struggle of blacks in the United States to the struggles of oppressed people of color across the globe and this is the piece that bell hooks misses for all of her analysis on love and liberation pedagogy rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition have been love and self-sacrifice, although hooks notes that today, "young listeners remain reluctant to embrace the idea of love as a transformative force. To them, love is for the naive, the weak, the hopelessly romantic" ("Love," xix). Despite the cynicism of many young people, martyrs like Martin and Malcolm are often used as starting points to reference the contributions of living martyrs to movements for social change. Living martyrs are an extension of both the celebrity and the ideologies of those martyrs who have been forcibly removed from political activism and either imprisoned or exiled and whose agency is restricted in ways that their followers find unjust. Consequently, such conditions of self-sacrifice, perceived injustices, defiant acts against the white power structure, linkages to past heroes, and rhetorical leadership elevate their status as victim, hero, and celebrity, ultimately resulting in their image circulation in popular memory as living martyrs.

Living martyrs become historically important because they push the boundaries of acceptability in a given culture. This is particularly true of women of color, who "train to be urban guerrillas by doing battle every day with the apparatus of the state," which perpetually works to silence and erase them from culture and memory (Hurtado 853). As guerrillas, women of color must overcome losing their children and loved ones to violence, prison, poverty, sexism, racism, and drugs (853). Marginalized by violence and the oppressive forces of both racism and sexism, women of color participate in a collective struggle against white men and women as well as men of color to assert their existence in a culture intent upon pushing them to what Gloria Anzaldúa has termed "the borderlands." In the borderlands they have become warriors, raging against their own invisibility (DeShazer 353).

Although women of color fight against both racism and sexism and it is important to acknowledge this work against their erasure in a culture that privileges whiteness, it is also crucial to highlight the activism of the women of color who radically oppose and resist white supremacy, particularly those in movements for social justice. Revolutionary black female activists commit themselves to social justice and revolutionary politics and, in this way, many overcome the gender binary and erasure implicit in Guevara's epigraph. And, although hip hop culture has been often silent on the role of women in social justice movements and has praised the sacrifice and heroism of black male militants, several hip hop artists have embraced Black Power hero Assata Shakur and praised her revolutionary resistance.

**Hip Hop, Love-Talk, and Assata Shakur**

**Hip Hop**

By the mid-1960s and early 1970s, when black social organizing was strong and visible, popular music had embraced the Black Power movement, whose organizations disavowed integration as a political goal and instead embraced revolutionary black politics that connected the struggles of blacks in the United States to anti-apartheid and liberation movements by people of color across the globe. Although the Black Power movement was associated with violence and the urban rebellions in cities following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the contributions by the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army in cities across the country connected black liberation and revolutionary politics and action to the Third World revolutionary theory and praxis of leaders like Che Guevara. Groups like the Black Panthers understood the power of music for the revolution and began producing their own music from within the organization to inspire action. For example,
Black Panther Elaine Brown wrote and recorded the Black Panther National Anthem and also cut a deal with Motown records to produce several albums of Black Power songs. Where spiritual slave songs provided the backdrop to the abolition movement and the early civil rights movement, hip hop helps black communities express the violence and poverty of urban life (Baker 45-6). Rap music expresses the frustration of urban black America following the decimation of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s by the FBI's Counter Intelligence Programs or COINTELPRO, which sought to discredit, undermine, disrupt and destroy revolutionary social movements and groups in the Black Power movement, the American Indian Movement, the anti-war movement, and the student movement (Pough, 234).3

Histories of rap music and hip hop culture abound, so this essay will not reproduce them at length. However, it is useful to understand that both rap music and hip hop culture began in the Bronx, New York, in the late 1970s.4 Here, young blacks and Puerto Ricans began “rapping” about each other and playing the dozens over break beats. After the L.A. riots in 1992, contemporary rap music began its ascendency and it tackled the legacy of the Reagan administration in the neighborhoods where the FBI eradicated Black Power organizations. Particularly after the L.A. riots in 1992, the eyes of the nation “focused on young urban prophets of postmodernity who have been trying to push through for more than two decades of what Grandmaster Flash called ‘The Message’” (Baker, “Scene,” 45-6). These young urban prophets blended the social critiques and calls for action of the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s with dance beats to record their own resistance against the racism and conservative politics of the 1980s.

