

# Afrarealism and the Black Matrix

Maroon Philosophy at Democracy's Border<sup>1</sup>

JOY JAMES

*Our mind is more powerful than anything.*  
—Amante<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction: Resilience

Black philosophy functions as both a corrective and a creative source for political theory in particular and philosophy in general: it approaches the life of the mind, aesthetics, ethics, and transcendence through the human struggle for “freedom”—not as an abstract value but as concretized in resistance to captivity.

Black philosophy's savant is an Afrarealism that explores its contributions and contradictions. Through black radical, feminist-womanist, queer theories, Afrarealism confronts theoretical limitations and political practices in conceptualizing freedom. It has been operative in the “New World” for half a millennium. It is as old as black theory and philosophy's hunger for liberty. Although Afrarealism often seems relegated to the underground of resistance and to the shadows of formal concepts, its resilience allows for continuous agency.

Fed upon and fetishized by Europe since the 1500s, emerging states in the Americas refined the efficacy of terror and genocide while inadvertently incubating the maroons

that birthed Afrarealism. Prefigured in the Atlantic slave trade, and challenged by the maroonage of ship rebellions and mutinies, racial capital and racial rape became the conquistadores of the Americas.<sup>3</sup> Five hundred years of flights from captivity, into communal and conceptual wilderness, created the maroon philosophers' natural habitat at the boundary of democracy. Such outsider terrain superficially appears as a reservation or cell; yet it is in part a trajectory into freedom. For centuries democracy was idealized through the rise of white citizenship,<sup>4</sup> and portrayed as the manifestation of freedom. Black radical thought witnessed it as building democracy's boundaries: establishing the definitional norms for democratic citizenship through racially fashioned captivity.<sup>5</sup>

Afrarealism recognizes two coterminous phenomena: democracy as a boundary defining freedom through captivity, and maroon philosophy at the borders reimagining freedom through flight. Afrarealism does not equate democracy with freedom as some black philosophy does. Rather, Afrarealism's journey moves adjacent to a democracy originating and reproducing amid racial captivity and racial rape. Afrarealism also sojourns with black philosophy's challenges to racial supremacy. Afrarealism sees through the lens of a black matrix. As both spectacle and spec-

**Joy James** is the F. C. Oakley Third Century Chair, Professor in Humanities and of political science at Williams College. Her most recent book is *Seeking the Beloved Community: A Feminist Race Reader* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013).

trum, the black matrix allows a broader grasp of anti-black state and citizenship terror, and wounded agency pursuing freedom.<sup>6</sup>

A form of maroon philosophy (all black philosophy is not radicalized as maroon philosophy), Afrarealist political theory treks beyond conventional militarized borders to survey democracy's violence toward the black matrix and black reproductivity. The violent exploitation of black productivity in agricultural, industrial, penal, and cultural markets is a historical and structural feature of democracy. These aggressions and violations I have earlier described as "state violence."<sup>7</sup> Democracy's aggressions against the black matrix, its terror against black reproductive labor, its sanction of racial rape I describe here as state "intimate violence." State violence and intimate state violence are two related but distinct phenomena. Violations of black productivity coexist with terror against black reproductivity. Afrarealism witnesses both and calls for greater scrutiny to assaults against black reproductivity, an under-theorized feature of black captivity.

## Reproductivity

Equally violently exploited in labor, black captive males and females enriched racial capital. Yet the inequities of the terror in their reproductive labors were diminished in both enslavement and abolition narratives, initially shaped and controlled by propertied white males. (In fantasies of democracy, the enslaver rescues the savage from barbarity, and the abolitionist saves the savage from the enslaver. Afrarealism sees both forms of "salvation" as captivity.)<sup>8</sup>

Colonial, imperial, and corporate state violence fomented and structured anti-black practices and policies. Productivity in work and labor, based on economic exploitation, and civil and human rights violations became the primary analytical framework for critiquing democracy's rapaciousness toward black captivity—a capacity first legalized in the US Constitution's "3/5 clause" and later in its thirteenth amendment codifying enslavement through imprisonment.

Reproductivity, marginalized as a theoretical space for analyzing (and undoing) democracy's terrors, points to the black matrix as the site for the symbolic and material subjugations that birthed the maroon philosopher. When and wherever the concept of racial capital overshadows the phenomenon of racial rape, the outline of democracy's boundary and the contour of its terrors are obscured. Terror against the black matrix shapes those borders. Afrarealism redirects maroon philosophy to criminal violence and political terror directed toward the exteriority of black productivity *and* the interiority of black reproductivity. Anti-black violence and terror also exist within maroonage complicating the enterprise of freedom; particularly if the terror registers most through forms of sexual predation.

