

Black Suffering in Search of the “Beloved Community”: Political Imprisonment and Self-Defense

Joy James*

Introduction

The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled...the cry is always the same: “We want to be free.”

-- Martin Luther King Jr.

The concept of the “beloved community,” as a desirable and achievable American phenomenon that encompasses black freedom, can be traced to human rights activist and pacifist Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.

January is the month of King’s birth. April – the time of Easter and political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal’s birthday – is the month of King’s assassination.

In remembrance, we would rather recall King’s entry into the world. The birth of any baby – with sustenance and protection from a mother possessing the same – offers promise. A prince of peace born in the winter and murdered in the spring can be immortalized if his life struggles and violent death are viewed as necessary sacrifices for the greater good. King surely knew that Jesus was both a *black* Jew and a *political* prisoner. He like so many of his era understood blacks as being political captives occupying a unique position in society, unique but universal to the human condition of struggle for liberation.

* Joy James is Professor of Humanities at Williams College and Visiting Scholar of African and African Diaspora Studies at University of Texas, Austin. Her works include *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in U.S. Culture* (1996), *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics* (1999, 2002), and *The New Abolitionists: (Neo) Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings*, Ed. (2005)

Some witness the hieroglyph of scars imprinted on the enslaved, and see spirit and malevolence singing about the black body in the diaspora. King preferred Negro spirituals. Yet the diaspora reflects multiple forms of communication about the gravity of antiblack racism. When the Rastafarians reframed Psalms 137, the Melodians and Bob Marley held sway as Jamaicans personalized the bible to black suffering, mapping the rivers of Babylon into the Atlantic slave trade's genocidal logic:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down
Ye-eah we wept, when we remembered Zion.

When the wicked
Carried us way in captivity
Required from us a song
Now how shall we sing the lords song in a strange land

Old Testament corollaries to Marley's rendition of the self-defense ballad, "I Shot the Sherriff," exist. However, these would be repudiated by King who, guided by the New Testament, Ghandi, and love, saw only one redemptive route out of black suffering. There were other routes though to be explored by radical freedom lovers.

The mandate for nonviolent civil disobedience

King gave the 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech/sermon on the Washington Mall, mesmerizing an international audience with the image of the beloved community where all god's children can play together. The March on Washington occurred in the absence of W.E.B. Du Bois, the intellectual victim rebel of so much suffering and resistance on American soil. Du Bois chose to die in Ghana, an exile from the United States that had sought to imprison him during the McCarthy era for his socialist views and anti-racist activism. Du Bois had a passion for justice, much like that of anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells whom he helped to marginalize and alienate from the NAACP, an organization that would eventually itself alienate and oust Du Bois. Despite his contradictions, he understood the value of revolutionary struggle. W. E. B. Du Bois maintained that his biography on John Brown, a book largely shelved by his white liberal publishers because of its content, was the favorite of the many he authored. For forty days and nights white abolitionist militarist John Brown was held captive as a political prisoner for the antebellum raid on Harper's Ferry; then the state executed him. In service to the underground movement, Harriet Tubman had found a compatriot in Brown. Naming themselves the heirs to Brown's legacy, a century later, white

militant anti-racists, such as Marilyn Buck – released from a California prison in 2010 to die from cancer among her beloved community in New York City – would support the Black Liberation Army, an off-shoot of the Black Panther Party, formed in response to violent state repression.

Historical political imprisonment, black suffering, and death have become familiar—forming a backdrop to everyday reality. Premature violent death and captivity cease to astonish or seem unusual in this landscape. They no longer register as political phenomena. Consequently, when suffering blacks and their rare militant allies break into rebellion, most people seem surprised and outraged. They seem less disturbed by the repression, which they accept in resignation or complicity, and more by the resistance.

According to the state, no suffering warrants rebellion; although “freedom from tyranny” is one of its hallmark phrases. Perhaps what is explicitly meant, but only implied, is that no black suffering warrants rebellion.