Arts such as N.W.A., Public Enemy, Ice-T, Ice Cube, and Poor Righteous Teachers emerged in the 1980s and began to depict “the insufferable poverty, relentless police brutality, and frustrated hopes of the black urban scene” (“Scene,” 46). The destruction of the Black Power movement and its organizations and the rise of rap music in L.A. and Oakland made celebrities out of the young (mostly) men, who continued the critiques of Black Power by remembering the heroes of the black liberation movement in their music. By memorializing men like Malcolm X and King in their songs, they connected the urban blight of the 1980s with the segregation of the 1960s and 1970s. Through their use of memory and storytelling, they began to rebuild the social conscience of the late 1960s around themes of self-determination and love, using the messages of both Malcolm and King to build coalitions of revolutionary struggle against white supremacy and neocolonialism (Bush 59). This kind of critical memory “is the very faculty of revolution” because it connects the struggles of black people to the struggles of Third World people across the globe as it attempts to see humanity as something larger than, say, “race” (Baker, “Critical Memory,” 7).

These revolutionary black heroes embraced a global perspective on violence and resistance and have been the source of inspiration for much intellectual production in rap music. Consequently, “rap songs invoke groups that are doing something, as well as the black radical heroes and traditions of the recent past, such as Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, H. Rap Brown and MLK” (Best and Kellner, par 37). But what they are doing is speaking to create a collective memory built around the commodification of male martyrs within a social movement that enjoyed tremendous female leadership. As hip hop glosses black women’s revolutionary activism while memorializing radical black men, black women are erased and only popular memory and mythification can reinset them into black liberation history.

As hip hop music builds up male heroes at the expense of the women who form the backbone of revolutionary black politics, the public discourse about women moves away from the communalist language of brotherhood and sisterhood employed by black revolutionaries in the 1960s and 1970s and instead talks about the relationships among black men and women through the lens of commercialism and consumption. bell hooks writes that the “love ethic” that informed the rhetoric of communalism in the 1960s is noticeably absent from “politically progressive radicals or from the Left” (“Outlaw Culture,” 243). She argues that this absence of a continued focus on love as a source of resistance and inspiration “arises from a collective failure to acknowledge the needs of the spirit and an overdetermined emphasis on material concerns. Without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed (“Outlaw Culture,” 243). By sacrificing a global perspective that embraces the love ethic, many contemporary hip hop artists have disconnected themselves from the communalism and Third World theories that provided the backdrop of black revolutionary coalition politics embraced by groups like the Black Panther Party.

Assata Shakur

Despite this rhetorical shift, one of the revered revolutionary icons in the hip hop community is former Black Panther and Black Liberation Army member Assata Shakur. Shakur was born JoAnne Deborah Byron (and later married Louis Chesimard) on July 16, 1947, in Jamaica, New York, where she grew up with her sister, mother, aunt, grandmother and grandfather. In her twenties, she became a member of the New York chapter of the Black Panther Party (BPP) and chose her new name: Assata (meaning “she who struggles”) Olugbala (meaning “love for the people”) Shakur (meaning “the thankful”), in Arabic (Shakur 185-6). As a Black Panther woman, Shakur joined with women like Lynn French, Kathleen Cleaver, Erica Huggins, and Akua Njere to challenge the various oppressions that characterized the experience of working-class black women in the male-dominated BPP (Kelley 97). She worked on the breakfast program for school children as well as on many of the
other Panther Survival Programs that helped feed and educate inner city communities. After the 1971 split in the BPP between those Panthers following Huey Newton and those loyal to Eldridge Cleaver, Shakur went underground in the Black Liberation Army (BLA), the guerrilla arm of the BPP dedicated to armed resistance. Her separation from the BPP was voluntary and based on her distaste for the increasingly paranoid style of political action that had permeated the Party due to constant surveillance, harassment, and disruption by the local police and the FBI as well as her disagreement with the leadership style of Newton and his inability to take criticism about his heroism, Shakur is the topic of two popular hip hop read in the 1980s as hip hop emerged as a political space (Asante 127). In fact, her autobiography became a popular made on websites, and she has been praised in rap music (Asante 127) and hip hop artists to express their admiration for Assata Shakur. For example, rapper Paris sees Shakur’s story of struggle and survival as the story of all black women. In “Assata’s Song,” Paris successfully reduces Shakur’s radical resistance to the kind of general praise for black women’s strength that often elides the active black female leaders of social justice movements. In this song, Paris gives respect to women for their hard work as he apologizes for being insensitive in his youth to the constraints upon black women living under the white supremacy of the United States. He talks about how women are objectified in this culture and recognizes the pain and struggle that they live every day as well as the respect they deserve.

