

OPEN LETTER FROM ASSATA SHAKUR

My name is Assata Shakur, and I am a 20th century escaped slave. Because of government persecution, I was left with no other choice than to flee from the political repression, racism and violence that dominate the US government's policy towards people of color. I am an ex-political prisoner, and I have been living in exile in Cuba since 1984.

I have been a political activist most of my life, and although the U.S. government has done everything in its power to criminalize me, I am not a criminal, nor have I ever been one. In the 1960s, I participated in various struggles: the black liberation movement, the student rights movement, and the movement to end the war in Vietnam. I joined the Black Panther Party. By 1969 the Black Panther Party had become the number one organization targeted by the FBI's COINTELPRO program. Because the Black Panther Party demanded the total liberation of black people, J. Edgar Hoover called it "greatest threat to the internal security of the country" and vowed to destroy it and its leaders and activists.

In 1978, my case was one of many cases brought before the United Nations Organization in a petition filed by the National Conference of Black Lawyers, the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, and the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, exposing the existence of political prisoners in the United States, their political persecution, and the cruel and inhuman treatment they receive in US prisons. According to the report:

The FBI and the New York Police Department in particular, charged and accused Assata Shakur of participating in attacks on law enforcement personnel and widely circulated such charges and accusations among police agencies and units. The FBI and the NYPD further charged her as being a leader of the Black Liberation Army which the government and its respective agencies described as an organization engaged in the shooting of police officers. This description of the Black Liberation Army and the accusation of Assata Shakur's relationship to it was widely circulated by government agents among police agencies and units. As a result of these activities by the government, Ms. Shakur became a hunted person; posters in police precincts and banks described her as being involved in serious criminal activities; she was highlighted on the FBI's most wanted list; and to police at all levels she became a 'shoot-to-kill' target."

I was falsely accused in six different "criminal cases" and in all six of these cases I was eventually acquitted or the charges were dismissed. The fact that I was acquitted or that the charges were dismissed, did not

mean that I received justice in the courts, that was certainly not the case. It only meant that the "evidence" presented against me was so flimsy and false that my innocence became evident. This political persecution was part and parcel of the government's policy of eliminating political opponents by charging them with crimes and arresting them with no regard to the factual basis of such charges.

On May 2, 1973 I, along with Zayd Malik Shakur and Sundiata Acoli were stopped on the New Jersey Turnpike, supposedly for a "faulty tail light." Sundiata Acoli got out of the car to determine why we were stopped. Zayd and I remained in the car. State trooper Harper then came to the car, opened the door and began to question us. Because we were black, and riding in a car with Vermont license plates, he claimed he became "suspicious." He then drew his gun, pointed it at us, and told us to put our hands up in the air, in front of us, where he could see them. I complied and in a split second, there was a sound that came from outside the car, there was a sudden movement, and I was shot once with my arms held up in the air, and then once again from the back. Zayd Malik Shakur was later killed, trooper Werner Foerster was killed, and even though trooper Harper admitted that he shot and killed Zayd Malik Shakur, under the New Jersey felony murder law, I was charged with killing both Zayd Malik Shakur, who was my closest friend and comrade, and charged in the death of trooper Foerster. Never in my life have I felt such grief. Zayd had vowed to protect me, and to help me to get to a safe place, and it was clear that he had lost his life, trying to protect both me and Sundiata. Although he was also unarmed, and the gun that killed trooper Foerster was found under Zayd's leg, Sundiata Acoli, who was captured later, was also charged with both deaths. Neither Sundiata Acoli nor I ever received a fair trial. We were both convicted in the news media way before our trials. No news media was ever permitted to interview us, although the New Jersey police and the FBI fed stories to the press on a daily basis. In 1977, I was convicted by an all-white jury and sentenced to life plus 33 years in prison. In 1979, fearing that I would be murdered in prison, and knowing that I would never receive any justice, I was liberated from prison, aided by committed comrades who understood the depths of the injustices in my case, and who were also extremely fearful for my life.

