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Black Roses for Mike Brown

An Interview with A'isha Fatima Sharifa

WyldFire! Collective

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Back in August 2014, outside the burnt-out husk of the QT on W. Florissant Ave. in Ferguson, MO we ran into some white people and old folks pissed off over having witnessed younger people tagging anti-Police messages on the concrete barriers facing W. Florissant Ave. These oldheads' respectability politics rhetoric made us wonder if someone who pissed them off so much might have something in common with us, so we made a pilgrimage to the now-fenced in QT to check out "the writing on the wall" and asked around.

As it turned out, we learned that we had a few friends in common with one the artists responsible for the graffiti slogans, and after a lengthy correspondence and a few false starts, in the spring of 2015 one of the taggers, StL-area street artist "A'isha Fatima Sharifa", agreed to give us an interview.

We talked about Ferguson, Mike Brown, the Police and the uprisings in the streets in the StL-area and now popping off all around the US, and much, much more! Some names and locations have been changed to protect friends & accomplices.

Since everything went down in Ferguson, it really is amazing how often you meet someone like-minded & it turns out you have A LOT of mutual friends. Small world, huh?

Small town. Saint Louis is a small town that likes to imagine it's a big city. Chicago is a big city. LA, NYC, those are BIG cities. Relatively, Saint Louis is a small town and I think it really does have a sort of rustbelt small town feel. Everyone seems to know everyone here, or know "someone who knows someone", y'know? Think about one of the most common ice-breaker questions folks ask in Saint Louis: "Where did you go to highschool?" I feel like most people in Saint Louis, and in small towns, generally, have a lot of like-minded mutual friends. It's a little easier for people to find each other that way, right.

You're from StL?

I'm from all-over, but somehow I keep landing back here. I moved back and forth a lot, between my father's family in Chicago and my mom here in Saint Louis. Mostly mom and I lived around the Baden neighborhood on the North Side of Saint Louis. I spent a lot of time dropping out and re-registering at different schools in college, moving from state to state with friends, couch-surfing, seeing a whole lot of North America on the cheap.

That's the best way to see anywhere, really.

It's the only way to really experience it, or any place. I don't think you can really get a feel for a place, for the people there, unless you're living it on the cheap, at street-level, in the dives, laundramats and alleyways.

You're partial to alleyways?

Very. Tourists and gentrifiers, academics and preachers, politicians and law enforcement talk about the "seedy underbelly" of society, but that's just a way of shit-talking the crumbling infrastructure that holds their whitewashed "squeaky-clean" theme park world of suburbs and trendy redevelopment neighborhoods together. The rest of us, most of us, live on the cheap, in the alleys and dives and hole-in-the-wall bars where

life is desperately, precariously, and passionately lived; really lived.

That word you just used? “Precariously”? Tell us about that.

You sure about that? Whenever I get into these sort of discussions, especially interview type things, I tend to get super-nervous and talk too much. Not that I’ve ever really done a lotta interviews, you understand?

No, it’s fine. Interviews intimidate me, too. So, about that word...

Well, it’s the way the world today is forcing more and more of us to live. Intellectuals talk about it like it’s something new, but I feel like that’s disingenuous. The very poor and marginalized, the oppressed and other-ed and the most exploited in many past societies lived lives on the edge. It’s about desperation, and we can talk all day about personal responsibility, but personal responsibility is really only really relevant inasmuch as we have control over our own lives. Precarity is about the theft of control & choices over our own lives, theft from those below by those above. Precarity is the real-life everyday lived-experience of generation fucked. Maybe social safety nets or unions used to ensure that only the most-marginalized really experienced precarity in the West, but I feel like we can look at the world today and see precarity is being extended to more and more of society, even in the so-called “first world” countries.

Thank you for explaining that. We’re finding that idea of “precarity” is becoming a buzzword among liberals and activists.

Of course, you gotta include academics and “socially conscious” self-styled intellectuals in that, as well. Precarity is a very trendy buzzword in their sorta circles. I can’t tell you how many professors in college who thought they were so “radical” tried to “subversively” teach us that our generation is living something “new” called “precarity” and how significant that is.

As though women's lives, Black lives, LGBTQ lives, immigrant lives, poor lives or the lives of anyone deemed Other in these fucked up systems we're under have ever been anything other than precarious! It's real sad, really.

Which "systems are you referring to?"

