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What's a Black Man Doing Here In ZapatistaLand?

Journey Into the 'Mississippi' of Mexico

Ashanti Omowali Alston

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riences, readings, doings, reflections, and minute experimentations. If one puts it in terms of Potential, then I'm simply saying that I been wasting a lot of it and I'm at the point of Fannie Lou Hamer's 'Tired of being tired.' I choose to be here in Zap Land as a first step, as a concrete step in a 'recovery' process. A sort of like my own N/A or AA for Revolutionaries. Shit and/or git off the pot...

The Zapatistas did.

— you still procrastinate, sit back, half-participate, be liberal, walk around not happy, et cetera, et cetera...

The life I have created is somewhat a living hell. Hard on myself? I say no. Oppression — oppression. Here at La Realidad you see a beautiful land and people who are very poor, but a people who are surviving as best they can. We know why there's poverty here. Mexico is a kapitalist nation, seemingly 'annexed' formally by NAFTA to the u.s. empire...Babylon. They're the same pigs we fight, resist and all that. The u.s. is a real muthafucka, believe me. People wanna be free, happy, prosperous in a good way, communal. Why can't they be? Cuz of home-grown and international global kapitalist interests who use all forms of official and unofficial military and slick methods to keep order. So what does it matter, today, where people be? The vast majority of the world's people are being fucked over by local and global vested interest groups. And it hurts. It hurts me to see these kids' bright, laughing, smiling, giggling, curious faces and know that — without a doubt — without UNCOMPROMISING REVOLUTION, INSURRECTION — they are doomed to an on-rushing misery and elimination they'll not fathom. But somehow they'll come to accept it as out of their control.

What does it matter? Here amidst physical poverty, or in Babylon amidst a glittering psychic poverty. Baudrillard's Hyper-Reality? So, though the oppression 'we' suffer and the wealth and power 'they' maintain is awesome and frightening and MORE COMPLEX THAN MOST CAN EVER IMAGINE — revolution, insurrection, revolt is still a do-able. Power to the People, yall! That's why I's so pissed at me. Cuz the Great Refusal, the creative People's Intervention IS still a do-able. It's the how and the fact that I have some ideas on the 'how.' It's that I aint moved on offering them, as in doing all that I can to HELP get the Revolution on the road.

I aint no genius. I claim no special magic. Just a muthafucka who has some shit to offer out of the crucible of my own expe-

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New York City who Dema and Sara know. Small World? Small world.. Oh, you gotta feel this breeze...

THE ACTION/PLAN JOURNAL

February 25th

This is the journal I keep to record my thoughts on what I'm doing, plan to do, and where I'm going with my life. Politically and otherwise. Here I am in Mexico, in La Realidad. Look it up on the map. A community way deep in the mountains of Chiapas. Why am I here, I ask you, Ashanti? Ashanti? I'm a strange bird, right? Using my vacation to be way off into Zapatista Land where there's no or lil' modern civilization. Indigenous people walking around barefoot. Chickens and whatnot un-caged. What is it? Well, Ashanti's tired. Tired of a lot of shit, but most of all TIRED OF ME, my procrastinating ways, my depression, my living a half-life, my ...whatever. Revolution, revolution. Revolutionary. Stop oppression. Create a new way, or ways of live happy, creative, responsible, non-authoritarian, self-determining lives. Hmm?

February 26th

I figure I been wasting my life for the last oh, say, eleven almost twelve years. Its been that long since I been out of prison. Living a half-life is what I say. When you have grown wise from experience, when you have read 1,000 books, when you have trained, been trained in a lot of good stuff (like organizational skills, sex education, counseling skills, group participatory learning techniques, etc.). And knowing that this was what you wanted because of how moved you were by psychological insights into movement failure (fuck Cointelpro! That was minor and it became our movement 'scapegoat.'))

