

“I am Maroon!”

The Historical and Political Importance of Freeing Russell “Maroon” Shoatz

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“The martyred Black Panther, Fred Hampton, once said, ‘to be a revolutionary is to be an enemy of the State.’ To be arrested for this struggle is to be a political prisoner. I became a political prisoner of a war; a war our oppressors had been waging against people of African descent ever since kidnapping our ancestors from our mother continent of Africa. We fought back, utilizing every means at our disposal and to the best of our ability. I had no regrets associated with my actions.”

Russell “Maroon” Shoatz, U.S Political Prisoner since 1972

School just let out. After hugging and kissing my girlfriend, which I learned quickly was protocol, I emptied my locker to meet up with a couple of my homies. We attended a small Christian high school situated in the heart of North Philly. Typically, we would catch the 15 bus to Broad and Girard where we would then catch the subway. However, we had just missed one and it was nice outside, so we decided to walk. As we were making our way along the massive Girard College wall (a wall that I had no understanding of then but would come to find out was a famous wall of racial segregation and police violence against Black citizens, particularly under the administration of Frank Rizzo) we were swarmed by a slew of police cars. The three of us all had on our school uniforms, white-shirt, blue-tie, blue pants, and black shoes. Yet, we were ordered to “stop! And get on the fucking wall!”

We froze, looking back and forth at one another, as if deciding what to do. We were scared to death, but if we chose to run, we would be presumed more guilty than we already were, although we did not do anything, and promptly, most likely, shot in the back. So initially we didn’t move. This non-action, however, seemed to incite these pigs even more, I suppose because we did not actually follow their directives. They ran to us, gripped us up by the collar, and drove us to the wall.

“I said, get on the fucking wall!”

“For what, we didn’t do anything?!” I asked, naively.

“Shut up! Ya’ll fit the description of a burglary that just occurred at a store.”

“Huh?! We’re coming from school.”

Our faces pressed against the hard brick wall; we were then aggressively patted down, threatened, mocked, and harassed. We were held like this for a few minutes, which to us felt like forever,

until we heard a radio dispatcher say, “we think we have the suspects.” And just like that the pigs got back inside their cars and sped off. We were left without so much of an apology or explanation, though none of that would’ve mattered to us anyway. Instead we were left confused, scared, angry, traumatized.

As I grew up, coming to age in the 90’s and early 2000’s I had many similar experiences with the police. When the police appeared or arrived, I never felt safe, secured, or protected. I always wanted to be protected from the police. I never understood why they were so aggressive and violent towards people in my community and why they hated us so much. I did not know my history nor the history of this country. How could I? It was never taught or talked about in the schools I attended or the communities I lived in. I was left to assume that this was just the way things were, how things would always be. I would later become even more indoctrinated into believing and accepting that the police only brutalized us and killed us because we were always doing something wrong or bad, and, justifiably, needed to be corrected and/or punished for it. I knew nothing about resistance. I knew nothing of freedom or rights or power. I did not know anything about social oppression, colonization, or what it meant to be politically dominated. I lived in Philly my entire life, and knew next to nothing about the original Black Panther Party, MOVE, Mumia Abu Jamal, RAM, and so many other formations and revolutionary organizations within the city that had organized not only against police brutality but fundamentally was serving the Black community, including the Black Unity Council (BUC) created and founded by Russell “Maroon” Shoatz.

Shoatz prior to being politicized was never on a “respectable kick.” He was a product of his social and cultural environment and of his times – the 1950’s and 60’s. He enjoyed hanging out on the corners, talking his shit and drinking his wine. He was a member and active participant of his neighborhood gang. This basically entailed ripping and running the streets of Philly looking for rival gangs to intimidate and press. Russell, never one to cower or back down, always demonstrated tremendous heart and skill whenever he had to scrap or fight local gang members, separated, often, only by a few blocks. Back then, rarely, were there guns involved; how one displayed or showcased or proved their masculinity was through hand to hand combat. And Russell could fight. The majority of his day to day routine involved the gang culture, drinking wine, hanging out with the homies, fighting, engaging in lascivious acts with a variety of different women, and going in and out of juvenile facilities. Inside the youth study centers, as they were called back then, not a lick of studying was happening in those places. Consequently, Russell would come out and continue along the same path as if nothing ever happened. The system was not designed to radically change people, but to keep them fundamentally the same or make them worse. It was more beneficial and profitable for the State this way.