The U.S. Senate's 1976 Church Commission report on intelligence operations inside the USA, revealed that "The FBI has attempted covertly to influence the public's perception of persons and organizations by disseminating derogatory information to the press, either anonymously or through "friendly" news contacts." This same policy is evidently still very much in effect today.

On December 24, 1997, The New Jersey State called a press conference to announce that New Jersey State Police had written a letter to Pope John Paul II asking him to intervene on their behalf and to aid in having me extradited back to New Jersey prisons. The New Jersey State Police refused to make their letter public. Knowing that they had probably totally distort the facts, and attempted to get the Pope to do the devils work in the name of religion, I decided to write the Pope to inform him about the reality of "justice" for black people in the State of New Jersey and in the United States. (See attached Letter to the Pope).

In January of 1998, during the pope's visit to Cuba, I agreed to do an interview with NBC journalist Ralph Penza around my letter to the Pope, about my experiences in New Jersey court system, and about the changes I saw in the United States and it's treatment of Black people in the last 25 years. I agreed to do this interview because I saw this secret letter to the Pope as a vicious, vulgar, publicity maneuver on the part of the New Jersey State Police, and as a cynical attempt to manipulate Pope John Paul II. I have lived in Cuba for many years, and was completely out of touch with the sensationalist, dishonest, nature of the establishment media today. It is worse today than it was 30 years ago. After years of being victimized by the "establishment" media it was naive of me to hope that I might finally get the opportunity to tell "my side of the story." Instead of an interview with me, what took place was a "staged media event" in three parts, full of distortions, inaccuracies and outright lies. NBC purposely misrepresented the facts. Not only did NBC spend thousands of dollars promoting this "exclusive interview series" on NBC, they also spent a great deal of money advertising this "exclusive interview" on black radio stations and also placed notices in local newspapers.

DISTORTIONS AND LIES IN THE NBC SERIES

In an NBC interview Gov. Whitman was quoted as saying that "this has nothing to do with race, this had everything to do with crime." Either Gov. Whitman is completely unfamiliar with the facts in my case, or her sensitivity to racism and to the plight of black people and other people of color in the United States is at a sub-zero level. In 1973 the trial in Middlesex County had to be stopped because of the overwhelming racism expressed in the jury room. The court was finally forced to rule that the entire jury panel had been contaminated by racist comments like "If she's black, she's guilty." In an obvious effort to prevent us from being tried by "a jury of our peers the New Jersey courts ordered that a jury be selected from Morris County, New Jersey where only 2.2 percent of the population was black and 97.5 percent of potential jurors were white.

In a study done in Morris County, one of the wealthiest counties in the country, 92 percent of the registered voters said that they were familiar with the case through the news media, and 72 percent believed we were guilty based on pretrial publicity. During the jury selection process in Morris County, white supremacists from the National Social White People's Party, wearing Swastikas, demonstrated carrying signs reading "SUPPORT WHITE POLICE." The trial was later moved back to Middlesex County where 70 percent thought I was guilty based on pretrial publicity I was tried by an all-white jury, where the presumption of innocence was not the criteria for jury selection. Potential jurors were merely asked if they could "put their prejudices aside, and "render a fair verdict." The basic reality in the United States is that being black is a crime and black people are always "suspects" and an accusation is usually a conviction. Most white people still think that being a "black militant" or a "black revolutionary" is tantamount to being guilty of some kind of crime. The current situation in New Jersey's prisons, underlines the racism that dominates the politics of the state of New Jersey, in particular and in the U.S. as a whole. Although the population of New Jersey is approximately 78 percent white, more than 75 percent of New Jersey's prison population is made up of blacks and Latinos. 80 percent of the women in Jersey prisons are people of color. That may not seem like racism to Gov. Whitman, but it reeks of of racism to us.