## Racial Rape

Historically, captive females were violently forced to labor alongside captive males. This seeming erasure of gendered differences masculinized black suffering. Under patriarchy, violence against the female form is often denied or deflected through language



that renders female trauma invisible, inconsequential, or self-inflicted. The “uncut bond” of black exploitation and trauma under white supremacy meant a folding of black female trauma into the black male frame, from which it receded from common view, typically emerging as spectacle only and not as spectrum. Thus common perceptions of black suffering became embodied in and represented by male trauma—emanating from the lash, shackle, the brand, convict lease, lynch mob, death row, mass imprisonment, and “stop-n-frisk.” With the norm and apex of black suffering centered on violence in the public realm and the public spaces of the private realm (cloistered plantations and prisons), racial rape became subsumed under racial capital.

The official chronology of and narratives about violence and terror that constitute US democracy’s borders—chattel slavery, the convict prison lease system,<sup>9</sup> Jim Crow segregation, mass incarceration, “stop-n-frisk”—crowd out the black matrix, displacing it from philosophical inquiries into subjugation. The interiority of this trauma zone has paltry public record and memory. Racial rape, the dominant threat, appears in black women’s writings, memoirs, fiction, and art, but in these forms may be categorized as emotive performance, mere illustrations for rather than inherently forms of critical philosophy.

Racial rape is complicated and mercurial although all blood trails are traceable to the black matrix. Part of the trauma of captive males entails their sexual violations. Boys and men could be forced into being proxy rapists, coerced to rape for the entertainment, edification, or enrichment of their captors or “masters.” And black boys and men themselves are rape victims. (Legal dis-

course has changed to acknowledge male victimization as rape; recently the US Justice Department under Eric Holder redefined “rape” to include males.)

Outside the narratives of compulsory heterosexuality, black males were raped by their white captors or were forced to rape others, or both. Outside of the narratives of compulsory black solidarity, captive males raped for pornographic, sadistic pleasure or material gain (more food and benefits, fewer beatings, etc. from violent authoritarians). Any philosophical aversion, emotional dissonance, political “shame” toward critiques of racial rape leaves black masculinity theory adrift or disengaged. Either it dangles as strange fruit or following the broken branch collapses heavily upon the black matrix. If black philosophy undervalues male entanglement and investment in racial rape and violence against reproductivity, it loses sight of the violence manifested through sexual trauma and denigration, forced breeding or sterilization, or abuse of or contempt for children. Thus the currency of black philosophical engagements with freedom is undermined.

Male captives “feminized” through blackness, and terrorized by mutating manifestations of white supremacy, have structural male supremacy over *black* females. Male captives did and do not, could and cannot suffer rape as routine entertainment or the terrors of forced reproductivity. Hopefully, we agree that this discussion is not about which (trans)gendered being suffers most under racial subjugation; rather the focus rests on the “nature” of the subjugator’s extensive reach into interior spaces, its colonization and scarification of black wombs and matrices that have no public record.



American democracy's generative violence uniquely and strategically targets the black matrix because it offers the foundational frame for building the border between democracy and captivity, and deniability of state inmate violence. The black matrix is where patriarchal, racial-sexual violence, economics, and privatized terrors meet. The *maroonage* is where they are dissipated into the dust of Afrarealist departures.

Historically, captives and fugitives painted political ethics and theory so that maroon philosophy could map freedom along the contours and fault lines of colonial and imperial democracies.<sup>10</sup> When early rebellions and multiracial *maroonage* receded to leave only blackness at democracy's outermost borders, that blackness solidified into the silhouette of the black matrix, as the basic boundary between *domination* and *power*,<sup>11</sup> between the violence of productive labor for the marketplace and the terror that reproduces "plantation babies."<sup>12</sup> Encompassing democracy's anti-black animus and maroonage's anti-black feminist sentiments, the black matrix both points to and constitutes uncharted territory on the other side of democracy. Its objective is to destabilize democracy's mythology and *maroonage*'s demystifications as a form of pleasure, as well as justice.