Although Paris uses love-talk to revere black women, he does so at the expense of being particular about the kinds of resistance that black women employ. This lack of specificity becomes problematic because “[d]econtextualized, militant historical black women’s activism is recast in the image of the respectable middle-class black feminist or community worker as reductionism leads to simplistic readings of the African-American liberation struggle and those who waged it” (James 96). Paris wants to chronicle the struggles of black women; instead, he provides a reductionist account of both the oppression and resistance of black women. And,

Women and Language, Vol. 32, No. 2, Pg. 6
instead of talking about the kind of collective group love that forms the love-ethnic of liberation movements, Paris seems to be talking about the romantic, heterosexual love between individuals. In part, this may come from a place that forms the love-ethnic of liberation movements, Paris that decry domestic violence or speaking to a male revolutionary politics or the politics of black women's leadership generally, though it does teach us that the personal is, in fact, political.

Paris continues by talking about how women should respect themselves and leave abusive relationships because black women need more self-love. The problem here is one of blaming the victim. Paris thinks that women should leave abusive men but rather than writing lyrics that decry domestic violence or speaking to a male audience about the kind of respect that they need to show women, he tells women they do not need men, despite the financial and familial incentives that make heterosexual partnership seemingly valuable for black women. Paris can talk about loving black women generally, but in expressing this sentiment all black women become homogenized, indistinguishable, and battered.

From here, the song becomes a confessional, where Paris talks about “runnin’ game” on women and ultimately concluding that he wants substance in his romantic relationships. Paris writes a kind of eulogy for social, communal love by talking about the absence of the kind of love that people die for. Paris tries to express devotion to the higher ideals of love-talk but ultimately collapses into a much more paternalistic expression of love that reflects the cynicism of which bell hooks speaks. Although this song seems to be about empowering women, it also privatizes and personalizes women’s issues, rather than highlighting those experiences central to black women’s lives or history. This move by Paris highlights the double-bind that often arises when black women break gender, race, and class roles to become revolutionaries. Even while they are revered for their role in the struggle and their hardships, often the characterization of their work fails to acknowledge their leadership and, instead, inscribes them with more domesticated images of their work for liberation.

Although Paris makes the rhetorical choice to express a kind of social love by invoking Assata Shakur, his love-talk is ultimately an immature form. He does successfully connect Shakur to other women of color who struggle everyday against repression and violence, but they are nameless and faceless. He mourns the loss of social love but ultimately collapses into a self-indulgent lament for women that he mistreated. He invoked Shakur by name but then fails to discuss the specifics of her heroism, which provides an incomplete iteration of love-talk.

Common’s Love Talk

Like Paris, rapper Common is also interested in Assata Shakur, though his love-talk is more nuanced. Common begins his “Love Song for Assata” by invoking ancestral spirits as well as the spirits of members of the Black Panther Party and he dedicates the song to the oppressed who struggle daily against state repression as he pledges himself to the spiritual journey that is black resistance. Common then recalls the highlights of Shakur’s autobiography: the shootout on the New Jersey turnpike that left her critically wounded, her hospitalization and incarceration, the conception and birth of her daughter in prison, and her escape from the Clinton Correctional Facility in New York. The chorus of the song provided by Cee-lo reifies Shakur as a beautiful soul and as a hero. He sings her name and pledges his love to the memory of her because her power and pride radiate the intensity of her commitment to black liberation. This type of passion connects the spiritual and the political and entails the deepest passions of love for the people and for struggle against oppression (Lorde 56).

