

The True History of an Oppressed People

As seen through the eyes of Assata Shakur

In 2013 Joanne Deborah Chesimard, otherwise known as Assata Shakur, was added to the FBI Most Wanted Terrorist list. The list consists of fugitives such as Mohammed Atef and Osama bin Laden that were involved in attacks such as the 1998 United States embassy bombings and 9/11.¹ In other words, this list contains those considered as the worst of the worst. Assata Shakur was the first woman in history to be added to this list. One must therefore assume her deeds and crimes must have been horrendous, right? According to the FBI, this is apparently still the case. As of writing in 2021, Assata still lives in hiding somewhere in Cuba, while she remains the only woman on the FBI Most Wanted Terrorist list. So do her crimes justify her spot on the list? Or is history impaired by those in power? An interesting question for a devoted reader of *Activist Autobiographies from the 1960's*.

Whether the depiction of history is truly diluted by those in power is often debated by historian and philosophers. An absolute unbiased telling of history is considered impossible. Yet, we are left to speculate whether the things we are taught in our history books aren't politically motivated, especially when it comes to the history of minorities and the oppressed. While reading *Assata: An Autobiography*, I was surprised by how often the author highlights her growing understanding of African-American history. At first, Assata acknowledges history as it is presented to her. Throughout her life, her perception changes as she learns more about the true plight of African-Americans across history. As Assata puts it bluntly: "*I realised that the true history of any oppressed people is impossible to find in history books.*"² A line from her Autobiography that highlights the importance of looking critically at the portrayal of contemporary history. As a consequence, Assata's Autobiography fuelled my interests for the history of African-Americans.

Therefore, I have decided to write an essay in order to seek an answer to my question: "How does Assata Shakur's Autobiography demonstrate the diluted telling of the American history?"

In the first paragraph I will define what I mean by the diluted telling of American history. In the second paragraph I will emphasize examples of historic discrepancies as portrayed in *Assata: An Autobiography*. In the third paragraph I will offer arguments against the historical discrepancies mentioned in the previous paragraph. Finally, I will offer a short summary of the arguments. With an carefully weighed analysis of these arguments, I will provide an answer to the questions whether Assata Shakur's Autobiography demonstrates the diluted telling of American history.

¹ FBI Most Wanted Terrorist List, <https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/terrorism/> (accessed 13-12-2021).

² Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago 1987).

The Diluted telling of African-American History

Every historian, philosopher, activist, or literate person has at least once come across the phrase: “History is written by the victors”. The phrase implies the obvious, our history is not grounded in facts. Rather, it’s the winner interpretation of these facts that ends up being written down and passed on to the next generation. As historian Drew Maciag puts it beautifully: “*The mushrooming of social and cultural history not only undermined the premise of objectivity by revealing that historical narratives but are always partial—historical interpretations and political.*”³ This shows us how often history can become impaired when those in power decide what is to be accepted as “History” and what is to be forgotten, hidden or removed. In *Assata: An Autobiography* the exact lines: “History is written by the victors”, are never paraphrased. However, it’s message rings clear throughout the chapters. Assata provides a series of examples where she sheds light on the lesser-known history of African Minorities in the United States. The history of African-Americans, from their horrendous journey across the Atlantic, all the way up to the rise of civil rights movement and the continued struggle in modern times, seems to be filled with diluted facts and misconceptions.

For example, a telling article from *The Journal of African American History* by V.P. Franklin sheds light on the historical amnesia that plagues most Americans.⁴ Despite recent research on the transatlantic slave trade, most Americans believe that slaves were powerless and had no influence in the course of their lives.⁵ History differs, as Franklin writes: “*While some engaged in armed rebellion and petit marronage (running away), others chose to accommodate to the circumstances and collaborate with the slaveholders to survive and possibly advance their individual situations.*”⁶ Sources like these reveal the profound significance of the African-American contribution to their history in America. However, they also show how distorted the telling of history can become.