Russell would continue along this path until a chance encounter with Malcolm X. Malcolm was holding and speaking at a rally in Harlem. Russell at the time was staying with an aunt who suggested he attend because “the Nationalists would be there and there would be trouble.” Always one to get into some trouble, Russell decided to go. And it changed him forever.

“Within the first five minutes of hearing Malcolm speak, I knew this was not a man like any that I knew or ever heard about. His words and the concepts that he was expounding on was striking my psyche and emotions like nothing I had ever heard before in the past. I was enthralled with his explanations of many occurrences that I had witnessed in the black community. The police brutality, the brutality that the community members

visited upon each other, the absurdity of demanding that the civil rights demonstrators not defend themselves from attack, and on and on. It stuck me that he was the first real man that I had ever met... just the things he was saying out of his mouth... I had never been told anything like what was being said. I knew I had found my calling. I was convinced that everything I was trying to achieve by being a tough guy in the gang culture was what this man was about. I had been born again. In my heart I had took a vow to be like him and dedicate my life to doing the things he was talking about."

The transformation did not occur immediately, however. His girlfriend became pregnant and he soon married her. He acquired a job at the steel mill that paid well, and he was able to comfortably support his family. However, he began drifting back into the streets, hanging out with his old corner boys. His marriage started to deteriorate due to his own admitted failures and immaturity. Russell was at a crossroads in his life. However, he was directly in the middle of the emerging Black Liberation Struggle.

"Within a number of months three events would occur that would have a profound effect on the course my life would take. A son was born to Bonnie and I; Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, and me, Points, and about a dozen other people would start our own organization, called the Black Unity Council (BUC)."

Within a few weeks the newly formed group held a meeting and produced a Statement of Principles. In short, BUC wanted to provide services to the Black community. These services included a food collection drive, a daycare center and liberation school for toddlers and youth, gang intervention courses, and paramilitary forms of community self-defense. These programs were established without prior knowledge to what the Black Panther Party (BPP) were doing in regard to their "survival" programs and the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), with their paramilitary formation, the Black Guards. However, each of these groups would become known to BUC as they started organizing more extensively. As BUC was establishing themselves within the community, a police murder of a young black male sent the community in an uproar. A simple youthful display of joyriding would result in a police officer shooting the young man in his own home while his mother was in the kitchen. The boy attempted to flee and was shot by the cop inside his home. As the two grappled in another room, his mother grabbed a knife and cut the officer. The boy managed to exit the home but was shot again by the cop. This last bullet killed the boy and he was subsequently left in the middle of the street for a long period of time. The Black community was furious. It was all too familiar. The community wanted justice but knew it would not come from the system. They looked to BUC.

Russell and a few of his comrades determined that enough was enough and planned to retaliate.

"At 11pm on August 29th, 1970 I turned on the local news station and heard that Hugh Williams who was a member of our Philadelphia Black Panther Party underground cell had been arrested. That was in connection with the death of a Philadelphia Fairmount Park police sergeant, who had been killed in the park police station earlier that evening."

Russell Shoatz went underground.

During his time underground, Russell, for about two years impressively continued to politically organize the Black community. He engaged in several bank and food expropriations during this time to help fund the Movement. Banks are institutions which exploit and ruthlessly take from the people. And poverty and food scarcity are ingrained necessities in capitalist society. There is no reason for anyone to be homeless or hungry in America or anywhere else for that matter, unless there is an economic system that is in place that requires and demands it. Russell would never hurt anyone. It was a human rule that he always stuck by. Russell, unfortunately, would eventually get caught on a failed expropriation attempt. Once captured, he was brought up on the charges of the police shooting in Philadelphia. This was in 1972. He has been a prisoner of war ever since, well, not exactly. Russell acquired his nickname “Maroon” because he made several attempts to liberate himself, and successfully did so, twice!

“I had adopted the name Harun Abdul Ra’uf in 1972. In 1977, I escaped from the State Prison in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. I lived off the land for twenty-seven days while trying to evade scores of state police, prison personnel, FBI agents, and local police and volunteers... However, I was recaptured and on my return to prison, a friend mentioned he had kept up with the search through the press. After a while he said, ‘They were chasing you like a Maroon!’ ‘Harun’ (Ha-roon) sounds like ‘Maroon’ and he started calling me ‘Maroon.’ From that time on the nickname stuck. Historically, ‘maroon’ came to be used as a generic term for slaves who became fugitives from their owners in North and South America and the Caribbean islands.”