Although popular love-talk “is not the life-affirming discourse of the sixties and seventies, which urged us to believe ‘All you need is love,’” Common’s song reminds us of the music that has historically connected love with struggle (hooks xvii). This kind of love-talk characterizes Common’s song as he connects himself to Shakur and her radical legacy. At one point in the song, he even says that they come from the same earth and are shaped of the same clay, connecting himself to Shakur as well as highlighting their common struggle for black liberation. Artists like Common elevate heroes because “[they] seek our validation and support from the lives of others, from the awareness that others have done comparable work, from the knowledge that others have survived and that, where they did not, their work lived after them” (Fisher 215). By saying that he and Shakur are built from the same elements, Common is seeking validation for his own work in the struggle for black liberation and is praising an activist whose liberation work lives on, just as his music will as well.

The most moving part of the song is Common’s description of Shakur’s daughter Kakuya, her birth, and the attempts by the prison doctor to forcibly abort Shakur’s child. Here, Common praises her decision to have a child, who will continue the struggle for black liberation. For Shakur, Kakuya is a symbol of resistance to white supremacy and prison politics and she provides continuation of her mother’s struggle. By loving a man and having a child in prison, Shakur resists the bodily control that the prison system enacts and her daughter represents a feminized part of the struggle for freedom. Shakur hopes that her baby will carry on the struggle into the next generation and help rebuild and recreate the movement for black liberation. In an interview on Riker’s Island in 1974, she is asked about the decision to get pregnant and says, “What we thought about when we talked about getting pregnant was life and the future. All of us related to the fact that we fight from one generation to the next. And I didn’t know if I would even have another chance to have a child.... And sitting in the courtroom with all this shit happening it seemed to be the
only thing that made sense” (Angola 7). For Shakur, passing down the tradition of revolutionary resistance was a crucial component of her decision to conceive in prison and as she passes down her narrative of this revolutionary act, so too, does Common pass down her strategies of resistance to a new generation of listeners.

Common sings praises of Shakur’s revolutionary motherhood just as he sings of her inevitable separation from her daughter in prison and in exile. He says that she was “left to mother the Revolution,” since it was many years before she saw Kakuya again. At first glance, this reification of the Black Panther woman as a mother seems fairly conservative and constraining like Guevara’s epigraph, since Shakur’s participation in black liberation involved more than the decision to become a mother. A more nuanced understanding of the politics of incarceration, especially as it pertains to women of color, demonstrates how subversive having Kakuya really was for Shakur since the prison apparatus was so intent upon killing her and her fetus. But the decision to conceive in prison is also a strategy to resist the genocide of blacks in America that encompasses more than just the state repression of revolutionaries and Common acknowledges Kakuya as an extension of Shakur’s sacrifices as well as of her commitment to the struggle for black freedom even from within prison and his song makes the connection between Shakur’s resistance to genocide and that of heroes that resisted even slavery. Hochberg notes:

It is by her and through her, through ‘mother as a source of memory,’ that one is rooted in a genealogy, a past, a people, a tradition. ‘Mother’ is often represented as a valuable source of unmediated, direct memory and as such is frequently and forcefully ‘kept in the past,’ located outside of history. (1)

Instead of representing Shakur as a mother outside of history, Common’s song reclaims and remembers her as an intrinsic part of the genealogy of radical black female resistance. Common sees Shakur as a survivor of repression, as an active participant in black liberation, and as a mother of the Revolution, clearly feminizing her role in the production and regeneration of the Black Power movement but also positioning her as an active leader in social justice even today, as she nurtures black resistance from exile in Cuba. The song ends with Common’s conclusion that Shakur suffered and sacrificed so that black people could enjoy a freedom historically denied to them. Common points to Shakur’s self-sacrifice for her people as a way of elevating her as a living martyr.

At the end of the track, Common borrows from one of Shakur’s interviews where she is talking about freedom. She admits that she doesn’t know much about freedom because she has never in her life experienced it. As Common narrates her life as a fugitive and revolutionary, he participates in an affirmation of her role in black liberation struggle and in her status as a black hero who has survived immense violence as she worked to free black people from repression. But he also chooses to include Shakur’s own voice and words so that she may speak for herself within a state that has silenced her. This move has the potential to introduce Assata Shakur’s voice and sentiments to a whole new audience through Common’s music, ensuring that new actors enter the arena of active struggle against oppression. It also enters her radical warrior voice into the public record of those black women who have resisted and survived state repression and prison.