March 9th — The Ancient Ruins of Tulum and its Beach Resort

Last day. We'll be heading back to Babylon tomorrow. It's 6:30 a.m. I been up about an hour. Had to go to the bathroom. A BATHROOM! Here at Tulum, a resort of sorts, we have our lil' hut, and I do mean little. When I got up it was still dark but getting light slowly. So, I made my way to the bathroom which is straight up about two flight of extremely high New York stairs and behind the restaurant. As I walked back to the hut I notice the beginnings of that sunrise and got my (Kai's) camera, books and journals. Gonna foto that sunrise off the edge of the ocean then sit down at the restaurant table to do some reading, writing, whatever. It's nice. Oh, I should tell you that Tulum sits on the ocean edge. You can tell that an ancient city existed here. Now, you can imagine what this colorful sunrise looks like from this beach? Mm! Sara came up going to the bathroom, too. Unusual for her to be up this early, but nice. I welcome the company. Done got to know her a lot better and I like her. The Quiet One aint all that quiet.

We've been here in Tulum for three days now and will leave tomorrow for Cancun. The plane leaves from there for Babylon. The bus ride from San Cristobal to here was about 15 to 16 hours. This is a smaller, less fancied version of post-modern, post-reality Cancun or Atlantic City. For tourists, a lot of Babylonians and Europeans. I spotted one — ONE — Black man ... with a White Woman. Hm? Wonder what he thinks of me? Black man with TWO White Women. Ha! Lawd hep me now!

This water is just beautiful. Clear, warm, massaging waves. I aint never been in the water this much in my life. Like a kid. It could be breezy and a tad-bit chilly in the air, a tad-bit worm in the water. Unbelievable. I love it. We met two of our Spaniard comrades from La Realidad here. There're here! Dam, I gotta get my spanish together. Ran into two other guys from

I was on a Talk Show (Steal This Radio) in the Lower East Side of New York City the other day. I was invited to speak on my recent trip to Mexico. More specifically, ZAPATISTA LAND., One of my Sistuh said jokingly that we should title this talk: "What's a Black Man..." we all laughed. But upon second-thought, hmmm ... Why not.

I'd like to share with readers my experiences on this my first trip to Zap Land, in particular, and Mexico in general.. I was encouraged to keep a journal and actually ended up keeping two separate ones. There were two reasons for going on this trip. One was to support the on-going Zapatista revolutionary experiment in post-modern liberation struggle, and two, to use the time to get my own dam head together in terms of breaking out of this self-imposed imprisonment or self-colonization of my potential for 'becoming' as a human being and for bettering my revolutionary participation. OK, okay, I promise not to get too wordy but hey, I'm trying to convey as best I can where I'm going with the Experience I'm about to share.

One of my social movement family members from the Anarchist Black Cross (Sara) called one day and asked if I was really interested in going to Zap Land as we'd discussed at a prior Zap fund-raiser party. In my mind I said, "Oh shit, she's serious. Am I?" Folks know I talk about traveling, going places, never having been nowhere 'cept on that fuckin' federal prison bus. And now the opportunity is before me to do it. Do it? Hm. My heart says Yeah, but my mind is starting its regular shit: Excuses — Procrastinate. But this time I said, Fuck it! Bypass the bullshit. I'm gonna do it!, which verbalized itself to Sara as a big, YES.

First time I'm gonna leave the kounrty. To Zap Land, a land who's Peoples are engaged in and are going through a different kind of Revolution. In fact, it's so different that traditional left-ist 'experts' on these things are at a loss as to where to place it, how to define it and whether or not to even support it. To me though, this is an exciting struggle. It is not Marxist, Marxist-

Leninist, Trotskyist, Maoist, Gonzaloist [], *traditional nationalist, etc.* (By Gonzaloist I mean those who follow the movement popularly known as “The Shinning Path” of Peru.) In short, it has not adopted a Vanguardist, Political Partyist, modern pre-packaged all-answered approach to Revolution. I’d dare call their style ‘facilitationist,’ without a Hidden Agenda. It is inclusive, anti-authoritarian, radical democratic, post-modernist. So, contrary to all who are stuck in blueprints and formulas from the Great Ones of Revolution Past, I say, All Power to the Zapatistas! for rejecting flunkeyism, as Eldridge Cleaver would say, cause revolution is about daring intellectual honesty, creativity and practice. It’s about Che’s Love. It’s about shaking boundaries of all kinds and even breaking them. And to me, it’s obvious that Zapatistas are aware that it’s a truly new day, space and time. Subcomandante Marcos, Ramona, Tacho, Trini and company seem not to fear wrestling with these drastically changing imperialist times with some new combative and liberatory thinking. Enough.