### Pragmatic Dance

In perpetual flight from genocide and toward healthy intimacy, maroons crossed the borders of colonies and democracies. Their flights from captivity or toward familial community are viewed as defining moments for

democracy as oppositional to black freedom. Maroon resistance failed to convince the tyrannical majority of the soundness of its reasoning, and the legitimacy of its definitions. Still the diaspora's fugitives fought, fled, and bargained with enslaving armies, and their authorized reformers who followed in their wake. Their ancestral resistance is embodied in contemporary rebels, revolutionaries, and political prisoners and exiles that self-identify as realists rather than idealists.<sup>13</sup>

Realpolitik's lack of sentimentality about domination may still veil violence and terror—justified in the name of deity, family, democracy—against the black matrix.<sup>14</sup> Western democracies manufactured the black matrix as disposable through libidinal, linguistic, and material economies. Yet the tyrannical citizenry, discussed in Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, and dissected in Lani Guiner's *The Tyranny of the Majority*, is reticent about democracy's sexual predations.<sup>15</sup> A founding father and former president illustrates the centrality of the black matrix for predatory nation-state formation.

Thomas Jefferson was an astute consumer of black female reproductivity. In *The Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson differentiates between the Indigenous *social* savage and the African biological or *ontological* savage.<sup>16</sup> He illustrates with bestiary: orangutans, he asserts, prefer black women. Jefferson exempts all other racially subjugated human forms from animalized sexuality (e.g., he does not opine that female orangutans prefer black males or buffalos desire Native women).

Jefferson's political progeny, obsessed with the reproductivity of "Sallys," appear



in Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report on "black matriarchy" as a family pathogen;<sup>17</sup> Reagan Secretary of Education William Bennett's 2005 *Morning America* talk show suggestion that the final solution to crime is anti-black abortion; and the 2011 "Most Dangerous Place" anti-abortion advertisements depicting black women (their absence represented by dark-skinned cherubic toddlers) as mass murderers terrorizing black children (hence the black matrix as a "freak of nature" that harbors both predator and prey in one body).

Afrarealism and realpolitik appear strange, and estranged, bedfellows; yet if one comprehends racial rape, Afrarealism is an advanced level of realism distanced from violent nihilism and denials. "Conventional" wars exemplify male casualties. Yet normative warfare is unconventional: civilians are the primary targets for destabilizing terror. Racial rape is an act of war. Terror against black female matrices and children emanates from varied sectors.<sup>18</sup> The DNA of police, guards and (para)military, of master/mistress races, "civilized" Indians, hard-working immigrants and black captives and maroons, and of intimates—all can be found on the bodies of the black matrix.<sup>19</sup> Afrarealism counters the foundational patriarchs fostering proxies: whatever the "orangutans" prefer, these are not the preferences of black women and girls.

### Conclusion: Grieving Beauty

In Euripides's play *Medea*, the Greek chorus of slave women plead against and beautifully grieve Medea's sovereign vengeance

expressed in the murder of her and Jason's children and his child-bride. Lacking grieving beauty as an impetus to act, the chorus does not flee or impede their slave mistress's homicidal terror. Euripides, as author, refuses the slaves the agency of defiance, the dance in resistance. They lack the wisdom that rebellion inevitably follows violent tyranny. Hence these women lack the beauty of survival, they have no concept of *maroonage*. Afrarealism respects the complexity of "slave women" who traumatized in the black matrix still view the hangman's noose as a frame intensifying the colors of sky and flowers; still glimpse the decayed child corpse as emerging compost for a riot of red, thorny roses.

This black matrix maroon is terrifyingly beautiful because it is violently transcendent. It ruptures conventional political protest: Mamie Till's open-casket funeral for her mutilated, decomposed teenage son; Soweto mothers' burials of schoolchildren refusing Afrikaans as mandatory instruction; black Brazilian mothers' nonnegotiable demands to democracy's paramilitary police ("Highlanders") who decapitate youth in favelas: "Resurrect the child you have killed."

Politicized black mothers, although prematurely silenced or disappeared through grief or death,<sup>20</sup> transform tragedies into a breach in democracy's concertina wire.<sup>21</sup> In the era of open rebellion against repression, *The Black Scholar* published such women as political prisoners or fugitives, including in one 1970s issue Assata Shakur's article, "Women in Prison: How It Is With Us."<sup>22</sup> Captured and showcased in sensationalized trials, trophies of democracy's police powers, located at the extreme borders of



democracy, the Afrarealism of such women illuminated freedom flights and shaped a legacy for black philosophy.