In an interview for Alphabeats, an online magazine, Common explains that he wrote the song after traveling to Cuba with the Black August organization and meeting Shakur. He says that meeting her was:

one of the most special moments of my life. It was like meeting my mother. Like meeting a sister. Meeting a cool friend. She’s a living martyr, really, like somebody who sacrificed their life for freedom for all people. It was like meeting history, like meeting the revolution right there. (Sonzala)

Common’s description of Shakur as a “living martyr” helps solidify her position as a leader in the black liberation struggle and justify her circulation in hip hop culture where black revolutionary organizing is ongoing. And, in equating her with his mother, a sister or a friend, he exemplifies what Fisher sees as a central component to understanding how heroes provide a benchmark for human struggle. He sees her as the revolution itself, as an inspiration, as a beautiful sister in the communal struggle for black liberation. Even as Shakur’s autobiography attempts to regenerate revolutionary black activism, her martyred image and body (womb) also act as a further regenerative force for Black Power activism as her resistance to genocide and repression is connected to those women who led the struggle against slavery.

Common’s love-talk is certainly more sophisticated than the love-talk in “Assata’s Song.” Where Paris falls short in linking Shakur to historical heroism by black men and women, Common acknowledges her as a guerrilla fighter, as a woman, as a mother, as a member of the communal struggle for black liberation. This love-talk centralizes Shakur’s personal struggles as well as her political action in way that acknowledges Shakur’s historical specificity. And the decision to include Shakur’s own voice at the end of the track makes her visible and audible in a profound way, introducing her voice and her ideas to a whole new audience. The inclusion of Shakur’s voice demonstrates that Common’s love for Shakur is selfless because he lets her speak for herself.

Mos Def’s Love Talk

Although Common’s love-talk provides a more complicated and specific account of Shakur’s heroism, it does not connect her explicitly to other black women revolutionaries. “Love Song for Assata” exhibits a love-
Assata!, a coalition of “activists, artists, scholars, elected talk that is still incomplete in that it does not link Shakur's guerrilla fighter, and connect her to a vibrant history of struggle lead by black men and women. This love-talk pays close attention to the importance of connecting Shakur to the black women who have formed the backbone and the vanguard of the struggle for black liberation.

For example, rapper Mos Def provides an account of Shakur’s heroism that acknowledges her specificity and he also links Shakur to liberation heroes. He comments on Shakur’s revolutionary history on the website, Hands Off Assata!, a coalition of “activists, artists, scholars, elected officials, students, parents, attorneys, workers, clerics and community members who are standing in solidarity against the latest attack on Assata Shakur,” namely the increased bounty on her head and her placement on the terror watch list (HandsOffAssata.org). In his 2006 statement about the increased bounty on Shakur’s head titled, “Assata Shakur: The Government's Terrorist is our Community’s Heroine,” Mos Def describes Shakur as a heroine and details his first encounter with her image on the “Wanted” posters in his neighborhood in Brooklyn. He writes that the posters said:

she was a killer, an escaped convict, and armed and dangerous. They made her sound like a super-villain, like something out of a comic book. But even then, as a child, I couldn't believe what I was being told.... I saw someone who looked like she was in my family, an aunt, a mother. She looked like she had soul (Mos Def).

Mos Def’s account of Shakur also positions her as a familial, maternal figure who exemplified the brutal repression of black activism in the 1960s and 1970s as well as the resistance of radical black women. His comments combine recognition of her activism with her sense of woman-ness as he critiques the government’s frame-up of her in the early 1970s. He writes that the government’s depiction of her was a caricature and that even as a young child he resisted such an account. Instead of seeing her as a villain, Mos Def’s love-talk depicts her as a family member and highlights his perception of her as a community member. This account stresses the kind of communal love ethic that enables the practice of freedom. Mos Def’s piece concludes with a denunciation of her trial and the verdict as well as a description of her as a living martyr:

She was guilty of calling for a shift in power in America, and for racial and economic justice. Included on a short list of the many people who have made that call and were either criminalized, terrorized, killed or blacklisted are Paul Robeson, Martin Luther King, Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman, Medgar Evers and Ida B. Wells. (“Assata Shakur”)

Mos Def’s comments rightfully include Shakur among the men and women who became martyrs for black liberation and civil rights following harassment and murder. Mos Def acknowledges both Shakur's specificity and her connection to other black heroes who struggled, including anti-lynching crusader and journalist Ida B. Wells.