The lengths Maroon took to stay free are incredible and truly inspiring. While foraging in the woods, he was alone, cold, hungry, yet, determined. He bore the elements of nature, sipping unclean water, here and there from the surrounding area, even consuming a raw turtle as a much-needed source for his physical nourishment. When he was recaptured there was a lot of media present, as only one could imagine, and they asked if he had anything to say. Maroon responded by saying, “Tell everyone that the slave has been caught, and I’m going back to the plantation.”

It is particularly important to contextualize Maroon’s imprisonment and escape within a long continuum of social Movement and political resistance of Black African people against the ravages and bitter forces of European slavery, settler-colonialism, capitalist exploitation, and racialized oppression. We are still not a free people in this country. We are still very much enslaved, subjugated. We are still routinely hunted down, shot down, and slaughtered with vicious impunity in this country — be it through the auspices of State violence, or by any regular white person who simply has an itch or an urge at any given moment to lynch a nigga. We are still castrated economically in this country, still mass incarcerated. Our schools are closed in mass; our communities are gentrified in mass; our homes our foreclosed in mass; our water and food supplies poisoned in mass; our children are being kidnapped in mass; we are being exterminated all across the world, in mass. There is no justice for us in this country. Therefore, the bravery and courage of organized mass resistance against such concentrated elements of repression by our Freedom Fighters such as Russell “Maroon” Shoatz and The Black Unity Council, The Black Panther Party, The Black Liberation Army, The Revolutionary Action Movement, MOVE, etc. cannot be understated or overlooked. These revolutionary organizations and freedom fighters stood up, placing their lives and futures on the line, in order to protect our barren, neglected, ravaged, and dominated communities from imperialistic forces. And we love, respect, and honor

them for it. We are honored and proud and grateful to have warriors of Black resistance such as the implacable Russell Maroon Shoatz.

Maroon has been a routine victim of cruel and unprecedented political repression since his failed liberation attempts, placed in solitary confinement and control units for well over 30 years. The United Nations has already determined that only 15 days of such forms of isolation constitutes psychological and inhuman forms of torture. Maroon has suffered beyond that. The consequences of sensory deprivation, poor diet and nutrition, a lack of fresh air, exercise, and medical treatment, among many other crippling aspects, are designed fundamentally to strip one of their dignity and ultimately their humanity. However, despite being physically and psychologically brutalized, Maroon has managed, extraordinarily, to write some of the most amazing and thought-provoking pieces on a variety of topics, including eco-socialism, capitalism, imperialism, the prison industrial complex, maroon societies, African history, patriarchy, eco-feminism, food security and sustainability, Anarchism, Marxism, and so much more. His writings have traveled across the world, educating and inspiring a new generation of radical thinkers and young activists. His book, *Maroon the Implacable*, is an incredible work and a must read for everyone who is serious about real social and political change in this world.

Maroon is 77 years old. Not too long ago he was diagnosed with stage 4 rectal cancer. He managed to successfully endure a series of consecutive chemotherapy treatments. The therapy, though physically taxing on Maroon, was helpful, meaning that he was now in a position to receive the proper surgery needed to attempt to remove the tumor. However, on November 13th, right before his surgery, he tested positive for COVID-19. Maroon was immediately sent to a gymnasium where other victims of COVID were being quarantined inside the prison. It wasn't a safe, let alone comfortable, environment for anyone to be quarantined in, particularly someone of Maroon's age and existing health complications. In fact, there was only one bathroom for 30 men. Maroon went to the bathroom on himself because there was no light in the area, and he did not want to risk getting up and falling. It was only after Maroon's family, friends, and other community members mobilized on his behalf that he was finally transferred to the infirmary.

Maroon is in need of proper medical treatment. We can only ensure this with his immediate release. He is not a danger or threat to anyone, and certainly not to his family and friends or the community that he would be released to. We love Maroon. And we wish to take care of him in his later days. We want him home. He deserves to be home. Doctors, various medical experts, community activists, and well over 140 organizations are calling for his immediate release, particularly with the steady surge of COVID-19 in the prisons and jails across this country. It is impossible to social distance in prison. He is our elder. Our hero. Our courageous, loving, and beautiful champion of freedom and resistance, justice and equality, love and humanity.

Free Maroon!

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