SEEKING THE BELOVED COMMUNITY
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SEEKING THE BELOVED COMMUNITY

A Feminist Race Reader

Joy James

Foreword by Beverly Guy-Sheftall
To the cyborg maternals and ghost warriors—
Chicago Mamie Tills; Oakland Georgia Jacksons;
Soweto and São Paulo mothers Dona Marias—
all who made and make the impossible demand
to the omnipotent state, its allies, and apologists:
“Resurrect the child you killed.”
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Beverly Guy-Sheftall

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Foreword
Beverly Guy-Sheftall

. . . we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As black women we see black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.
—The Combahee River Collective, 1983

. . . dissidents are anchored to revolutionary possibilities that demand both intellectual discipline and irrepressible courage to speak the unspeakable, to stand alone if necessary, and to accept the material and emotional consequences of trampling over hegemony's "holy" ground.
—Antonia Darder, 2011

I am reminded while reading Joy James’s provocative essay collection, Seeking the Beloved Community: A Feminist Race Theory Reader, of Antonia Darder’s riveting anthology, A Dissident Voice: Essays in Culture, Pedagogy, and Power. Educators, scholars, endowed professors, activists, critical race theorists, dissidents—James and Darder emerge from marginalized/racialized communities in the United States and Puerto Rico. It is important to embrace the dissident women among us, so often maligned and misunderstood. For nearly two decades, Joy James’s dissenting voice has been loud and unrelenting, beginning with the publication of her first book, Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in U.S. Culture (1996), followed by Shadowboxing: Representations of Black
Foreword


Like the Angela Y. Davis Reader that James edited, her own feminist race theory reader underscores the heterogeneity of contemporary black feminist discourse, a perennial theme in James’s writings. Like dissident Angela Davis and the architects of the Combahee River Collective document above, Joy James emerges from a robust African American left tradition that is anticapitalist, anti-imperialist, and passionately critical of the U.S. state. Davis and James have been perhaps the most vocal black feminist voices with respect to the ravages of the prison industrial complex and U.S.-sponsored violence, including genocide, here and around the globe. James’s work has been pioneering as well in its careful attention to radical black women such as Harriet Tubman, Assata Shakur, Angela Davis, and Ramona Africa. In fact, without James’s work, it would be difficult to imagine the existence of black women revolutionaries since African American political history has privileged male figures such as Huey Newton, George Jackson, Malcolm X, and Mumia Abu-Jamal, to name a few.

While most of the essays are not new and have appeared in various publications, this Joy James reader is at its core a portrait of “the making of a dissident voice,” to borrow from the title of Antonia Darder’s introductory essay in the reader to which I alluded earlier. What we most desperately need in a world that fears and silences opposition—or worse—are revolutionaries who speak truth to power and beckon us to stand with them in solidarity. A luta continua. The struggle continues.

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In 1998 and 2003, respectively, students at the University of Colorado-Boulder (CU) and Brown University organized two large conferences that led to a decade of anthologies on injustice and incarceration. At the request of Angela Y. Davis, I organized a spring 1998 national gathering on U.S. imprisonment at CU as a precursor to, or prototype for, the fall 1998 “Critical Resistance: Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex.” In March 1998, “Unfinished Liberation” took place with panels that incorporated the contributions of academics, graduate students, and activists from California, Colorado, New York, and beyond; Davis’s campus keynote drew several thousand. CU invested significant resources into the conference, but the heart of the endeavor came from the volunteer labor of activist students. Conference papers became *States of Confinement* (2000), and subsequent anthologies and conferences, such as Brown’s 2003 “Prison Intellectuals,” prominently featured incarcerated activist authors. Encouraged to attend to their studies first, as were CU undergraduates, Brown students found the disruption of organizing for justice more compelling—a desire that appeared incomprehensible to nonactivist academics. Students’
preference for social justice—over grades, political conformity or careerism—has brought greater critical scrutiny to mass and political imprisonment within democracy. My thanks to all who have expanded the boundaries and commitments to intellectual inquiry and political acts for justice.
Part 1.

FEMINIST RACE THEORY
People of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic . . . our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create . . . [in] dynamic rather than fixed ideas . . . How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? And women, at least the women I grew up around, continuously speculated about the nature of life through pithy language that unmasked the power relations of their world . . . My folk, in other words, have always been a race for theory—though more in the form of the hieroglyph, a written figure which is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative.

—Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory”

Erasure in Academic Theory

Contemporary African American theorists such as Barbara Christian, who writes that theory not rooted in practice is elitist, think within a community-centered tradition in which the creativity of a people in the race for theory sustains humanity. However, teaching theory as nonelitist, and intending the liberation and development of all of humanity, specifically Africana communities, contradicts much of academic theory, which is Eurocentric.¹

All philosophy and theory, Eurocentric or Afrocentric, is political. Academic “disciplines,” when sexualized and racialized, tend to reproduce themselves in hierarchically segregated forms. To confront segregation means recognizing that current academic or educational standards have never worked, and were never intended to for us as a people. Our paltry presence in (white) universities and colleges speaks to the fact that individuals, but not the community, may attain some success in an educational process centered on the marginalization of all but the “European” (socially constructed as white, male, propertied, and heterosexual).

Philosophy or theory courses may emphasize logic and memorizing the history of “Western” philosophy rather than the activity of creating philosophies or theorizing. When the logic of propositions is the primary object of study, how one argues becomes more important than for what one argues. The exercise of reason may take place within an illogical context—in which academic canons absurdly claim universal supremacy derived from the hierarchical splintering of humanity into greater and lesser beings, or the European Enlightenment’s deification of scientific rationalism as the truly “valid” approach to “Truth.”

Some thinkers have argued that theory and philosophy are open to the “everyday” person and intend the good of humanity. However, few identify Africana people, women of color, women in general, and black women in particular, or poor people or prisoners as both equal partners in that humanity and important theorists in its behalf. Fewer still connect the “life of the mind” to the understanding that “black people have to a disproportionate extent supplied the labor which has made possible the cultivation of philosophical inquiry.”² They, along with female labor in the “private realm” or the “household,” have disproportionately cultivated philosophies that provide nonabstract meanings of freedom and justice. Surviving genocidal oppression allows insights into (in)humanity and (in)justice that transcend the abstractions of academic philosophy and theory, infused in Western democracies by patriarchies and Eurocentrism, which is not synonymous with European.³

In a society and culture where the white European represents both the ideal and universal manifestation of civilization, racist iconography infuses worldviews and misshapens European philosophy, with destructive effects on the material lives of the majority of the world’s people.⁴
Adhering to the tastes of white supremacy, “white solipsism” masquerades as universal philosophy within the myth of racial superiority. If legitimizing a world order of domination becomes an intellectual mandate, like the carnival house of mirrors, theory projects what it distorts in solipsistic reflections.

Playing by academic house rules sets standards for theory that few will meet. The thoughts of “outsiders” are reduced to descriptions of a part (of humanity or subhumanity) rather than analyses of a whole (humanity). When teaching about the lives of black activist women, for example, is viewed as a descent to the particular from the “universal norm” (white, male, monied), biology becomes the destiny theory (privileged biology becomes manifest destiny). Recognition as “theorists” or “intellectuals” because of their adherence or loyalty to house rules is the equal opportunity moment for former outsiders to play inside; technique is not inherently theory. (Self)Objectification through the “expert” voices of “trained” speakers could be interference. Stripped of context in community may mean forced relocation to some mental or academic ghetto. Extreme locations offer the vantage point of view: if the axis of the universe remains the same in reform, what would it mean to revolutionize theory?

Talking Theory

Theoretical traditions in service to community challenge the authoritative or authoritarian narratives about theory and philosophy. Outside the academic or popular worldviews of “scientific” materialism and “objective” rationalism, exist the nonduality of the sacred and secular, spiritual and political, the individual and communal. Discredited indigenous cosmologies, and political rebellions, offer concepts of not just nonlinear time, or shared spatial commitments to community, but they gesture toward the holy grail of the “beloved community.” Toni Morrison sketches transcendent theory in her observations on writing:

If anything I do in the way of writing . . . isn’t about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams, which is to say, yes, the work must be political.
Feminist Race Theory

It must have that as its thrust. That’s a pejorative term in critical circles now: if a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow it’s tainted. My feeling is just the opposite: if it has none, it is tainted.9

A tradition of labor for liberated communities evokes worldviews where ethical concerns and liberatory acts move the community closer to political thought. Activism is a great and difficult learning experience, particularly if connected to communities in crisis.10

Concretizing ethical ideals in action supports an unfamiliar form of thinking—theorizing in the face of political violence.11 For centuries, Indigenous and African peoples in the Americas have theorized for their lives and so collectively crafted a revolutionary praxis. Fiercely struggling for collective freedom, ancestors Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, along with countless others theorized with the weight of legacies not fully comprehended and rarely engaged.

Notes

1. Samir Amin writes: “Eurocentrism is a specifically modern phenomenon, the roots of which go back only to the Renaissance, a phenomenon that did not flourish until the nineteenth century. In this sense, it constitutes one dimension of the culture and ideology of the modern capitalist world.” Samir Amin, Eurocentrism (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989), vii.