In Assata’s *Autobiography*, the way she recollects her memories of the American education system is especially telling. The *Autobiography* allows for a personal dive into the history of America that is presented to students in the 1960’. Take for example Assata’s early fascination with Abraham Lincoln. She writes how appealed she was to the president, proudly memorizing and reciting “*O Captain My Captain!*” by Walt Whitman in the fourth grade. Later on in her life she realises how diluted that early depiction of Lincoln truly was as the sole liberator of the slaves. As Assata puts it in her own words regarding her 4th grade teacher: “*Mr. Trobawitz taught us “fairy-tale history,”*” but at

³ Maciag, Drew, ‘History is Written by the (Pyrrhic) Victors’, *Reviews in American History* 44:1 (2016) 160-166.

⁴ V. P. Franklin, ‘Ending the Transatlantic Slave Trade: Bicentennial Research, Reflections, and Commemorations’, *The Journal of African American History* 93:4 (2008) 471-473.

⁵ V. P. Franklin, ‘Ending the Transatlantic Slave Trade: Bicentennial Research, Reflections, and Commemorations’, 473.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 472.

least he made it interesting.”⁷ To an extent one can understand why history is diluted down to make things more comprehensible, especially if you’re teaching children at a young age. However, never in *Assata: An Autobiography* is there any effort by the educational institutions to rectify this by teaching expressing the “darker side” of American history when it comes to American minorities.⁸ This shapes our perception of history, and only by being critical and digging deeper into the facts, do we tend to find a more accurate depiction of history.

As Joe Kaplan from The University of Puget Sound notes in his analysis of *Assata’s Autobiography*: “*What makes the ethnocentrism of history so important in Assata’s Autobiography, is the way she recollects her memories of the American education system. The deeply-rooted anti-Blackness continues to distort her legacy in American history and memory.*”⁹ Kaplan describes his sentiment towards the diluted telling of history in the education system by highlighting Assata’s discovery of the silences in history that have erased the presence of Black resistance in America.¹⁰ This is symbolised by the way she describes learning about the life of Nat Turner. The discovery of Nat Turner’s slave rebellion inspired her to dig through her mother’s extensive book collection, never once encountering the name Nat Turner.¹¹ Another strong depiction of the diluted telling of African-American history.

In the words of Angela Davis: “*Her message helps us to hold on to that sense of historical continuity as we reflect on the way racist violence in our contemporary world seems to recapitulate the violence of the past.*”¹² The historical continuity of our contemporary world is plagued by historical dilution, which can cause the recapitulation of violence. Therefore it’s important that we remain critical in perceiving history. Assata’s words remind us of this importance. Knowing this, I would define the diluted telling of the American history as follows; The unambiguous bending, neglecting, and withholding of historical facts associated with American minorities for the betterment of an Ethnocentric historical narrative.

Examples from the Autobiography

As mentioned briefly in the previous paragraph, there are strong example of how Assata symbolises this dilution of history. In this paragraph I will offer a more in depth review of the most telling examples from Assata’s *Autobiography*. The first examples that struck me as especially telling is the way Assata

⁷ Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 33.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Kaplan, Joe, "Assata Shakur: The Battle for Memory in the Imagined Borderlands" (2015) (*Summer Research* 260, University of Puget Sound) 1-50.

¹⁰ Kaplan, "Assata Shakur: The Battle for Memory in the Imagined Borderlands", 21.

¹¹ Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 175.

¹² Angela Y. Davis, The Past, Present, and Future of Assata's Message, *The Feminist Press* (2018) 46:3-4 pp. 232-234.

describes the American Civil War. Here the diluted telling of history in American classrooms of the 1960' comes across firmly. Assata gives a detailed description of how she was taught in primary school that the Civil War was fought to free slaves. Not until college did she found out that, like most wars, it was fought for economic reasons.¹³ In reality, Northern Industrialist were fighting for control over the American economy. The world was industrializing, and the thought of Southern States industrializing formed a treat to the economy of the Northern States. The North, in contrary to their Southern counterpart, did not have access to free labour in the form of slaves. In short, Assata describes that the abolishment of slavery was not morally but mostly economically and politically motivated, in contrast to what is taught in contemporary history books.¹⁴