King had to think critically, as he grappled with an emotional landscape littered with bodies, trauma, and social and physical death. (Initially, he focused on the domestic scene; later as had Malcolm, he became an internationalist, fluent in the language of global suffering but alphabetized in black vulnerability and resistance). Some of King’s best thinking occurred while he was either imprisoned or being threatened with death, which was likely most of his days and nights as an activist for social justice and peace. Although influenced by the teachings of Jesus, Ghandi, Thich Nhat Hahn, Martin Luther King, and other activists, still needed the transcendent, beloved community as a political phenomenon and escape. One’s instinct for self-preservation forms one’s mode of self-defense and shapes pragmatic politics that are useful.

This is the irony or paradox. Political resistance could kill you, well actually the state could in response to your resistance, but the beloved community could save you. Not from physical death. Nothing would do that, not even god. But from meaningless death and despair. One does not negotiate with the state’s use of terror, violent and premature death (actual physical death or disappearance through incarceration). One opposes it and in that opposition finds meaning in black suffering.

Given the scope and urgency of the suffering rooted in black captivity, questions persisted: “What is to be done?” or King’s “Where do we go from here, chaos or community?” Martin King answered in the 16th April 1963,

“Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” There he writes that, having waited more than 340 years for our Constitutional and God-given rights, we must break unjust laws through civil disobedience in order to alleviate our suffering and the suffering of others. He states essentially that nonviolent crimes against the state are a moral mandate. (Hence the adamant opposition by Republican party visionaries – from Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan to present day spokesmen – to King, and by extension “his” holiday). King qualifies as he strategizes from his jail cell in Birmingham. Addressing the charges against him by clergy who demand “Why protests in Easter season?” he delineates the principles of struggle. Principled participants in a nonviolent campaign must: 1. determine the facts of injustice; 2. negotiate; 3. engage in self-purification; 4. take direct action.

He does not explicitly state what one should do when: 1. facts are on your side but few listen; 2. negotiations fail because you lack existential or monetary capital; 3. self-purification becomes self-mortification; 4. direct action is met by state violence.

There are other primary questions, that King does not address, to ask about our suffering and our activism: What is its relationship to black political death and political prisoners? How is it relevant to the issues of sexual violence and exploitation of black women, children, and LGBT communities? What are sustainable commitments and organic organizing for black freedom? How shall we remember the political dead and disappeared?

Remembering the Dead as Political Phenomena

State indifference towards, or complicity in, antiblack political violence makes certain passings first frighteningly significant, then hazily familiar, and finally depoliticized memory. When one fails to recognize political trauma as domination, one is more likely to personalize and internalize violence rather than move against. So, the beloved community seems to be immobilized, preoccupied with personal rather than political issues, avoiding a conversation about and with the dead.

What is black death in American democracy but a political phenomenon? We observe political passings – from premature death, assassination, disappearance into prisons for decades – as museum pieces, far removed in emotive and intellectual importance from our personal lives and present traumas. We are troubled by current black sufferings fueled by the “new Jim Crow” or “neoslavery” in a punitive mandate, organized by a racially driven state, increasingly fragmenting us through poverty, abuse of power and

predation. Yet our language is rarely considered political when we speak of these challenges and the fragmentation that dismembers the beloved community that King promised we would see from the mountaintop.

King died the year before the FBI engineered killings of Black Panther Leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in Chicago on 4th December 1969. The joint FBI and Chicago police raid on Panther headquarters killed the twenty-something revolutionaries in their apartment while they slept. The black and white images captured in the documentary *Eyes on the Prize, Part II, A Nation of Law?* disturb my students screening self-defense organizing (the original name of the Party, sparked by police killings of unarmed black male, was the Black Panther Party for Self Defense) that preceded their births by several decades. Perhaps it is not only the blood soaked mattress and Fred's bleeding skull that no one dares to cradle that stuns them into suffering. Perhaps they grieve the remorseful narrative of the FBI informant, William O'Neil, who was coerced into providing detailed drawings of the apartment to the police – and who committed suicide after the documentary was made public – apparently because there is no room for his suffering on these shores. I imagine that the twenty-something students in the privileged classroom want what they cannot or will not name. Not the self-indulgence of revenge; the crimes are too old and revolutionary struggles too distant. Yet their shock and outrage at the vulnerability of the black body is apparent; and the US government's \$1.8million dollar settlement to the young black Panthers who survived, or the family members of those who did not, does not muffle mute calls for “self-defense.”