3. Samir Amin argues that Eurocentrism “assumes the existence of irreducibly distinct cultural invariants that shape the historical paths of different peoples.” According to Amin, it is “anti-universalist” because instead of searching for “general laws of human evolution” it represents itself as universalist by claiming that “imitation of the Western model by all peoples is the only solution to the challenges of our time.” See Samir Amin, Eurocentrism, vii.

4. The academic mind-set mirrors white supremacy: “the idea of white supremacy emerges partly because of the powers within the structure of modern discourse—powers to produce and prohibit, develop and delimit, forms of rationality, scientficity, and objectivity which set perimeters and draw boundaries for the intelligibility, availability, and legitimacy of certain ideas.” See Cornel West, “A Genealogy

5. See Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman* for a discussion of “white solipsism.”


10. Bernice Johnson Reagon argues this point about plagiarism in Martin Luther King Jr.’s dissertation. See Bernice Johnson Reagon, “‘Nobody Knows the Trouble I See’; or ‘By and By I’m Gonna Lay Down My Heavy Load,’” *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 1 (June 1991).

11. In the 1990s, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) traveled from its headquarters in Indiana to rally in the local campus town where I spent a semester as a visiting scholar. After viewing William Greaves’s documentary, *A Passion for Justice*, on the life of antilynching crusader Ida B. Wells, students formed a coalition, led by black women, to organize a countereducational event critiquing racism, (hetero)sexism, and anti-Semitism. At one meeting, a senior recalled being dragged off a catwalk into the bushes as her white male assailant repeatedly punched her, yelling “nigger bitch.” As she struggled to get away, she noticed white student spectators who offered no aid and later equally nonresponsive university investigators and administrators. White and black university employees and students would dismiss the anti-Klan organizers as “radical” and as “overreacting.”
Within her nonfiction essays, Toni Morrison’s dissection of racist paradigms is framed by a worldview that testifies to African American ancestral spirits, the centrality of transcendent community, as well as her faith in the abilities of black intellectuals to critique and “civilize” a racist society. This reading of Morrison quotes extensively from her nonfiction to sketch a framework for her observations on racist stereotypes and black resistance. Even a partial sketch reveals clues for deciphering how the author uncovers and recovers ground for “discredited knowledge” in order to reconnect “traditional” and contemporary cultural beliefs to political struggles. This is not an argument for black “essentialism.” Black cultural views manifest and mutate through time and space; and are neither quintessential nor universal to everyone of African descent. Likewise, a passionate interest in African American intellectual and political resistance to antiblack racism is not a synonym for indifference to nonblacks and the varied accommodations to Eurocentrism and white supremacy.

“American-Africanisms”

My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world. To think about (and wrestle with) the full implications of my situation leads me to consider what

happens when other writers work in a highly and historically racialized society.¹

Writers working in a highly racialized society often express an overt and covert fascination with blackness. For Morrison, European Americans "choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence."² This practice and its arsenal, which she labels “American Africanisms,” mirror (if not stem from) European Africanisms. The term Africanism represents:

the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people. . . . As a disabling virus within literary discourse, Africanism has become, in the Eurocentric tradition that American education favors, both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability.³

A literary and political tool and vehicle, the Africanism “provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom.”⁴ The distinctive difference of the New World, writes Morrison, is that its claim to freedom coexisted with “the presence of the unfree within the heart of the democratic experiment.”⁵ It is arguably still the same. Morrison advises that we investigate “the Africanist character as surrogate and enabler” and the use of the “Africanist idiom” to mark difference or the “hip, sophisticated, ultra-urbane.” Her own investigations inform us that within the “construction of blackness and enslavement” existed:

not only the not-free, but also with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me. The result was a playground for the imagination. What rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an [European] American Africanism—a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American.⁶
Newly constructed beings and inhumanities, such as the white male as both exalted demigod and brutish enslaver, were sanctioned by literature. Morrison emphasizes the cultural aspects of dominance to critique the Euro-American literary imagination: “cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation’s literature . . . what seemed to be on the ‘mind’ of the literature of the United States was the self-conscious but highly problematic construction of the American as a new white man.”

In the formation of this “new American” identity, blackness embodied in the African was indispensable to elevating whiteness. In this elevation of whiteness, the Africanist other became the device for “thinking about body, mind, chaos, kindness, and love; [and] provided the occasion for exercises in the absence of restraint, the presence of restraint, the contemplation of freedom and of aggression.” Within this framework, the boundaries of the conventional, literary imagination were set to ignore or rationalize enslavement and freedom-based-on-enslavement. Transgressing such boundaries is rarely encouraged. However, those determined to see themselves without mystification do transgress.