Listen, I’m a big kid in ways. So, I knew I’d take to this new experience like a kid. I recorded in my journals not only sites, but my thinkings about those sites. I also recorded what else I seemed to do 24–7: my thoughts on Revolution, new developments in revolutionary and philosophical thinkings and analyses and some introspections. So, I’m not sure if my entrees follow proper procedures. I can only tell you that they’re my honest entrees. In sharing them I hope you will be encouraged to both support the Zap revolution and to see how your life impacts on the world (worlds) and also how the world (worlds) impacts on YOU. Such a complex, multi-faceted, multi-dimensional life world we’re in. So much to face, to learn, to do. There’s probably never been such a social, spatial and time matrix in history as now that bounces any and every aspect of our lives and thinkings onto the center and peripheral stages of life and struggle. It is truly a

Love in our hearts, and love for us. Focused in our minds. Minds staid on Freedom. We know what must be done. Yeah. So, I’ve had an experience. a wonderful experience. Power to the Zapatista Uprising. May it ride surely to victory!

March 5th – From the Capitol of Chiapas to the Capitol of Hyper-Reality, Cancun

Nikki left this morning by bus (18 hours?) for Mexico. She will be able to get money from her folks (hopefully) in order to fly back to Switzerland. Hopefully. We each gave her some pesos to help. It’s all we had ourselves after souvenir-buying. Umma miss her. We all will. She came with us to dinner at friends’ house last night. Good amerikan food served with Ole Pork-pie Hat Jazz (Charles Mingus). Culture. Hm? What’s our culture? What’s Black culture? What’s Babylonian USA culture? Gotta go outside of it, territorially, and for a lil’ bit of time, and suddenly you begin to see what it means to you... what you long for, what you can do without. And funny thing here is that I’m sure I’m the only NIGGA within a million miles of here. So, these are Babylonian white folks whom, for some, Black culture is a vibrant part of their personal, social, biographical mosaic. (Dam Ashanti, you’s e a baaad mutha...Shut yo’ mouff.).Oops! Wait. I talked to my Sugah-pie last night. About 12 midnight her time. And that voice did me silly wonders on the googlie side. All is well, she says. Asked how my chilluns was. She said, Cool, with that tone that hides. My daughter must be having ‘males are dogs’ blues, I bet. And of course, Kai has to ask me those utterly ridiculous questions. Now picture this: house fulla people sitting round talking and shit and she HAS to as, ‘You miss me?’ Argh! Why, why, why? Because she’s sick I tell you. So, cool and non-chalantly I spiel. ‘Well, yeah, a little. Okay, gotta go now!’ Ha! Women. Alright. Done told the story. Break time.

my movements. Whoever couldn't or wouldn't, I'd call them 'crazy.' Loco, loco. So, of course, they called me loco, too. And still playing (I love this about kids innocence), first one, then the other, about three, would turn their BEE-HINDS to me and make a FART SOUND and laugh! Oh shit! And I'd laugh. That international language needed no translation. To me, it's clear: Children are children everywhere. I love them for it. Things like that, though, helped us to befriend each other. They asked me my name a thousand time. A-SAN-TEE. Si. Ashanti. They'd say it and next day if it wasn't a-san-tee, it was just plain and simple LOCO. Ha!

Possibly life here is socialist or even sort of communalistic. There the one who is like the 'mayor' of the community, and others who are responsible for different areas of community life, like who blows the horn that calls for the community meeting. But, there's no big shots, jails or cops in La Realidad. Only outside force is the intrusive Mexican government troops. They make convoy appearances at least twice daily. But community folks don't seem intimidated.

Every now and then you look up and a Zapatista, a MASKED Zap, will come riding by the house on a horse, strapped with a very used-looking machine-gun on her or his back and pistol on the side. Or they may be just walking and talking, just as easy and just as relaxed. As much a part of the La Realidad life as that life-organizing stream that strolls through the community. What makes this seem so out-of-place for an outsider is knowing that the Zap Army is actively engaged in this War of Liberation. They are 'WANTED' by the u.s. backed Mexican ogre government/corporate pigs claiming this as NAFTA territory.