Self-emancipated political prisoner Assata Shakur repeats the demand for self-defense in her memoir, *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987). Exiled in Cuba, with a million dollar “dead or alive” bounty on her head, Shakur writes of her youth and of her work in the Black Panther Party. As a child she confides that she could not participant in civil rights nonviolent civil disobedience training advocated by King because the thought of some white racist spitting on her with the mandate that she turn the other cheek shocked her. Should there be a limit to suffering, even the redemptive kind? Shakur emphatically answers “Yes” and is consistent in this affirmation. As a teenager, she successfully resists a “train” or gang rape from black teens by threatening to destroy the vases and lamps of one youth's mother's apartment where she is trapped. Later driven underground by a murderous FBI that has targeted her and her work in free breakfast programs and sickle cell testing clinics, she is shot by New Jersey State Troopers. Retaliating for the death of one of their own (who, unlike Assata's slain companion Zayd Shakur, may have died from “friendly fire”), troopers torture her while “guarding” her as she lays

shackled to a hospital bed awaiting trial. There are acquittals and hung juries in several trials, and court malfeasance before she is convicted. While incarcerated, prison doctors actively “encourage” her to abort through miscarriage her daughter. Through all, Assata Shakur rebels. She fights as a political prisoner. She gives birth to a healthy daughter who eventually permits her to be a grandmother – of the revolutionary kind. Shakur survives to author an influential memoir, one that embodies the fugitive slave rebel, and lives, for now, to tell the tale of black suffering, resistance, and state violence. She wrestles with the community, asking for more for the present, the captive, the “free,” the young, the yet to be born.

Wrestling with the Beloved Community

[W]e've got to give ourselves to this struggle until the end. Nothing would be more tragic than to stop at this point...We've got to see it through....either we go up together, or we go down together...Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness...

-- Martin Luther King, Jr. “I’ve been to the Mountaintop”

The FBI and the CIA’s clandestine counterintelligence programs, documented in Shakur’s memoir and the Freedom Archives documentary *Cointelpro 101*, devastated black liberation movements. The long arm of state violence with its international human rights violations extended farthest into black communities to inflict pain on bodies organizing for democratic rights and self-defense in search of the beloved community. In the 1960s, during rebellions against racism, the FBI’s counterintelligence program led future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall to report the activities of SNCC students as subversive radicals when he worked with the NAACP. FBI agents sent Martin Luther King Jr. anonymous letters suggesting he commit suicide before being exposed as a moral fraud. Through associates and journalists, the FBI influenced republican integrationist Alex Haley while he edited and posthumously completed *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

We belong to a beloved community that has an extensive police file, and a bottomless bag of dirty tricks historically deployed by the state to foster black suffering reserved especially for it. That bag encompasses whatever enables black suffering to serve others. Centuries old machinations reinvent themselves. The 3/5th clause in the US Constitution, without racial referent, gave southern presidential candidates greater electability as their slaves garnered electoral votes: Sally Hemings “voted” for Thomas Jefferson, as did her children by him, allowing the author of the virulently racist *Notes on the State of Virginia*, to defeat his presidential rival John Adams in 1800.

Following the civil war, the Thirteenth Amendment “rectified” the 3/5th clause by legalizing slavery for those duly convicted of a crime, which in the postbellum era included blacks seeking economic or political equality. The convict prison lease system was not only the source of massive suffering and premature and violent death for captive blacks after Reconstruction; it was also a vehicle for the transference of black wealth to whites.

