

ASSATA SHAKUR STUDY GROUP

"Assata: An Autobiography" by Assata Shakur | Chapter 13, pages 203-207



The most important organization on my list to check out was the Black Panther Party headquarters in Oakland. I had a whole lot of respect for the Party and had been heavily influenced by it, as had almost everyone around my age that i knew. Every time we heard about Huey Newton and Bobby Seale standing up to the power structure, we slapped five and said, "Yeah!" As far as i was concerned, the Panthers were "baaaaaad." The Party was more than bad, it was bodacious. The sheer audacity of walking onto the California senate floor with rifles, demanding that Black people have the right to bear arms and the right to self-defense, made me sit back and take a long look at them. And the more political i became, the more i appreciated them. Panthers didn't try to sound all intellectual, talking about the national bourgeoisie, the military-industrial complex, the reactionary ruling class. They simply called a pig a pig. They didn't refer to the repressive domestic army or the state repressive apparatus. They called the racist police pigs and racist dogs.

One of the most important things the Party did was to make it really clear who the enemy was: not the white people, but the capitalistic, imperialistic oppressors. They took the Black liberation struggle out of a national context and put it in an international context. The Party supported revolutionary struggles and governments all over the world and insisted the u.s. get out of Africa, out of Asia, out of Latin America, and out of the ghetto too. I had gotten to know some of the Panthers in New York when they spoke at the lectures we invited them to at Manhattan Community College. I made it my business to drop by some of the New York Black Panther Party offices and offered to help them with this or that, whatever needed to be done. I was happy to do it. I barely opened my mouth. I just looked, listened, and worked. Some of the comrades would ask why i didn't join. "I probably will, someday," i'd always answer.

When i heard on the radio that the New York Panthers had been busted, i was furious. The so-called conspiracy charges were so stupid that even a fool could see through them. The police actually had the audacity to charge them with plotting to blow up the flowers in the Botanical Garden. And the 21 were some of the baddest, most politically educated sisters and brothers in the Party. It was an insult. I thought about joining the Party right then, but i had some other things i wanted to do and i needed a low profile in order to do them.

As much as i dug the Party, i also had some real differences with its style of work. As i opened the front gate of the Oakland headquarters, i felt just as nervous about going inside as i did about the Doberman pinschers running around the yard. A brother opened the door and i nervously blurted out that i was from New York and had come to check out the Party. He acted like he **was** glad to see me and brought me into a room to meet some of the other Panthers. A group of sisters and brothers were sitting around the room, laughing and talking. They greeted me casually, passing over a chair for me to sit in. Artie Seale was there and i had to control myself to keep from gawking at her. I wondered how **she** felt with her husband in jail, being railroaded and bound and gagged in kourt. I recognized the names of others. It was strange to be there in a room with those people. It was like sitting down on the pages of a history book.

They asked me about New York, and i told them what **was** happening with the Black students at Manhattan Community College, CCNY, and the Black student movement in general, the antiwar movement, Black construction workers, and whatever other work i was involved in at the time. I told them i had **done** some work for the New York Panthers and ran off a list of the ones i knew. Somebody asked my why i had never joined the Party.

Half stammering, i told them i had thought about it but had decided not to. "Why?" everybody wanted to know. It was hard for me to say it because i felt so much love and respect for the sisters and brothers seated there, but i knew i'd hate myself if i didn't say what was on my mind: that i had been turned off by the way spokesmen for the Party talked to people, that their attitude had often been arrogant, flippant, and disrespectful. I told them i preferred the polite and respectful manner in which civil rights workers and Black Muslims talked to the people rather than the arrogant, fuck-you style that used to be popular in New York. I said they cursed too much and turned off a lot of Black people who would otherwise be responsive to what the Party was saying.

When i had finished, i waited nervously, fully expecting them to jump all over what i had said. To my profound surprise, nobody did. Everybody agreed that if that was, in fact, how Party members were relating to the people, they should change at once. One of the sisters pointed out that there was a leadership crisis in the New York chapter caused by the arrest and imprisonment of the Panther 21. It was well known by everybody in the movement that the New York police had kidnapped the most experienced, able, and intelligent leaders of the New York branch and demanded \$100,000 ransom for each one. One of the brothers explained that the Panthers were facing the same problem all over the country because of persecution by the pigs. We spent the rest of the afternoon rapping about the Black struggle in New York and in the u.s. in general. I was deep in a discussion about strategy and tactics when Emory Douglas came in. I was as happy as a bee in a pollen factory to meet him. I dug his artwork a lot and had even taped a piece he had written on revolutionary art to my closet door. We hit it off at once and, when everybody finished rapping, he took me up to see how the Black Panther newspaper was put together.