The NBC story implied that Governor Christie Whitman raised the reward for my capture based on my interview with NBC. The fact of the matter is that she has been campaigning since she was elected into office to double the reward for my capture. In 1994, she appointed Col. Carl Williams who immediately vowed to make my capture a priority. In 1995, Gov. Whitman sought to "match a \$25,000 departmental appropriation sponsored by an "unidentified legislator." I watched a tape of Gov. Whitman's "testimony" in her interview with NBC. She gave a very dramatic, exaggerated version of what happened, but there is no evidence whatsoever to support her claim that Trooper Foerster had "four bullets in him at least, and then they got up and with his own gun, fired two bullets into his head." She claimed that she was writing Janet Reno for federal assistance in my capture, based on what she saw in the NBC interview. If this is the kind of "information" that is being passed on to Janet Reno and the Pope, it is clear that the facts have been totally distorted. Whitman also claimed that my return to prison should be a condition for "normalizing relations with Cuba". How did I get so important that my life can determine the foreign relations between two governments? Anybody who knows anything about New Jersey politics can be certain that her motives are purely political. She, like Torrecelli and several other opportunistic politicians in New Jersey came to power, as part-time lobbyists for the Batista faction – soliciting votes from right

wing Cubans. They want to use my case as a barrier for normalizing relations with Cuba, and as a pretext for maintaining the immoral blockade against the Cuban people.

In what can only be called deliberate deception and slander NBC aired a photograph of a woman with a gun in her hand implying that the woman in the photograph was me. I was not, in fact, the woman in the photograph. The photograph was taken from a highly publicized case where I was accused of bank robbery. Not only did I voluntarily insist on participating in a lineup, during which witnesses selected another woman, but during the trial, several witnesses, including the manager of the bank, testified that the woman in that photograph was not me. I was acquitted of that bank robbery. NBC aired that photograph on at least 5 different occasions, representing the woman in the photograph as me. How is it possible, that the New Jersey State Police, who claim to have a detective working full time on my case, Governor of New Jersey Christine Whitman, who claimed she reviewed all the "evidence," or NBC, which has an extensive research department, did not know that the photograph was false? It was a vile, fraudulent attempt to make me look guilty. NBC deliberately misrepresented the truth. Even after many people had called in, and there was massive fax, and e-mail campaign protesting NBC's mutilation of the facts, Ralph Penza and NBC continued to broadcast that photograph, representing it as me. Not once have the New Jersey State Police, Governor Christine Whitman, or NBC come forth and stated that I was not the woman in the photograph, or that I had been acquitted of that charge.

Another major lie and distortion was that we had left trooper Werner Foerster on the roadside to die. The truth is that there was a major cover-up as to what happened on May 2, 1973. Trooper Harper, the same man who shot me with my arms raised in the air, testified that he returned to the State Police Headquarters which was less than 200 yards away, "To seek aid." However, tape recordings and police reports made on May 2, 1973 prove that not only did Trooper Harper give several conflicting statements about what happened on the turnpike, but he never once mentioned the name of Werner Foerster, or the fact that the incident took place right in front of the Trooper Headquarters. In an effort to hide his tracks and cover his guilt he said nothing whatsoever about Foerster to his superiors or to his fellow officers.

In a clear attempt to discredit me, Col. Carl Williams of the New Jersey State Police was allowed to give blow by blow distortions of my interview. In my interview I stated that on the night of May 2, 1973 I was shot with my arms in the air, then shot again in the back. Williams stated "that is absolutely false. Our records show that she reached in her pocketbook,

pulled out a nine millimeter weapon and started firing." However, the claim that I reached into my pocketbook and pulled out a gun, while inside the car was even contested by trooper Harper. Although on three official reports, and when he testified before the grand jury he stated that he saw me take a gun out of my pocketbook, he finally admitted under cross-examination that he never saw me with my hands in a pocketbook, never saw me with a weapon inside the car, and that he did not see me shoot him.

The truth is that I was examined by 3 medical specialists: (1) A Neurologist who testified that I was immediately paralyzed immediately after the being shot.

(2) A Surgeon who testified that "It was absolutely anatomically necessary that both arms be in the air for Mrs. Chesimard to receive the wounds." The same surgeon also testified that the claim by Trooper Harper that I had been crouching in a firing position when I was shot was "totally anatomically impossible."