Mm! My mind, my imagination, though, went straight to the Black Liberation Army! Futuristic images of us riding, strolling into a Bed-Sty or Harlem community. Easy. Relaxed. A part of the life-stream of our People. The BLA and Panther fighters would love this scene in front of me. Weapons at the ready.

great time to be alive and in the whirlwinds, undercurrents and roller-coasters of Revolution. Git on board.

The Everyday Journal

February 23rd — Happy Birffday Pops! — In San Cristobal, Chiapas, Mexico

Here with Sara and Dema. Me and Dema had decided that Sara should be 'the leader' cause she has the experience, best command of the language, and most resistance to being 'the leader.' Ha! Here we are in other people's property (O.P.P.) and I'm checking out their library. This is the rented house of Kael and Melissa. Both are anarchists from Philly and here with a commitment to Zapatista Support Work. They are into building water-purification systems for Zap indigenous communities where needed. So yeah, this is a way-station for those like us going from the "city" of San Cristobal into the even more mountainous Zap communities. And they are hosts to our little crew.

The "Talks" between Zaps and los mejicanos puercos (Is it puercos mejicanos/ pigs first, Mexicans second?- smile) have reached a stalemate. We hear there's an alarm, red alert of sorts, so our desires to visit and bring medical supplies to the Zap Camp may not happen. We'll see. We're here in San Cristobal in the state of Chiapas. The contrast. Coming from Super Tech Babylon to here. Seeing a poverty I'd only 'saw' in National Geographic or in radical media. I now see this FACE-TO-FACE. Aw-man, my heart goes out t the folks here, and my heart is crying! Little city kids hawking 'tourists' (us, too, as tourists regardless of how we might feel) for pesos, pennies really, selling their cultural artifacts whose makings and meanings go way back. I don't know, how many generations. To be reduced to this?! Contemporary Mayans; majestic, proud Mayans. Shoe-shine, shoe-shine. Bracelet. Necklace. Doll... The

impact of NEO-LIBERALISM is what the Zapatistas call it. Don Cordelion has cut off the head of the prize horse and has presented it to the world's villagers. That's NAFTA, the offer you can't refuse.

A land of varied peoples. And the Indigenous folks, with their short selves... (I was told that might be kinds fucked up to say as it doesn't consider that their height may have to do to with their diet UNDER OPPRESSION & EXPLOITATION. Well, I am here to learn). A Chicagoan here, who's a Zap supporter, said that it was only 25 years ago that the powers-that-be here in San Cristobal ALLOWED the Indigenous Folks into THEIR city. Dam, treated like niggas! Ain't that some shit! Yeah, they need some Zapatistas, got-dammit. Fuck it.

I can't figure out yet what Zap support is here among the city residents and Indigenous Folks, but there's boku literature, videos and other paraphrenalia around to purchase on this contemporary folklore of the Zaps. And the Folks make plenty of Zap dolls with characteristic masks and weapons. Some on doll horses. Cute. Powerful. And you know I gotta get me one of them on horseback (the only permissible occasion for a macho revolutionary man to be getting a doll. (Smile) A woman Zap preferably.

With government hatred and intimidation of Zapatistas and supporters, aint this some sign of open support to defiantly sell such? I understand it's survival \$\$, too, but shit, you willing to sell Zapatista symbols of resistance in spite of a brutal Mexican government intimidation campaign and these freelance reactionary muthafuckas? There's definitely some support here. How much? What other forms does it take? And how is it sustained for the obvious long-term? Okay, enough for now. That's my interest in popular culture. You see where my head is at.

something I ate.... Leaving La Realidad was sad. I wanted to stay a lil' longer. Befriend the kids a lil' more. Converse with the internationals more in depth and just let more of the acculturation process happen (it helps to HUMBLE first world/third world folks like me). Here, Africans-in-amerika will see just how much 'amerikans' we are, just from a reluctance and embarrassment in shiting in a out-house (letrina/letrino) to language barriers due to our being raised on ENGLISH-ONLY and uncritical personal amerikan arrogance. There's so much to say about this trip. Maybe I'm lucky that the diarrhea happened the day before our departure. I got to experience a lot of direct life there, non-mediated by commercial breaks and manufactured news. Like, I bathed in the stream, washed my clothes in it, too. The out-house experience.