Love Talk Among Women

In addition to Mos Def, black women poets have used love-talk to describe the practice of freedom embraced by black revolutionary Assata Shakur. For example, in her poem “For Assata,” Audre Lorde writes that Shakur’s “smile has been to war” and that she dreams of Shakur’s:

freedom
as my victory
and the victory of all dark women
who forgo the vanities of silence
who war and weep. (28)
She calls Shakur her “sister warrior” and writes:
Joan of Arc and Yaa Asantewa
embrace
at the back of your cell. (28)

Like Lorde, Alice Walker lists Shakur along with historical heroes of the past like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Mary McLeod Bethune, Shirley Chisholm and others as heroes who are “black-skinned and fighting and screaming through the solid rock of America,” protesting the treatment of black Americans (Walker 307). Finally, slam poets Tuiya Autry and Walidah Imarisha call Shakur a “Supa Soul Sista” and they:

call upon the forces of Isis and Harriet Tubman
Sojourner Truth and Nefertiti
Assata Shakur and Cleopatra
to reign down the fury of centuries of oppression
degradation and silence on your head
because we will not be silent anymore
and with the voice of a hundred million
sistas moaning across the bloody pages of history
you will feel our rage!
because I have the power to resurrect the past
train it like a pit bull
and sic it on your ass! (325)

All three of these poetic selections remember Shakur as a hero and position her within a tradition of black revolutionary female resistance that embraces the lineage of women warriors who have eschewed docility and silence for collective vocal protest against oppression. These poetic expressions of Shakur’s resistance exist as
cultural artifacts that demonstrate the flexible ways in which heroes are culturally constructed and remembered. In the company of such heroes as Nefertiti, Cleopatra, and Yaa Asantewa, the writers connect Shakur to the tradition of female leadership against neocolonialism in Africa, where these women wielded power and wealth to resist colonization and imperialism. By invoking Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, they place Shakur within the context of slavery and the resistance to slavery to which black women were central. And, in connecting her to Mary McLeod Bethune and Shirley Chisholm, Shakur is linked to the modern civil rights tradition that has been often described as one led entirely by men, despite the strong leadership of revolutionary black women. Although these women seem unconnected on the surface, they are all notable for their leadership qualities in the nations and organizations of which they were apart as well as for their tenacity, courage, and adaptability in the face of the multitude of dangers they faced by simply being women of color.

These comparisons heroize Shakur as a revolutionary warrior who will fight for and love her people in the way that Guevara explains, though these descriptions also feminize her activism. By underscoring the leadership of black women in revolutionary struggle as active and vocal participants in black liberation, these poets go beyond the gender politics eschewed by Guevara in his epigraph, and instead highlight the revolutionary politics and vanguard nature of black women throughout the course of human history. They strategically restore Shakur’s activism to the revolutionary past and they create space to understand black women and the uniquely female contributions to leadership they have historically made through their formal political power as well as through avenues like motherhood.

Conclusion

For her part, Shakur has posted several open letters on websites dedicated to her that elucidate her concerns about the future and the problems facing black youth and the hip hop generation, including police brutality and the prison-industrial complex. In her 1998 “Open Letter,” she writes:

But at this moment, I am not so concerned about myself. Everybody has to die sometime, and all I want is to go with dignity.... I am more concerned about our younger generations, who represent our future. I am more concerned that one-third of young blacks are either in prison or under the jurisdiction of the “criminal in-justice system.” I am more concerned about the rise of the prison-industrial complex that is turning our people into slaves again. I am more concerned about the repression, the police brutality, violence, the rising wave of racism that makes up the political landscape of the U.S. today. Our young people deserve a future, and I consider it the mandate of my ancestors to be part of the struggle to insure that they have one.

Here, Shakur reasserts her living martyrdom through the language of self-sacrifice that makes the struggle more important than her own life. She then re-centers police brutality, the prison-industrial complex, the death penalty, and political prisoners in the context of the poverty and racism that continue to characterize the racial landscape of the United States. Shakur talks about the importance of future generations in the struggle for black dignity and insists that they carry out the tradition of black resistance and, in this way, she utilizes the revolutionary black past as a rhetorical resource to express her hopes for the future.