Assata mentions the Lincoln and Civil War multiple times in her Autobiography. Especially when she quotes direct statements, the impaired telling of history is presented. For example, Assata quotes Abraham Lincoln on his famous reply to editor Horace Greeley in 1862 about the purpose of the Civil War: *"My paramount objective in this struggle is to save the Union, and it is not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without the freeing of any slave, I would do it and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving other alone, I would do that also."*¹⁵ In the Autobiography, Assata goes into more depth concerning the history of the Civil War. Such as Lincoln's enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act, which allowed Southern slave owners to reacquire their escaped slaves in Northern states. This resulted in the right for any white man with a "certificate of ownership" to kidnap any "free" Black man, woman or child in the North and force them into slavery.¹⁶

Evermore, the president that is celebrated as the liberator of African-Americans, was a firm believer in the exportation of African-Americans. As Assata writes: *"In 1865, at the end of the war, he asked General Butler to explore the possibility of using the navy to remove Black people to Haiti or to other areas in the Caribbean and South America."*¹⁷ These serve as convincing examples of how the history of African-Americans was not truthfully nor accurately taught to the next generations. Instead, Assata was taught the defined "fairy-tale version of history".

Not only African-Americans suffer this fate of a diluted telling of history by their oppressors, other American minorities struggle with this as well. Assata vividly describes her visit to Alcatraz as an assistant to a doctor who volunteered at the prison. The prison island was being used at the time by Native Americans that we're protesting a long series of treaties broken by the government. During her time there she learned a lot about the history of the tribes present at Alcatraz. Assata writes how her

¹³ Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 34.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 176-179.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

perception of American Indians was based on what she was taught in school and had seen in museums. When she got to Alcatraz, she realised that most of that “history” turned out to be lies invented by the establishment. An example that struck me was the notion of scalping. Most people will assume that Indians and scalping are inseparable, most movies or history books mention that the custom was a Native American invention. Assata describes how scalping was actually an old European custom, brought over when the first settlers came to America. Only in response to massive genocides at the hands of the settlers, did Native Americans themselves take to scalping their foes to incite fear.¹⁸

Lastly, another striking example that comes from Assata’s Autobiography is her depiction of Communism when she comes into contact with some African students. She describes how they joined into conversation about the war in Vietnam. Assata describes how she was stunned to hear about the history of Vietnam, its exploitation under French colonialism, and America’s intentions in safeguarding their economic and military interests in the region. When they came across the topic of Communism, Assata details what she had learned in school. Which is somewhat comical and depressing at the same time. To quote her own words: *“My image of communists came from a cartoon. It was a spy with a black trench coat and a black hat pulled down over his face, slinking around corners. In school, we were taught that communists worked in salt mines, that they weren’t free, that everybody wore the same clothes, and that no one owned anything. The Africans rolled with laughter.”*¹⁹ Another bizarre yet compelling depiction of how impaired the telling of history can be.

Arguments against Dilution

In evaluating the arguments made by Assata in her Autobiography, what can’t be left unmentioned is the constructed nature of Autobiographies. In Assata’s Autobiography one can catch a glimpse of cynicism in her writing. Typically related to renunciatory Autobiographies, written soon after the events transpired can result in emotional bias. This is also the case for Assata, since her Autobiography was written shortly after she escapes prison and fled to Cuba. According to D.R. Beike and J.W. Ransom, we often see that our memory system constructs memories consistent with our current goals and the current sense of self. Additionally, memories that are inconsistent with this current state of mind can be left out of Autobiographies.²⁰ Therefore, her depiction of historical facts can be influenced by this current state of self. This would ironically imply that by making the case for the diluted depiction of American history, she is impaired in her own telling of history. To illustrate, perhaps her earliest conception of communists was less cartoonish as she ended up describing in the

¹⁸ Ibidem, 199.

¹⁹ Ibidem, 151.