I was truly impressed by the Panthers in Oakland. After my first visit, i dropped in at their offices regularly. I visited some of the other branches in the area, talking to the people and asking my usual ton of questions. I spent a couple of nights working at the distribution center for the Party paper, which was located in the Fulton district in San Francisco. It was a trip! The papers wouldn't get picked up from the printer until late in the evening, and people would work until the wee hours sorting them out and preparing them for distribution to the Panther offices all around the country. Panthers worked there, but the majority seemed to be sisters and brothers from the neighborhood who had just dropped in to give the Panthers a hand. A lot of young people were there and some elderly sisters and brothers. As we wrapped the papers in bundles, printed addresses, and counted out papers, we sang Panther songs and marching chants. Every now and then, a few stepped outside to sip a little bitter dog. This was supposedly a Panther invention made of red port and lemon juice. It wasn't too bad, once i got used to it, and by the time 1 A.M. came around, i loved it. Working on the paper distribution didn't even seem like work—it was more like a party. Somebody always gave me a lift home and i would fall into a happy sleep feeling refreshed and renewed.

It was splashed across the papers, blaring on the radio, and yet i still couldn't believe it. The face of the serious young man with the

gun refused to leave my thoughts. I must have picked up the same newspaper and put it down a hundred times. This shit was serious! Seventeen years old with a rifle under his raincoat. Seventeen years old and taking freedom into his own hands. Seventeen years old and defying the whole pig power structure in amerika. Seventeen years old and dead. Tears i didn't even know i had poured out. I got on the phone to find somebody who could explain it all. Who was Jonathan Jackson? Who was the young man who came to free a revolutionary Black prisoner, holding a district attorney and a pig judge hostage, shouting, "We are the revolutionaries! Free the Soledad Brothers by 12:30"? Who was he?"

I had only vaguely heard of the Soledad Brothers. A brother who knew all about the case broke it down to me. Three unarmed Black prisoners were shot down in the yard by a white guard. A grand jury ruled it "justifiable homicide." After the verdict, a white guard was found dead. Three politically conscious Black prisoners were charged with the murder and thrown into solitary. They all faced the death penalty. John Clutchette, Fleeta Drumgo and George Jackson were the brothers charged with the murder. George Jackson, a brilliant revolutionary theorist and writer, was Jonathan Jackson's brother.

I couldn't get the whole thing out of my head. Why were grown men and women living while Jonathan Jackson lay dead? What kind of rage, what kind of oppression, and what kind of country shaped that young man? I felt guilt for being alive and well. Where was my gun? And where was my courage?

I was dry-eyed when i attended the funeral. There were hundreds of people. We could barely get into the church. They set up a loudspeaker outside so that people could hear the sermon. Black Panthers, solemn and determined, marched in military formation. I was so, so glad they were there. Black people need someone to stand up for us or we will always be victims. I held my arms real close to me, feeling a bit unraveled. Life for us gets so ugly. If i stay a victim it will kill me, I thought. It was time for me to get my shit together. I wanted to be one of the people who stood up. These were serious times.

Angela Davis was running for her life. They had hooked her up with Jonathan Jackson, charged her with kidnapping and murder at the kourthouse, even though she was nowhere on the set. They charged her with murder because they claimed that some of the guns used belonged to her. She was one of the most beautiful women i had ever seen. Not physically, but spiritually. I knew who she was, because i had been keeping clippings of her in my file. She

was the sister who got fired from her job teaching at a California college because she told everybody she was a communist and if they didn't like it, they could go to hell.

But i wasn't surprised. They will charge Black people with anything, using any flimsy excuse. We were very glad they hadn't caught her. I hoped they never would. The air was charged, everything was happening so fast, and i wasn't blind anymore. I was seeing things straight, seeing them more clearly than ever before. I had so many things to do. If you are deaf, dumb, and blind to what's happening in the world, you're under no obligation to do anything. But if you know what's happening and you don't do anything but sit on your ass, then you're nothing but a punk.

I tried to explain how i felt to some of the people i knew. I wanted to struggle on a full-time basis. They urged me to join the Panther Party. I went over in my mind all the criticisms i had of the party. They had said, "You'll be good for the Party, and the Party will be good for you. The Party is only as strong as its people." It made a lot of sense to me. For the first time in months i felt calm and sure of what i was going to do. I told them that the first thing i was going to do when i returned to New York was join the Party.

I thought about it all the way home. Of all the things i had wanted to be when i was a little girl, a revolutionary certainly wasn't one of them. And now it was the only thing i wanted to do. Everything else was secondary. It occurred to me that even though i wanted to become a revolutionary more than anything else in the world, i still didn't have the slightest idea what i would have to do to become one.