(3) A Pathologist who testified that "There is no conceivable way that it [the bullet] could have traveled over to hit the clavicle if her arm was down." he said "It was impossible to have that trajectory" The prosecutors presented no medical testimony whatsoever to refute the above medical evidence.

No evidence whatsoever was ever presented that I had a 9-millimeter weapon, in fact New Jersey State Police testified that the 9-millimeter weapon belonged to Zayd Malik Shakur based on a holster fitting the weapon that they was recovered from his body.

There were no fingerprints, or any other evidence whatsoever that linked me to any guns or ammunition.

The results of the Neutron Activation test to determine whether or not I had fired a weapon were negative.

Although Col. Williams refers to us as the "criminal element" neither Zayd, or Sundiata Acoli or I were criminals, we were political activists. I was a college student until the police kicked down my door in an effort to force me to "cooperate" with them and Sundiata Acoli was a computer expert who had worked for NASA, before he joined the Black Panther Party and was targeted by COINTELPRO.

In an obvious maneuver to provoke sympathy for the police, the NBC series juxtaposed my interview with the weeping widow of Werner

Foerster. While I can sympathize with her grief, I believe that her appearance was deliberately included to appeal to people's emotions, to blur the facts, to make me look like a villain, and to create the kind of lynch mob mentality that has historically been associated with white women portrayed as victims of black people. In essence the supposed interview with me became a forum for the New State Police, Foerster's widow, and the obviously hostile commentary of Ralph Penza. The two initial programs together lasted 3.5 minutes – me – 59 seconds, the widow 50 seconds, the state police 38 seconds, and Penza – 68 seconds. Not once in the interview was I ever asked about Zayd, Sundiata or their families. As the interview went on, it was painfully evident that Ralph Penza would never see me as a human being. Although I tried to talk about racism and about the victims of government and police repression, it was clear that he was totally uninterested.

I have stated publicly on various occasions that I was ashamed of participating in my trial in New Jersey trial because it was so racist, but I did testify. Even though I was extremely limited by the judge, as to what I could testify about, I testified as clearly as I could about what happened that night. After being almost fatally wounded I managed to climb in the back seat of the car to get away from the shooting. Sundiata drove the car five miles down the road carried me into a grassy area because he was afraid that the police would see the car parked on the side of the road and just start shooting into it again. Yes, it was five miles down the highway where I was captured, dragged out of the car, stomped and then left on the ground. Although I drifted in and out of consciousness I remember clearly that both while I was lying on the ground, and while I was in the ambulance, I kept hearing the State troopers ask "is she dead yet?" Because of my condition I have no independent recollection of how long I was on the ground, or how long it was before the ambulance was allowed to leave for the hospital, but in the trial transcript trooper Harper stated that it was while he was being questioned, some time after 2:00 am that a detective told him that I had just been brought into the hospital. I was the only live "suspect" in custody, and prior to that time Harper, had never told anyone that a woman had shot him.

As I watched Governor Whitman's interview the one thing that struck me was her "outrage" at my joy about being a grandmother, and my "quite nice life" as she put it here in Cuba. While I love the Cuban people and the solidarity they have shown me, the pain of being torn away from everybody I love has been intense. I have never had the opportunity to see or to hold my grandchild. If Gov. Whitman thinks that my life has been so nice, that 50 years of dealing with racism, poverty, persecution, brutality, prison, underground, exile and blatant lies has been so nice, then I'd be more than happy to let her walk in my shoes for a while so she

can get a taste of how it feels. I am a proud black woman, and I'm not about to get on the television and cry for Ralph Penza or any other journalist, but the way I have suffered in my lifetime, and the way my people have suffered, only god can bear witness to.

Col. Williams of the New Jersey State Police stated "we would do everything we could go get her off the island of Cuba and if that includes kidnaping, we would do it." I guess the theory is that if they could kidnap millions of Africans from Africa 400 years ago, they should be able to kidnap one African woman today. It is nothing but an attempt to bring about the re-incarnation of the Fugitive Slave Act. All I represent is just another slave that they want to bring back to the plantation. Well, I might be a slave, but I will go to my grave a rebellious slave. I am and I feel like a maroon woman. I will never voluntarily accept the condition of slavery, whether it's de-facto or ipso-facto, official, or unofficial.