But Shakur’s statements from exile also position black women at the center of black liberation struggle. In her 1995 “Message to My Sistas,” she says:

BLACK PEOPLE WILL NEVER BE FREE UNLESS BLACK WOMEN PARTICIPATE IN EVERY ASPECT OF OUR STRUGGLE, ON EVERY LEVEL OF OUR STRUGGLE. I think that Black women, more than anybody on the face of the earth, recognize the urgency of our situation. Because it is We who come face to face daily with the institutions of our oppression. And because it is We who have borne the major responsibility of raising our children. And it is We who have to deal with the welfare systems that do not care about the welfare of our children. And it is We who have to deal with the school systems that do not educate our children. It is We who have to deal with the racist teachers who teach our children to hate themselves. It is We who have seen the terrible effects of racism on our children. I JUST WANT TO TAKE A MOMENT OUT TO EXPRESS MY LOVE TO ALL OF YOU WHO RISK YOUR LIVES DAILY STRUGGLING OUT HERE ON THE FRONT LINES.

Here, Shakur emphasizes the importance of both collective female struggle as well as matrilineage in the survival and struggle of black people. In this way she acknowledges the struggles of black women as Paris does, but she is also encouraging black women to resist together because the exigency is so great and their children are at such great risks. Shakur highlights the specific ways in which women must be mobilized, not necessarily for themselves but for their children. For Shakur, maternity is a means through which one can wage a mighty war against white supremacy in all of its forms. And so, she sends out love to the women who struggle everyday, the warriors “on the front lines” fighting for their children’s future. It is this love ethic for her people that defines Shakur’s activism and is partially reflected in Common’s “Love Song for Assata” and fully reflected in
the comments by Mos Def and the poems by Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Tuiya Autry, and Walidah Imarisha.

Shakur’s presence in hip hop culture illustrates the legacy of her regenerative strategies on behalf of the Black Power movement. We can see hip hop activists positioning Shakur in varying degrees as a guerrilla leader, a living martyr, a feminized icon of struggle, and a mother—all of which are generated in Shakur’s writings. Her celebrity is heightened by her role as a hero at the forefront of the hip hop generation and it helps her to highlight the new agenda for Black Power agitation, which must deal with police brutality, prison polices, the death penalty and political prisoners, who were incarcerated for their movement leadership. Shakur’s importance as a hero in hip hop culture is incredibly important because as one in a long line of black women who have struggled for black liberation, her legacy is often overlooked in histories of the BPP or in civil rights more generally.

But her role as a hero extends beyond the borders of the United States. Fernandes explains:

Like the African American activists who visited Cuba in the 1960s and 1970s, from Stokely Carmichael to Angela Davis and Assata Shakur…African American rappers such as Paris, Common Sense, Mos Def, and Talib Kweli spoke a language of black militancy that was appealing to young Cubans. (91)

These American rappers, making their pilgrimage to meet and spend time with Assata Shakur, have brought their music and their messages of both love and struggle to the youth of Cuba, struggling under the repression of Castro. Through their connection with Shakur, rappers like Paris, Common, Mos Def, and Talib Kweli are helping to shape the social and political ideologies of the hip-hop movement in Cuba (92). In today’s shifting political climate, following Castro’s abdication to his brother Raul, the hip hop movement will have even more opportunities to shape the emerging political landscape. Hopefully, emerging hip hop traditions will embrace the legacy of revolutionary black women in the United States and abroad that have embraced the ethic of love that enables the practice of freedom.

In connecting love-talk and liberatory practice, the ties between rap music and revolutionary politics elucidate the importance of hip hop culture to revolutionary black life both historically and for future generations. In seeing the emergence of love-talk in Paris’ “Assata’s Song,” scholars can appreciate the importance of acknowledging the everyday struggles of black women to creating black memories and black history. And, by highlighting the love-talk in a song like Common’s “Love Song for Assata” that connects Assata Shakur to a revolutionary black past often ignored and heroizes her as a warrior who will fight for people resisting oppression, scholars can understand how love-talk emerges in hip hop to demonstrate the specific choices and sacrifices of black women in the movement for black freedom. Finally, by chronicling the leadership of black women in revolutionary struggle as active and vocal participants in black liberation, artists like Mos Def, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Tuiya Autry, and Walidah Imarisha go beyond the gender politics of early Third World revolutionary theory to highlight the revolutionary politics and leadership of black women throughout the course of human history. In connecting Assata Shakur to the vibrant history of revolutionary black women who are often forgotten and ignored in black history, hip hop artists strategically restore Shakur’s activism to the memories that build black history through a love-talk that is at once personal and political. This creates a rhetorical space to understand black women and the uniquely female contributions to leadership they have historically made through their formal political power as well as through avenues like motherhood. This essay, then, excavates a role for revolutionary love in both black history and black popular culture and demonstrates how memory connects the two in a way that highlights the contributions of black revolutionary women to black resistance.