²⁰ ²⁰ D.R. Beike and J.W. Ransom, ‘Episodic and Semantic Systems of Autobiographical Memory’, The Encyclopedia of Human Behavior (Second Edition) (2012) pp. 61-67.

Autobiography.²¹ This arguments are however hard to verify. Perhaps all telling of history is simply subject to some sort of bias. An interesting subject for further research.

If we look critically as Assata's reference to the Civil War. The evidence of Lincoln statements seem difficult to rebuke. However, in an article from *The Journal of Southern History*, the argument is presented that if Lincoln's only goal had been to preserve the Union, he could have accomplished that goal through compromise with the south.²² As mentioned early however, this is not the same as teaching young children that Abraham Lincoln is the sole liberator of African-American slaves and that this liberation was driven by morality and warm-hearted sympathy towards slaves.

When it comes to the history of scalping enemies. Historians remain somewhat debated about who actually invented the gruesome custom. According to an article from *The William and Mary Quarterly*, there is plenty of evidence of scalping in early archaeological site across Europe and of Englishmen scalping Englishmen during the American war of Independence. However, there is also evidence showing pre-Columbian scalping among Native Indians and of Natives perfecting the practise extensively across early American conflicts.²³ This does not diminish the fact that contemporary history heavily depicts the custom as exclusively Native American. As Axtell and Sturtevant describe in their article, the constant depiction by colonist of Indians scalping Europeans formed the image of the Native American as the scalpers of the world.²⁴

Lastly, we have to consider bias due to external dictates of the genre of Autobiographies. The most famous example of this problem comes from Malcom X his Autobiography. Where frictions existed between Alex Haley and Malcom X. This ongoing debate centres around whether Haley acted primarily as the "writer" or rather as the "interpreter".²⁵ What the author puts to paper and what eventually ends up being published can differ. I believe no Autobiography can completely escape this fate. For Assata there was no friction between her and a dictator. However, we might never know what was eventually cut or edited by a publisher or editor. This dilemma symbolises the external dictates of the genre.

Concluding

The diluted telling of American history comes down to the unambiguous bending, neglecting, and withholding of historical facts associated with American minorities for the betterment of an

²¹ Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 151.

²² Norman, Matthew, "Reviewed Works: Abraham Lincoln and White America by Brian R. Dirck; Lincoln and Race. Concise Lincoln Library by Richard Striner.", *The Journal of Southern History* 79:3 (2013), 714-716.

²³ Axtell, James, and William C. Sturtevant, "The Unkindest Cut, or Who Invented Scalping.", *The William and Mary Quarterly* 37:3, (1980) 451-472.

²⁴ Axtell, James, and William C. Sturtevant, "The Unkindest Cut, or Who Invented Scalping." 465-467.

²⁵ Garrett A. Felber, "'A Writer Is What I Want, Not an Interpreter': Alex Haley and Malcolm X—Conceiving the Autobiographical Self and the Struggle for Authorship", *Souls* (2012) 12:1, 33-53.

Ethnocentric historical narrative. Having analysed *Assata: An Autobiography*, several telling depictions of the impaired telling of American history are mentioned. The lengths of distance between what is taught in the American education system and what actually happened seem so far apart, that one can hardly rebuke the fact that the history of American minorities is diluted. Even if we consider that the historical examples from Assata's Autobiography aren't flawless and are subject to debate by historians. They are not compatible to what Americans perceive as the history of minorities in America. The external dictates and the constructed nature of Autobiographies are not to be neglected. Yet, it's frail to dismiss the diluted telling of American history on the basis that all Autobiographies are subject to bias. If anything, it shows that no telling of history can be completely unbiased.

Concluding, Assata's Autobiography tells a powerful first-hand experience of the perception of history. It tells the story of a woman who always remained willing to learn and look critically at what was presented to her as historical fact. *Assata: An Autobiography* shows that finding the truth about history is a joined effort of critical discovery and analysis. Assata's words teach us not to accept everything that's presented to us, especially when it comes to the history of the oppressed minorities of America.

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