Of Black Revolutionaries and Whig Histories: Using Assata in the Classroom

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Of Black Revolutionaries and Whig Histories: Using *Assata* in the Classroom

CHERYL GREENBERG

MOST STUDENTS IN MY history classes today have, I am delighted to say, a basic knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement. Both black and white students know the names of Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X. They are aware of the bus boycotts and *Brown v. Board* and have heard King’s “I Have a Dream” speech at least annually. Those from predominantly black neighborhoods know a few more names and events. This reflects the success of a generation of historians who have tried to bring textbooks up to date, identify structures that contributed to social and civic inequality, and discuss history—at least occasionally—from the bottom up.

Despite these efforts, however, or perhaps as the price for inclusion into the mainstream narrative, the Civil Rights Movement has been taught in the grand tradition of the Whig school, in which American history is a slow but inexorable trek from inequality to equality, from injustice to justice, from an imperfect to a more perfect union. Thus, and to overstate the case only slightly, King and Parks (and, some add, Malcolm X) brought full equality to black people, aided by a government that rose to the challenge. If students have encountered the Black Panther Party or other more radical groups, they know them as extremists who derailed progress or provoked race riots. Today, my white students and even some of my black students believe that such strife is behind us as we march into the twenty-first century united and basically bias free.

I need not explain to *JAEH* readers the many ways this narrative is partial or incorrect and how dangerous the distortions are. Therefore, I design my courses on African American history and on race to undermine almost as much understanding as (I hope) they provide. The implied lack of agency for black people in general and the silence around mass and grassroots organizing, the lethal dangers facing activists, the opposition of government officials even at the highest levels, and the ongoing reality of inequality and bigotry all require emphasis and explanation.

My students often resist these revisions to the triumphal narrative. They unsettle the safe and reliable world these students hope to inherit. Generally
most difficult for them to accept are the extreme claims of the Panthers and others who accused the government of working deliberately, illegally, and unethically to undermine civil rights activity and restrict black opportunity. They know about the Ku Klux Klan but struggle to come to grips with COINTELPRO. And fewer still believe that the evil and corruption reached down so far from J. Edgar Hoover to northern judges in courthouses or northern cops on the beat (although my African American students generally find it more plausible than do my white students, raised with Officer Friendly).

For these reasons, I have been assigning Assata (1987), the memoir of Assata Shakur (JoAnne Chesimard). She was a Black Panther accused of killing a police officer; she escaped from prison before she could be tried. If that background is not enough to confirm my students’ assumptions that the Panthers were extremists and criminals, her editorial decision not to capitalize state institutions and her persistent use of “amerika” to suggest the nation is no better than the Klan, will.

Over the course of the book, however, students become uneasy, then angry and militant themselves. The egregious violations of police procedure and legal practice, her unconscionable treatment in a number of prisons, and the charade put on by government representatives turn many of my students from embracing to repudiating their earlier understanding of the Civil Rights Movement. The book’s explorations of central issues of civil rights history leave students open to other challenges to the ubiquitous master narrative, more willing to question pat assertions and glib reassurances, whether or not they agree with her conclusions. None of my students so far have become terrorists or disillusioned expatriots, but they do become more critical thinkers, less likely to take the claims of authority figures (including me) at face value. And that, I believe, is the intellectual legacy of the Civil Rights Movement—that we should question assumptions, consider the views of the least among us, and think for ourselves.

I do not mean to suggest that in my courses we do not praise King or Parks. Nor do I minimize the monumental successes the movement had. Indeed, texts like Assata lead students to celebrate civil rights victories even more passionately for having achieved all they did against such substantial odds. Rather, what I have found this book helps to do is lead students toward better critical thinking and greater appreciation for the struggle of masses of black people who were (and are) necessary for any political success. Its usefulness depends not at all on acceptance of her historical and political arguments but rather on the direct engagement with those arguments offered by critical readings of the text.
Assata raises a number of issues central to the study of race, social movements, and African American history. We often begin with the writing itself and its relationship to her political claims. Why does she refuse to use capital letters for some (but not all) places and titles? Why spell America with a “k”? What does she mean when she writes that JoAnne Chesimard was her “slave” name? What is the significance of naming—here, in the black community, in society as a whole?

She answers most of these questions by embedding them in the deeper social and political challenges facing African Americans. Living within the harsh limits of Jim Crow segregation, her family members celebrated their culture and demanded respect as black people. At the same time, she found a great deal of self-hatred within the community. I ask my students to consider how both pride and self-hatred might coexist, the challenge of maintaining one’s dignity under a system that so deeply denied black people respect, and the impact all this might have on black people (especially children) and on the shaping of the movement.