Notes

1 Soul culture, in particular, promoted black liberation values like “black is beautiful” through film, music, and television (See. Guillory and Green, 1998).
2 Elaine Brown’s albums included Seize the Time and Elaine Brown (Brown, 1992, p. 306-12)
3 See also (Churchill and VanderWall, 1990/2002).
4 There is not enough space here to provide the history and politics of hip-hop, which have been tackled elsewhere in great length. See (Asante, 2008), (Reeves, 2008), (Ogbah, 2007), (Watkins, 2006), (Chang, 2005), (Kitiana, 2002), (George, 1999), (Henderson, 1996) and (Rose, 1994).
5 Rap is the music but hip hop is the culture that includes rap, breakdancing, graffiti culture, scratching, etc. In the most recent historiography of the Black Power movement, Peniel E. Joseph argues that the relationship between Black Power and hip hop culture are quite natural: “[f]or a generation of scholars who have come of age in an American social and political landscape marked by the rise of Hip Hop culture, the decline of the Civil Rights Movement, and conservative appropriation of that movement’s icons and ideals, Black Power offers radical activists whose lives and works resonate with intellectuals seeking to come to grips with a mean season of racial setbacks in American life” (Joseph 10).

6 At the scene, Sundiata Acoli was arrested and he was later convicted of the same crimes as Shakur. He is still a political prisoner. In New Jersey, anyone at the scene associated with a felony crime can be prosecuted for that crime, so Shakur was prosecuted for murder despite the fact that ballistics and medical examiners noted that due to a bullet through her wrist, she could not have fired a gun to kill Trooper Foerster. For a longer discussion of the shoot-out and subsequent trial, see (Williams 1993).
7 Although there are many other hip hop songs that deal with
revolutionary black politics, these are the only two hip hop songs that address Assata Shakur's participation in the Black Power movement in a substantive way.


9 In 2006, New Jersey Governor increased the bounty on Shakur’s head from $50,000 to $1,000,000 in an attempt to win support from the fraternal order of police in her bid for re-election. Nefertiti was Pharaoh Akhenaten’s wife and Queen in Egypt from c. 1370 BC to c. 1330 BC and scholars believe that she may have reigned after her husband’s death. Cleopatra was the wily Queen of Egypt whose alliances with Roman leaders Julius Caesar and Marc Antony to keep Egypt’s sovereignty are legendary. And, Yaa Asantewaa was Queen Mother in the Asante Confederacy in what is now Ghana. Scholars believe that she led the Ashanti Rebellion against British colonialism at the turn of the twentieth century. All three women of color were African warrior queens who served their people in struggles against occupation or colonialism and their stories connect the struggle of black Americans to the female revolutionaries that populate their African past.

10 Sojourner Truth was a black female orator who spoke at women’s rights conventions on the importance of suffrage for black women and Harriet Tubman was a principal architect of the Underground Railroad, which helped slaves escape slavery to the North and to Canada. Both of these black women risked their lives to revolutionized black people to fight against slavery and to resist colonialism and they are particularly important heroines to black women revolutionaries who seek to emulate them in word and deed.

12 Mary McLeod Bethune was a pioneer of the club movement among black women in the first half of the twentieth century as well as a civil rights activist and educator of black girls. Her tireless fight for education was a labor of love that highlights the importance of global knowledge to the struggle against oppression. Shirley Chisholm was the first black female member of Congress (D-NY) elected in 1968 and in 1972 she became the first black woman candidate for President on a major party platform. She created a diverse coalition of support for issues affecting inner city residents and she opposed the Vietnam War as well as American imperialism. She became an important hero for black women in particular because her work was dedicated to improving the lives of black people by building networks of supporters committed to a communal ethic of social justice. These two heroines are made significant contributions to the lives of black people, and black women in particular, as they struggled to emancipate blacks from the white supremacist policies of the U.S. government.

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