Today, the shipping of black and brown bodies from New York City into upstate New York prisons increases census numbers and federal resources for largely white conservative congressional districts while diminishing federal dollars and votes for black/brown urban districts: prisoners are counted where their jail cells are although they cannot vote. Current political mandates (most incarceration stems from nonviolent drug offenses) have led to the majority of the 2 million imprisoned being black and latino while the majority of illicit drug consumers are white. The presence of political prisoners in the United States, such as Jalil Muntaqim, Sundiata Acoli, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Mutulu Shakur, is rarely discussed.¹ Political prisoners cannot be easily interwoven into our everyday history, particularly for those who trace their lineage of antiracist struggle only to King. Most political prisoners were and are not pacifists. They will not be mainstreamed and sanitized as icons for national holidays. Their belief in self-defense is more tied to chaos than

¹ In December 2010, a small group waited and hoped for outgoing New York Governor David Patterson to do “the right thing” in offering clemency, parole, or some relief to black political prisoners, most of them incarcerated for their roles in the Black Liberation Army, an offshoot of the Black Panther Party, formed because of state violence against activists. Although President Bill Clinton had provided clemency to white and Puerto Rican political prisoners on his last day in office, no presidential act or signature brought relief to black suffering. In his 2010 position paper, political prisoner Mutulu Shakur references the book of Leviticus, and the biblical mandate to free political prisoners every 50 years. That text remained unfamiliar to state officials in their responses to African Americans. Governor Patterson, who is black, did parole or pardon several latinos with immigration and criminal violations, and one black man, John White, who had shot and killed a white seventeen year old Daniel Cicciano in August 2006. Cicciano had appeared with other white youths on White’s lawn late on August 9th, threatening harm to his family, particularly his teenage son who had been falsely accused of harassing a white female youth by text at a party. Racial epithets, white threats of killing black bodies allegedly sparked memories John White held of the lynching of a male relative in the South. So, although it was Long Island, New York, he brought an old family gun outside and the weapon, he testified, accidentally went off. Cicciano died. White went to jail. Patterson later stated that he regretted not informing the Cicciano family before this act of state forgiveness. The governor’s political gesture to ease black suffering in a politicized world made no mention of black political prisoners also incarcerated for what they define as self-defense in which the deaths of white police occurred.

organized, structured community. The question is what is our relationship to them, political violence, and their quest for freedom not just for themselves but also for the beloved community.

Conclusion: “It Doesn’t Really Matter What Happens Now”

*Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place.
But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will.
And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over.
-- Martin Luther King Jr.*

The demise of individual or collective humanity leads us to mourn what we never accomplished, either as individual or community. Regret over loss of time, ability, and will to forge a memorable life is a form of suffering. This is particularly true, if one mourns a life that sought to forgive all failings, one’s own and those of one’s oppressors, but still demanded justice.

We know that suffering unfolds or folds in upon itself even if no one immediately talks; yet we still lack a shared, common language for political violence. Death and mourning are universal human traits. Black suffering and black resistance are part of the human condition conditioned by white supremacy, imperialism and capitalism, homophobia, patriarchy, female, and child sufferings. We share universality with the particularities of black suffering that suggest that this wilderness experience has lasted too long.

King did not live long enough to wander in retirement. At thirty-nine, he was still young by Western standards. At Memphis gatherings where King spoke, thousands came; police arrested hundreds, injured scores, and shot and killed sixteen-year-old Larry Payne.² His last speech in Memphis foretold his premature, violent demise. There were constant reminders of longevity’s elusiveness. King recalls them in his “I’ve been to the mountaintop” speech: the mentally disturbed black woman who stabbed him at a book signing in New York City, and the letter from the little white girl who wrote King that she was so glad that he did not sneeze and rupture his aorta; the firebombing of homes; the constant death threats. The coup de grace: the sniper’s shot awaited him at the motel balcony in Memphis.

²The strike would end when King’s widow, Coretta Scott King, and others led a march in Memphis, while President Johnson forced a resolution to the strike addressing the human rights violations of black workers.

We are not surprised. Death stalks us as a political reality. Striking sanitation workers mobilized when inclement February weather, and Jim Crow laws banning blacks from the city's "white only" shelter, forced several men to climb into the back of a garbage truck to escape the rains. The accidental starting of crushing machinery birthed a Memphis militancy unseen since Ida B. Wells confronted the lynchings of her law abiding fictive kin.

Memphis was King's last service to and in search of the beloved community. The challenging promise he leaves us with, in addition to his confidence that we will make the climb, is how we will care for, defend ourselves and reconcile ourselves to political imprisonment on the journey.