## Notes

1. This article, in conversation with “AfroPessimism,” is a reflection on the lives of black revolutionary maternals such as Assata Shakur and Afeni Shakur. See Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987); and Jasmine Guy, *Afeni Shakur: Evolution of a Revolutionary* (New York: Atria Books, 2004). Guy’s biography of Afeni Shakur offers a poignant description of the betrayal of Shakur’s ethics not to reproduce a child as a political prisoner.

2. Amante, Nashville high school student presentation at “School to Prison Pipeline” panel, Rethinking Prisons Conference, Vanderbilt University, May 3, 2013. At the Nashville conference, black activist-educators referred to formerly incarcerated kin as “returning citizens,” not “returning maroons.”

3. The concept of “racial capital” is developed in Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and libidinal economy of sexual terror against enslaved black women is explored in Sadiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Here, “racial rape” refers to the implicit and explicit racial value attributed to each sexually violated subject under cultural and judicial racial hierarchies. With such attribution, all accusations of rape and sexual assault are perceived and prosecuted through a racially driven framework. For a discussion of anti-black rape by black males, and police complicity, see Toni Irving, “Decoding Black Women: Policing Practices and Rape Prosecution on the Streets of Philadelphia,” *NWSA Journal* 20, no. 2 (2008).

4. See Sharon Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); and Khalil Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

5. Early maroon camps responded to anti-indigenous genocide, anti-black enslavement, and European servitude (racialization of the Irish). Xenophobic nativism, and the heteropatriarchy of racial capital, has been reproduced from the early encounters of “red, white, and black.” For a differentiation between political “conflicts” between people of color and white supremacy based in sovereignty, and structural “antagonisms” based in master-slavery legacies of anti-black terror, see Frank Wilderson, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

6. *Matrix*, from the Latin “breeding female animal” and “mater” or mother, signifies origins. To encounter black female suffering without mimetic performance is an intimacy and vulnerability to such suffering. The black matrix outlines the limits of the democracy that created it, and the beauty of resistance to denigration.

7. Joy James, *Resisting State Violence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

8. The US Civil War was followed by three “Reconstruction amendments” that reproduced anti-black violence: the thirteenth amendment, which legalized slavery or involuntary servitude to prisons; the fourteenth amendment, which granted political personhood to (white male-dominated) corporations, not to disenfranchised black masses; the fifteenth amendment, which permitted the evisceration of the right to vote through felon disenfranchisement, poll taxes, and voter ID laws, and intimidation at the polls.

9. For a discussion of the convict prison lease system, mass terror, and transference of black labor as wealth, see Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009).



10. All democracies in the Americas are “imperial” if they have colonized or held captive their racially fashioned “inferiors,” that is, invaded the “mother country” for conquest. Of course, this is the line of argument here for retrieving the black matrix as a conceptual incubator for maroon philosophy.

11. My use of Hannah Arendt’s concept of power as communication, an interpretation of the work of Jurgen Habermas, in relation to anti-black subjugation and black resistance, as well as her uncritical embrace of the Athenian polis whose public realm was predicated on the “private realm” of disenfranchised slaves, women, and children, appears in “‘All Power to the People!’ Arendt’s Communicative Power in a Racial Democracy,” in Joy James, *Seeking the Beloved Community* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013).

12. The term is taken from Afeni Shakur’s reflections in her life story; see Guy, *Afeni Shakur*.

13. The most influential and controversial of maroon philosophers are senior noncitizens in captivity or exile, including: Russell “Maroon” Shoatz, Assata Shakur, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Sundiata Acoli, Mutulu Shakur, Leonard Peltier, and Veronza Bowers. Organizing for release of political prisoner Shoatz, artist and writer Fred Ho observed: “It is time to stop writing about history and to start making it” (March 2013 e-mail to author).

See Russell “Maroon” Shoatz, *Maroon the Implacable*, ed. Fred Ho and Quincy Saul (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2013); Assata Shakur, *Assata*; Joy James, ed., *Imprisoned Intellectuals* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

14. For a historical review of the lethal FBI counterintelligence program, see Kenneth O’Reilly, *Racial Matters: The FBI’s Secret File on Black America, 1960–1972* (New York: Free Press, 1989).

15. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1864; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and Lani Guinier, *Tyranny of the Majority* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

The centrality of the black matrix to the viability of white life can be read into recent media reports of the starvation 1609–1610 winter of Jamestown colony in which “Jane,” the fourteen-year-old “pretty” British girl, allegedly was sacrificed in cannibalism. Perhaps only a black female slave could have saved her.