Waking at night and looking up at the brightest sky of stars I'd ever seen. I've never seen so many stars, and the moon was so bright that at times you didn't need a flashlight to guide your walk outside! Simply non-New York beautiful. And the Chiapanecos here are so industrious with the use of their flashlights, the way they flick them on and off to save energy as they night-navigate the lil' bridge and other communal terrain.

Men. Women. Children. Child-adults, in many ways, nothing like ours. So responsible at such young ages. A four or five year old girl or boy may have her or his lil' brotuh/sistuh strapped or wrapped around their front or back, taking care of them while Mom is doing stream-laundry, carrying gigantic loads of fire wood on her head or back, or cooking. And these kids are kids who laugh, play, get silly like most kids around the world. Ands they can get 'fresh,' too. Well, here's what happened:

I was doing some martial arts movements outside and it always draws an audience of kids (and whoever else is around). This day I was playing with some of my audience. I was trying to get them to do what I was doing — which they call 'dance.' So, as we bonded on silly, a few began to imitate me,

‘peace work’ with the camcorders, notebooks and pens. Observe, observe. Record, record. This goes a long way in keeping them fascist muthafuckas out of these communities’ asses. Avoid bad publicity... Anyway, after the convoy had passed, me and Dema went to the store. Small, one room hut-like thing, this store. Bought two sodas (fuckin coca-cola!) and a pack of sweet crackers. Picked up our books and things and went to a spot to read/write on this lazy afternoon.

Nikki and about 5 folks who just arrived from the City came through. She’s happy and the Italians are, too! These arrivals are from Italy, here to replenish and continue the Peace/La Paz work. Again, our crew waits for ‘Word’ on our intended destination to the military camp and community of the Zaps, for it must always be ...CON PERMISO. Stopping here. My butt hurts sitting on this hard wooden bench.

March 3rd — Back In San Cristobal

We’re back in San Cristobal. Our desire to visit the Zapatista camp did not come off, but we were able to get some medical supplies and other stuff there. And I forgot all about the CONDOMS! My excitement, y’know. But even they are on the way to the camp today. Ha! Spread love, safely! Hey, I’m also a trained sex educator.

It’s about 6:00 maybe. No, it’s still light out. But I think it is 6:00 because Dema & Sara just left to meet with the young folks (really young. Like teens) from Europe, Danish, to talk about Mumia work which they already do. Mumia really IS inter-national! More so than ‘national’ and that’s a shame. I’m very honest when they ask me about Mumia work in Babylon, and that right in Philly we can barely get black folks to come out in support. Enough. Lemme bring you up to date.

The day before our departure from La Realidad, I finally got my dose of diarrhea and nausea. Don’t know what triggered it cuz I aint drink nona their running water. So maybe it was

February 25th — The Reality

Well, we’re here in La Realidad, a Zap stronghold. Day Two. We were hoping to leave ‘yesterday’ to our final destination, pero (but) our acceptance letter has not been answered yet. So, we enjoy the community’s hospitality. Community? Village? Hm.

I bathed today in the Ganges, no! The Stream. Kid was smelling in a baaad (yet honorable) way. Smile. Difference between here and San Cristobal is as between city and country. San Cristobal the City (town to us?) seems to crush out joy in the faces of its people, especially the Folks. Lil’ kids resemble defeated adults as they look at you with lifeless eyes and thrust out dirty hands. Fuckin’ pigs! But here in La Realidad, a Zap community, faces are bright. Kids and adults. There’s much laughter, play, work. Skies are bright, mountainous range just beautiful and animals are everywhere with the people. Chickens, roosters, dogs, cats, horses, bugs...BUGS. Not a lot yet, but I hear that in December, they’ll be really introducing themselves!

