

You're listening to *A People's Anthology*. Produced by Boston Review, this is a podcast that highlights and explore key texts from US history, with our first six episodes surfacing a few important documents related to the urban rebellions of the 1960s and 70s.

This is episode six, our season finale, on Assata Shakur's essay, *Women in Prison: How it is With Us*, introduced by Jackie Wang and read by Aja Monet

So I just think that Assata, overall, is someone who has... a beautiful soul.

The teacher, poet, and revolutionary Assata Shakur was born in Flushing Queens. She became a socialist during her college years, and after a visit to the Oakland chapter of the Black Panthers, she joined the Party. Eventually Assata became head of the Harlem Panthers, and went on to join the Black Liberation Army—a loosely organized, underground offshoot of the Black Panthers, which advocated guerilla warfare against the US government. As Assata described in 1973, “the idea of the Black Liberation Army emerged from conditions in Black communities: conditions of poverty, indecent housing, massive unemployment, poor medical care, and inferior education... The Black Liberation Army stands for freedom and justice for all people.” She became the target of federal surveillance for this work.

So around this period there was intense state repression particularly targeting the Black Panthers. the most notorious form is the FBI's COINTEL Program, so their Counter-Intelligence Program... and in 1971 when COINTEL PRO was disbanded it evolved into the joint terrorism task force.

So Assata was someone who was intensely scrutinized and harassed and a target of these state programs. The event led to her ultimate incarceration was a shoot-out that happened in 1973 on the New Jersey turnpike. And I won't go too much into the details—

Assata: *To make a long story short, I was captured in New Jersey in 1973 after being shot with both arms in the air. Then shot again from the back.*

Here's a recording of Assata herself, describing the incident.

Assata: *I was left on the ground to die, and when I did not I was taken to a hospital where I was tortured. In 1977, I was convicted in what can only be described as a legal lynching.*

Jackie: — *basically the outcome of the trial was Assata was convicted of first degree murder and Assata was sentenced to life in prison*

Assata wrote this essay, *Women in Prison: How it is With Us*, during this time she spent in Rikers in New York. But it's about so much more than just her experience. She focuses on ALL the women in the prison, their experiences with racism, and their relationships with one another:

Over 95 percent of the women Assata encountered were poor black and Puerto Rican women. And she notes that the effects of racism were not only material but psychic as well. And she's troubled by what she thinks is a lack of solidarity between women.

So there is a part in the text where she says that men in prison will often refer to each other as brothers and there's political mobilization. But she said that she heard women call each other bitch and whore more than they called each other sister. So Assata also observed that black liberation and women's liberation struggles had not reached the women she encountered. The women develop coping mechanisms to manage their pain such as drugs and entertainment.

This is something you can tell reading the text that deeply troubles Assata. She found that women blame themselves for the oppression that they experienced.

But this couldn't be further from the truth. As Jackie describes, the state targeted the poor and especially poor people of color through incarceration, in conjunction with a program of austerity.

It's not white-collar criminals who go to prison, it's poor people who go to prison. And their poverty and their survival is criminalized.

So prison reproduces both white supremacy and capitalismmass incarceration is happening alongside deindustrialization white flight and the hollowing out of cities... And what we're seeing happening is prisons expand to absorb the people in the urban centers who are left behind.

So this is really the backdrop during this political moment. We're seeing rates of incarceration skyrocketing, but it's not because people have suddenly decided to commit more crime — we're seeing massive expansion of prison and policing infrastructure as a way to quote unquote solve social problems that politicians don't actually care about solving.

And this is actually you know using the prisons and police rather than investment in public infrastructure for health care and housing. This is something that Assata addresses in the text. So she writes about how when women hit rock bottom they subconsciously get themselves arrested so they can get clean and access health care... you know these women are are developing this dependency on prison itself because there's a failure to provide public infrastructure jobs livelihood health care for these poor women of color.

Assata recognized how women were criminalized for their survival and their willingness to defend themselves. This is a long-standing feature of the US prison system.

So there's been a lot of headlines recently about the decline in jail populations across the country. But it actually hasn't been the case for women in particular.

I want to emphasize the attention Assata brings to the issue of the criminalization of women for their survival.

And this is something that people have been organizing around in recent years so there have been a lot of campaigns to free women who have been convicted of assault or murder for self-defense. So in particular there is the case of Marissa Alexander who was threatened with 60 years in prison for defending herself against an abusive husband. So ultimately she served three years, and she also served two years of house detention and it was really a national campaign that led to her being released early.

And we've also seen organizing around getting sex workers and trans women in particular released — women who have defended themselves and been criminalized for their survival.

So there was also a national campaign to free C.C. McDonald who is a black trans woman who was assaulted by a white supremacist transphobic man and she was convicted of manslaughter and a national campaign led to her being released early so she was released after serving 19 months.

So Assata you know writing in the 1970s is bringing this issue to our attention. Women of color are being locked up for fighting for their survival. Where Marissa Alexander was tried and sentenced was the same place George Zimmerman was —

The cop who murdered Trayvon Martin, and got off free claiming “self defence.”

And yet Marisa Alexander, a black woman, went to jail... for firing a warning shot. Self-defense laws don't protect women of color.

Assata's own story didn't end in prison.

In 1979 she escaped from prison with the assistance of members of the Black Liberation Army who succeeded in breaking her free.

It is thought that Assata lived underground before making her way to Cuba where she was granted political asylum in nineteen eighty four. While living in exile she referred to herself as a 20th century escape slave.

Assata: *I have advocated and I still advocate revolutionary changes in the structure of the US...I advocate self-determination for all oppressed people inside the United States. Abolition of racist policies... if that is a crime, then I am totally guilty.*

As far as we know, Assata has continued to live in exile in Cuba.

[You can find the full text of *Women in Prison* [here](#)]

You've been listening to episode six of A People's Anthology, featuring Assata Shakur's essay "Women in Prison: How it is with us"

The text was read by Aja Monet, an activist and poet who co-founded the Dream Defenders and Smoke Signals Studio — and author of "My Mother Was a Freedom Fighter". It was introduced by Jackie Wang, black studies scholar, poet, and author of *Carceral Capitalism*.