16. See Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1785 (electronic text, University of Virginia Library), p. 265. In Query XIV titled “Law: The Administration of Justice and Description of the Laws,” Jefferson codifies white supremacy as essentially anti-black, stating: The superior beauty of whites (and Indians); black male preference for white females; “Orantoon” preference for black females as sexual partners over their species female.

17. The Hemings story is a case study of familial pathology determined and denied by white patriarchy while forced into the black matrix. Jefferson met the teenage Sally Hemings when she accompanied his daughters—her nieces by her late, white half-sister, Martha—to France where Sally Hemings’s biological brother-in-law and legal owner was US ambassador.

Although not a runaway in the likes of Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent, Hemings might have engaged maroon philosophy. Interpreting her relationship with the former president as a “love story” ignores that possibility and the fact that property is legally incapable of granting consent; hence nonconsensual (legalized) sex under captivity is racial rape. Productivity from bondage and pornographic pleasure overrides erotic intimacies.

18. Judith Herman notes that during world wars clinicians observed adult male trauma as part of warfare, whereas the trauma of women and girls was experienced in civilian life, through household violence. According to Herman, Sigmund Freud could not conceptually link sexual predation to family and so shifted from talk therapy to theories of female envy and seduction. Herman’s notion of recovery occurs only after



traumatization has ceased. See Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

19. Afeni Shakur, former Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army member, best known as the mother of Tupac Shakur, recounts the myriad violence against children and women, and the sexual duplicity of black men. She also notes black maternal violence against children and “plantation babies.” Still her rage and disarray present grief, dignity, and beauty. See Guy, *Afeni Shakur*.

20. Reportedly murdered in Mexico, Malcolm Shabazz, grandson and namesake of Malcolm X, is captured on YouTube offering an analysis of how he killed his grandmother Bettye Shabazz. The young Shabazz acknowledges that he set fire to her apartment in an attempt not to injure his grandmother but to force reunification with his mother Qubilah Shabazz, who was remanded to a drug and mental health rehabilitation center after planning the assassination of Louis Farrakhan, whom she blamed for her father’s death. Shabazz recounts that he did not realize that his grandmother, conditioned by political attacks against her, would see the arson on a continuum and as a “strong” black woman would run into the flames to rescue her twelve-year-old grandson (an act of courage and sacrifice not restricted to black resistance). Bettye Shabazz died several weeks later with severe burns on over 80 percent of her body. See “Malcolm Shabazz, Grandson of Malcolm X Killed,” *Amsterdam News*, May 9, 2013.

21. Afrarealism and maroon philosophy are expressed in *Scientific Soul Sessions*; opposition to FBI opportunism; political prisoners literary and film productions; and the repurposing of hospital beds as courtroom or death row for intravenously fed prisoners of war striking against torture and offshore prisons.

22. On the fortieth anniversary of the shooting and killing of New Jersey trooper Werner Forester, the Federal Bureau of Investigation held

a May 2 press conference raising the bounty on Assata Shakur to \$2 million and placing her as the first woman on the FBI “Terrorist List” with Al-Qaeda. Her attorney Lenox Hinds maintains that it was physically impossible for Shakur to have shot Forester, given that she had already been shot and her right arm paralyzed.

In a May 2013 *Democracy Now!* interview concerning Assata Shakur and the FBI terrorist list, Angela Y. Davis offers insight and context into the black matrix as a female revolutionary positioned at democracy’s border:

The FBI decided to focus quite specifically on black women, because somehow they feared, it seems to me, that the movement would continue to grow and develop, particularly with the leadership and the involvement of black women. I was rendered a target, an ideological target, in the same way that Assata Shakur was called the “mother hen” of the Black Liberation Army. The way in which she was represented became an invitation for racists and . . . the U.S. government to focus very specifically on her, to focus their hate, to focus vendettas on her . . . there is this effort to again terrorize young people by representing such an important figure as Assata Shakur as a terrorist.

Davis references five Cuban political prisoners currently held in Florida, who opposed CIA-backed terrorism that downed a Cuban airliner in 1973, killing all passengers and crew. See “Angela Davis and Assata Shakur’s Lawyer Denounce FBI’s Adding of Exiled Activist to Terrorist List,” *Democracy Now!* Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzales, producers, May 3, 2013. The US State Department has placed Cuba—the only nation in the hemisphere to successfully and militarily defeat a US-backed dictatorship—on its list of terrorist nations, alongside Iran, Sudan, and Syria.