The systems which rob us of the choices over how to live our own lives. Authority. Hierarchy. What we hear about more often in terms of patriarchy, white supremacy/racism, homophobia or hetero/cis-normativity/supremacy, capitalism, the state. All the ways those in authority, those who've taken power over our lives, keep themselves on top and keep the rest of us desperate. And it's all inter-connected. I feel like we really can't talk about any of this without talking about all of it, if we want to be serious.

It's what we're seeing in Ferguson right now, those systems inflict so much trauma and suffering on so many people, and every now and then some of us who've known suffering and trauma do something desperate; because we don't see things changing for the better otherwise. The oppressive systems put this desperation on us, and we strike back and those in authority seem shocked by that, that we'd do something desperate, but desperation is all some of us have ever known.

So that's what brought you out to Ferguson?

No, the police murder of an 18 year old young Black man named Michael Brown is what brought me out to Ferguson. The murder of a young person who had just graduated high school and was looking forward to college just a couple miles from where I grew up at hit me like a god-smack, and I don't mean the crappy band, either. I felt so... I don't know. Everything. Angry, sad, outraged, depressed, scared, everything except surprised; and I think that's what emboldened me, and a lot of other people. Was anyone really surprised by what the police did in Canfield, that day? Was anyone really surprised by the officials' response?

of using the rose as a threat. That's cute! Actually, I really feel that.

Sorry, not to get you off-subject...

No, that's cool actually. Yeah, I mean I gotta get to work soon, anyway. But that's what I suppose I'd like to end with, is this notion of not takin' shit anymore, y'know what I mean? Taking the fight to the man, to the source, not just to the individuals but to the institutions and all the norms and conventions and ideas they uphold. There was another slogan up on the walls the morning after QT burned, another slogan that got my attention. It said "Solidarity means attack!", and that's where I think I'm at personally, at the moment. So if someone sees some wall art that resonates with their experience in their day-to-day life, and it inspires them to action, that's the best I could hope for.

Talk is good, and necessary, and has its place in time, but we got to learn to take action. We gotta learn how to fight back and go on the offensive and fuckin' win, because this shit's got to go. We're not going to get there following the leader down the same old deadend paths, and we're not gonna get there praying or marching on the sidewalks or sitting on our hands drugged-up, disillusioned and bitter.

So yeah, to me solidarity totally does mean attack, and remembering really does mean fighting back. And the people I'm interested in meeting and getting with are the folks who feel similarly, whether they've come to that place just recently or suspected & felt this way for a long time, already. That's pretty much what it's all about!

Thank you so very much, A'isha, for your time and for what you're doing. Be safe out there!

No, you gotta say "Stay dangerous, out there!" We gotta learn to get dangerous and stay dangerous together.

Stay dangerous out there.

You too!

a much older friend in Mexico City who taught me all about the history of anarchist symbolism. When I moved to Chicago I started throwing them up in spots where police brutalized or killed someone. Out in LA I started stenciling the rose at my haunts around town, just places that had some meaning to me.

I got involved in this relationship with one of those mutual friends of ours that you mentioned earlier, a few years ago when they moved out to LA for a while to get away from StL, and when I later returned to Saint Louis a year or so after they had, I found that they'd borrowed my tag and slapped it up in significant spots all over the city. There's still a few faded black roses scattered all over StL, actually, if you know where to look. But when Ferguson PD murdered Mike Brown and shit went down, and I saw that slogan up on the wall it inspired me to revive the black rose tag in the spirit that I first used it; as a memorial and as a call to action.

So there's multiple meanings to the rose tag, depending on who's using it?

Yeah, just like anything else anyone ever writes, right? Or, the difference between whatever meaning someone intends when they write, and the meaning understood by the reader. Or even the difference between how the writer relates to their own writing the next day, a week later, a year or a decade-on.

The roses started out for me as little memorials to the outrages and tragedies we endure every day. Later on, in another setting they became like memorials to beautiful moments I experienced in certain spaces, and nowadays they're like these memorials to outrages or tragedies, but also they're like a call-to-action and a message to our oppressors that we're not takin' shit no more.

Didn't the mafia use gifts of black roses as a sort of threat?

I think that might be apocryphal, y'know? Like something out from The Godfather flicks. But honestly I really don't know anything about all that, or the history of the mafia or the other symbolic uses of black roses. I do like that, though, the idea

Going back to what you said before about desperation, it's ironic how REALLY surprised the Pigs & politicians seemed by people's response in the streets.