We also examine her exploration of history and socioeconomics. Historically, for example, she links the ideas of Booker T. Washington and the Talented Tenth concept of Du Bois, usually considered at odds with one another. Even more interesting, she endorses their arguments, although most scholars see both as fundamentally conservative while she considers herself a radical. Do we need to rethink our understanding of these thinkers or challenge her interpretation?

She similarly accepts the notion that there is a culture of poverty, an argument many contend blames the victims for their own lack of success. How significant do students believe culture is? And, broadening our discussion, I often ask whether they think the experiences of white ethnic groups differ in this regard from those of racial groups. This allows us to explore concepts of race and ethnicity, notions of the racialized “other,” and the historical roots of America’s sense of race as a black–white binary.

Assata’s emphasis, however, lies less with history than with politics. She identifies two sometimes contradictory factors undergirding oppression: race and class. Although she slips back and forth between the two with little evident awareness of the shift, both sets of claims provide wonderful material for discussion, not only of each one separately, but of the relationship between the two.

Over and over in the book, Assata argues that race determines politics. On a personal level, she routinely distrusts white people, including leftist lawyers who volunteer to advise her, and believes all black people are on
her side, from black nurses to black jurors and prison guards. I ask my students whether this is a legitimate position, using the opportunity to explain the notion of racial essentialism. To what extent are such claims valid? More generally, Assata details the problems she believes face black people from every walk of life and identifies all people of color everywhere as victims of white racist imperialism. This provides an ideal opening for a discussion of capitalism, radicalism, political alliance-building, racism, and globalization, as well as the consequence (and the legitimacy) of viewing people solely as victims. What might she mean when she claims that, in or out of prison, she has never felt free—indeed, that no black American has ever felt free? (60).

Elsewhere, Assata identifies capitalism, not racism, as the primary culprit, even noting on occasion that one cannot presume that all black people share interests. Instead, and with little apparent awareness that she herself presumed this, she suggests instead that all working-class people suffer, and she calls on radicals to welcome all who oppose colonialism, capitalism, and their evil consequences. (A 1973 radio broadcast she made from Cuba after she escaped from prison, reproduced on pp. 49–50, concisely articulates both racial and class arguments.) I ask my students not which argument is correct, but rather in what ways and to what extent each is persuasive. And I use this as an opportunity to explore structural racism, the interrelationship of institutions of economic advancement and racism.

*Assata* invites such a discussion of structural racism, given its extended descriptions of the criminal justice system, or what activists label the “prison-industrial complex.” Regardless of her innocence or guilt, Assata’s rights seem to be violated consistently, from the inappropriate behavior of judges and prosecutors in the courtroom to the unconscionably harsh and medically dangerous conditions she endured in prison. She asserts that many other imprisoned women were victims as well. We are forced to confront the question of whether rules of justice in fact protect us and to wonder what benefit might be gained by the extended and punitive incarcerations of so many poor and black people.

We confront questions of gender through this book as well. What difference does it make that Assata is female, I ask my students. How is she treated differently by others because of her gender, and what difference does her gender make to her? We compare the barriers and challenges posed by gender and by race. We also consider our earlier assumptions about civil rights leadership and gender and why we might have made such assumptions. In the first instance we are evaluating gender as a real factor in people’s lives;
in the second we are exploring social presentations of gender and pondering what purposes they serve.

There is much else in the book that might profitably be explored, from whether or not students believe she is guilty of the murder (she never says) to whether it is accurate to call African Americans’ lower life expectancy and greater levels of poverty and drug use “murder.” (51). Assata identifies herself as a “Black revolutionary” (49), but what do we understand her vision (or the Panthers’ vision) of the new order to be? Do we believe that violence is ever justified in the pursuit of these goals? And do we believe disruptive activities like those of COINTELPRO are ever justified against a perceived revolutionary threat?

While not all students are persuaded by Assata’s arguments, and although we challenge her views as often as not, the book provides a useful springboard from which to begin these important conversations. Assata has allowed me to move beyond the Panthers and even beyond the Civil Rights Movement to a number of broader issues regarding race and social structures. It has helped my students recognize multiple perspectives and makes them newly open to the nuances, complexity, and ambiguity inherent in a sophisticated understanding of race in America.

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