La Realidad is an indigenous community that was created maybe five years ago by several different Mayan peoples or groups made EXPENDABLE by NEO-LIBERALISM, i.e. “Hm. This land seems good for global profit. You business and government flunkies better get these worthless peasants off this land!”

La Realidad is also designated ‘La Paz’ (The Peace). The Zaps held a big international conference here, last year, and 4,000 activists showed from around the world. In fact, Gene (ABC-Bronx) was here. You have got to be here, know what kind of hike it is to even get here, to fully appreciate how such a feat was accomplished. And you talking bout some dedicated and Zap-inspired muthafuckas from far and near. Whew!

Me and my comrades are sort of attractions here. Wild-looking, blond short-haired Dema; boyish-looking Sara, and

the big black bald-headed guy — ME. The kids stare at us, but particularly at me. Most of the international committee folks here are Europeans. Am I the first person of Afrikan descent they've seen? I'm gonna find out¹

There's a nice group from the international peace-observers committee here. They're activist supporters. 3 from Spain. 1 from Switzerland, and I haven't learned where the others are from yet. The Spanish camaradas know all about the Spanish Civil War (dah) of their parents and grandparents generations. This is exciting to hear. And yeah, I'm forced to call upon my high school Spanish classes to pick up and speak the language 'un poco.' But being in this group I'm reminded of the movie, 'Land & Freedom,' which is pretty much about this guy who comes over as an Internationalist supporter through the revolutionary Trotskyist group POUM, and how he experiences the betrayal of the people's struggle by the Communist Party in the Civil War. This mixed group is here on pure internationalist dedication and though there's a definite lull in the Zap/pig government talks, and low morale, they keep this peace work going in support of Zapatista aims.

I worked out today. Had a lil' audience. Everything is in the open here. Folks aint use to seeing no one do our kind of exercises. Indian swoop push-ups, stretches. Etc. And when I did some boxing, kicking, blocking maneuvers and such, the Folks were amazed and ran and told Nikki (one of the Internationals frm Switzerland) that 'hombre' was doing some strange things and to come look. Glad my brothers aint see me, my ragged style. Glad nona my family in jersey can see me now. They'd be convinced, 'Yeah, Michael's crazy.'

¹ No, actually, a caravan of supporters and materiel from Reverend Lucas' Pastors For Peace group had been here. So, yes, they'd seen colored folks before.]

February 26th — While Waiting for 'Word'

No word yet on if/when we can move on. So, patience is the key. This morning as we shared café. We found out that the three camaradas de Espana left early this morning. I'm a bit sad. We gathered round the candles last night til 10:30 talking. Imagine: 2 Italians, 1 Swiss, 3 Spaniards, me and Sara. Dema was having her bout with diarrhea elsewhere. And the topic was the Spanish Civil War. This was AT MY REQUEST EARLIER THAT DAY. They were, like, READY. The discussion was spoz to have been around the two movies: 'Land & Freedom' and 'Libertarian Women.' What we really got into was a history of the whole Civil War, backdrop, background, Durruti, the role of the Women, etc. But before we even started, as we waited for yet another big pot of café to get hot on the open fire, our international friends wanted ME to talk about... What? THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY. Surprised? Yeah. Felt good, too.

It was as if I'd jumped right into a movie screen as I imagined being around the campfire during the Civil War with all these 'volunteers' from other countries come together to support an ideal: Freedom from Fascism. Here we were, our faces aglow by candlelight, talking about one of the most heroic revolutionary struggles in modern time, and one that was more or less anarchist and almost victorious. Ah, listen to them speak. At times animated, at time serious, at times humorous. At all times honest! Sara and Nikki did a lot of the translating for me, but I also found myself understanding a lot, as them high school and prison lessons had been kickng in. Curly would be proud of me!

Next morning. Here, you're up early, at sunrise or a lil' after. The roosters don't play. Ha! Its afternoon now and the café is hot, tortillas ready. Our Italian comrades had just gave us a short on the situation in Italy, re: anarchism, the Red Brigades, the Autonomous movement, Negri, etc. Then came the convoy of government soldiers and the internationalists had to do their