Right! They murdered a young man who was walking with a friend to go see family. He was killed for being Black while doing something as common as walking to go visit family, and this happens all the time. In the past we did the petitioning and the voter registration and the ballot initiative stuff and the marching politely with signs and a permit, I mean, I did all that; plenty of my friends and family and a lot of people I've known have passed through that at some point. Some are still stuck on it, like a needle stuck in a groove. I think a lotta folks have moved past that, now. You see enough out here in these streets, and you start to realize none of that shit works.

Think about it. How many times a year do you hear about police shooting someone, whether or not they were armed or doing anything "wrong"? How many times a year do you hear about the police beating someone up? How many of those videos of police beating up activists & protesters who are shouting "nonviolence" and "peaceful" back at the police while they're getting brutalized by the cops? How many ballot initiatives and petitions are we asked to sign each year? How many times are we going to vote for the black or the democrat or the liberal candidate because some activist says they'll totally be different this time than the last guy was?

We've seen it all before. None of it works. And the system keeps turning up the heat on our communities. When they push us so close to the edge, they shouldn't be surprised what's happens when we strike back.

Do you mean what happened to the QT on W. Florissant Ave.?

And the rest of that shit, yeah. The evening Michael Brown was gunned down, the police came into Canfield with shotguns and machine gun-looking things and snarling dogs and tear-gas. They brought clubs and armor to a candlelight vigil. They

had riot-shields and armor the next morning at the police station. They brought out an armored truck and more military equipment the night that gas station got burned down. I'm not certain what else they were expecting.

What about people who say we're just hurting ourselves, hurting our own communities?

Fuck that. Fuck that! How was that outpost of the Quick Trip corporation ever a part of "our community"? How are any of those places, corporate or privately owned, that sell our people poisons, keep us sick and weak and intoxicated, broke and distracted, part of "our community"? That shit was as much a valid target as the cop who chose to point his gun and pull the trigger, over and over again. That shit is as much a valid target as the institutions and the individuals who've got us all like this, that are benefitting from our suffering.

It appalls me how certain people refuse to recognize the context and inter-connected histories of oppression, of exploitation, and genocide. It's been built into the system from day-one. It's not "broken" at all, and that's what I feel like we're seeing more and more people understanding and feeling. The system is not broken, it's working exactly how it was always meant to work.

In that context, what happened on West Florissant was what the military calls "blowback". It was a moment of rage in which people who have been pushed closer and closer to the edge all our lives finally struck back and exercised our own power. That being said, fuck the naysayers who criticize us for burning down "our own communities". I wonder what "community" they're talking about. I wonder if those naysayers have to deal with racial profiling, stop and frisk, weekend checkpoints, constant surveillance and summary executions carried out by police on their streets; because that's what we have been dealing with for a very long time.

But what they're worried about is some broken windows, some paint on the walls, and a burned down gas station; not an ongoing genocide.

It really is every day.

It is, yes. Now we've got these "allies" out here, so "outraged" that history appears to be "repeating itself". But it never stopped. It never got better. It never went away. It's still here. It's gotten worse.

But a burned down gas station, looted merchandise, smashed windows, that's what the news and the politicians and the pundits want to focus on.

Do you think the media would have given this the coverage it has if it weren't for the violence?

Let's be clear on one thing first, I'm not going to talk about "violence" on the part of protesters, because the way I see it that's self-defense. When you live under siege like we do, when you and your parents and great-great grandparents were all born under siege, what isn't self-defense? It's all self-defense. All of it. We need to remember that.

There's a slogan I saw spray painted up on the walls walking around Ferguson the day after QT burned down. It said "remembering means fighting back!", and gotta say that I feel that, hard. The fight needs to be taken beyond the streets and to our oppressor's own doorsteps. All this whooping and wailing and cryin' doesn't mean shit if we don't act on our rage, hook-up and crook-up, and take the fight to our enemies. All of them.

When we first got in touch, it was because we'd seen these little black roses tagged all around the burnt-out QT with some pretty militant call-to-action slogans attached to them, and we heard from a mutual friend that those roses were meant as memorials. Can you tell us about that?

You wanna talk about those roses? Well I won't say much about this, because it's kinda personal, y'know? But yeah, they're partially memorials. I borrowed the black rose tag from