In another recent interview, Williams talked about asking the federal government to add to the \$50,000 reward for my capture. He also talked about seeking "outside money, or something like that, a benefactor, whatever." Now who is he looking to "contribute" to that "cause"? The Ku Klux Klan, the Neo Nazi Parties, the white militia organizations? But the plot gets even thicker. He says that the money might lure bounty hunters. "There are individuals out there, I guess they call themselves 'soldiers of fortune' who might be interested in doing something, in turning her over to us" Well, in the old days they used to call them slave-catchers, trackers, or patter-rollers, now they are called mercenaries. Neither the governor nor the state police say one word about "justice." They have no moral authority to do so. The level of their moral and ethical bankruptcy is evident in their eagerness to not only break the law and hire hoodlums, all in the name of "law and order." But you know what gets to me, what makes me truly indignant? With the schools in Paterson, N.J. falling down, with areas of Newark looking like a disaster area, with the crack epidemic, with the wide-spread poverty and unemployment in New Jersey, these depraved, decadent, would-be slave-masters want federal funds to help put this "nigger wench" back in her place. They call me the "most wanted woman" in Amerika. I find that ironic. I've never felt very "wanted" before. When it came to jobs, I was never the "most wanted," when it came to "economic opportunities I was never the "most wanted, when it came to decent housing." It seems like the only time Black people are on the "most wanted" list is when they want to put us in prison.

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 the growing poverty, the growing despair that is rife in Amerika. I am more concerned about our younger generations, who represent our

future. I am more concerned that one-third of young black 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. They have the right to live free from political repression. The U.S. is becoming more and more of a police state and that fact compels us to fight against political repression. I urge you all, every single person who reads this statement, to fight to free all political prisoners. As the concentration camps in the U.S. turn into death camps, I urge you to fight to abolish the death penalty. I make a special, urgent appeal to you to fight to save the life of Mumia Abu-Jamal, the only political prisoner who is currently on death row.

It has been a long time since I have lived inside the United States. But during my lifetime I have seen every prominent black leader, politician or activist come under attack by the establishment media. When African – Americans appear on news programs they are usually talking about sports, entertainment or they are in handcuffs. When we have a protest they ridicule it, minimized it, or cut the numbers of the people who attended in half. The news is big business and it is owned operated by affluent white men. Unfortunately, they shape the way that many people see the world, and even the way people see themselves. Too often black journalists, and other journalists of color mimic their white counterparts. They often gear their reports to reflect the foreign policies and the domestic policies of the same people who are oppressing their people. In the establishment media, the bombing and of murder of thousands of innocent women and children in Libya or Iraq or Panama is seen as "patriotic," while those who fight for freedom, no matter where they are, are seen as "radicals," "extremists," or "terrorists."

Like most poor and oppressed people in the United States, I do not have a voice. Black people, poor people in the U.S. have no real freedom of speech, no real freedom of expression and very little freedom of the press. The black press and the progressive media has historically played an essential role in the struggle for social justice. We need to continue and to expand that tradition. We need to create media outlets that help to educate our people and our children, and not annihilate their minds. I am only one woman. I own no TV stations, or Radio Stations or Newspapers. But I feel that people need to be educated as to what is going on, and to understand the connection between the news media and the instruments of repression in Amerika. All I have is my voice, my spirit and the will to tell the truth. But I sincerely ask, those of you in the Black media, those of

you in the progressive media, those of you who believe in truth freedom,
To publish this statement and to let people know what is happening. We
have no voice, so you must be the voice of the voiceless.

Free all Political Prisoners, I send you Love and Revolutionary Greetings
From Cuba, One of the Largest, Most Resistant and Most Courageous
Palenques (Maroon Camps) That has ever existed on the Face of this
Planet.

Assata Shakur
Havana, Cuba