According to Morrison, historically an exceptional few, exceptionally brave European American writers attempted to free themselves of entrapment in whiteness. Describing the courage of Herman Melville’s tormented struggle to demystify “whiteness” in *Moby Dick*, she observes:

> [T]o question the very notion of white progress, the very idea of racial superiority, of whiteness as privileged place in the evolutionary ladder of humankind, and to meditate on the fraudulent, self-destroying philosophy of that superiority, to “pluck it out from under the robes of Senators and Judges,” to drag the “judge himself to the bar,”—that was dangerous, solitary, radical work. Especially then. Especially now.

This “dangerous, solitary, radical work” is discouraged by claims that “race” or discussions of racism politicize and so pollute literary work:

> When matters of race are located and called attention to in American literature, critical response has tended to be on the order of a humanistic nostrum—or a dismissal mandated by
the label “political.” Excising the political from the life of the mind is a sacrifice that has proven costly. I think of this erasure as a kind of trembling hypochondria always curing itself with unnecessary surgery.¹⁰

Such surgery is also selective, usually performed only on those deviating from the dominant ideologies. Literary works derive their meaning from worldviews with political consequences. Worldviews carry cultural values as well as political agendas. Only by replicating or naturalizing the dominant political ideologies, in effect reproducing the racialized hegemony, can writers claim to be apolitical. Clearly identifying her work as a practical art with a political focus, Morrison writes in “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”:

I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams—which is to say, yes, the work must be political. It must have that as its thrust. That’s a pejorative term in critical circles now: if a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow it’s tainted. My feeling is just the opposite; if it has none, it is tainted.¹¹

These writings enable critical discussions in a society guarded against analyses of white supremacy. Her critical thought, invigorating analyses despite increasing calls for the irrelevance of “race,” is particularly important in a society that routinely rejects such critiques as politically uncivil. Racial discourse seems directed or pulled by marionette strings working to curtail antiracist critiques. As Morrison notes:

For three hundred years black Americans insisted that “race” was no usefully distinguishing factor in human relationships. During those same three centuries every academic discipline, including theology, history and natural science, insisted “race” was the determining factor in human development. When blacks discovered they had shaped or become a culturally formed race, and that it had specific and revered difference, suddenly they were told there is no such thing as “race,” biological or cultural, that matters and that genuinely intellectual exchange cannot accommodate it. In trying to come to some terms about “race” and
writing, I am tempted to throw my hands up. It always seemed to me that the people who invented the hierarchy of “race” when it was convenient for them ought not to be the ones to explain it away, now that it does not suit their purposes for it to exist. But there is culture and both gender and “race” inform and are informed by it. Afro-American culture exists and though it is clear (and becoming clearer) how it has responded to Western culture, the instances where and means by which it has shaped Western culture are poorly recognized or understood.¹²

African American culture exists within the worldviews that shape and inform it. This culture and its traditional practices reappear in Morrison’s work. For instance, typical of the call-and-response tradition, Toni Morrison receives the calling to testify to worldviews greater than white myths and to demystify a Frankensteinian blackness. Politicized by and politicizing the spirit of intergenerational black resistance, she issues her own charge and challenge to intellectuals and educators.

**Traditional Worldviews**

[In *Song of Solomon*] I could blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other. It is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people looked at the world. We are very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things. But to blend those two worlds together at the same time was enhancing, not limiting. And some of those things were “discredited knowledge” that Black people had; discredited only because Black people were discredited therefore what they knew was “discredited.” And also because the push toward upward social mobility would mean to get as far away from that kind of knowledge as possible. That kind of knowledge has a very strong place in my work.¹³

Distinguishing worldview from superstition requires sketching the cosmology that grounds Toni Morrison’s work. What some call “superstition” or “magic,” in *Traditional African Religions and Philosophies* John Mbiti describes as aspects of a cultural worldview:
Most [traditional] peoples . . . believe that the spirits are what remains of human beings when they die physically. This then becomes the ultimate status . . . the point of change or development beyond which [one] cannot go apart from a few national heroes who might become deified. . . . [one] does not, and need not, hope to become a spirit: [s]he is inevitably to become one, just as a child will automatically grow to become an adult.14

Mbiti notes that historically African worldviews maintain nonlinear time in which the past, present, and future coexist and overlap (this view is also held in other cultures and in some scientific communities). Traditional African cosmology sees the nonduality of time (as past, present, and future) and space. Rather than suggest a monolithic Africa, Mbiti’s work describes the diversity of religions throughout the continent. Yet, he maintains that despite diversity, organizing principles or structures prevail. The cosmology he documents rejects the socially constructed dichotomies between sacred and secular, spiritual and political, the individual and community characteristic of Western culture. Mbiti’s structures reappear in African American culture. Worldviews or values are not deterministic. One may choose. An African theologian trained in European universities, Mbiti depicts Christianity as “superior” to traditional African religions, which he notes share Christianity’s monotheism. One may reject the traditional worldviews shaping African cultures, as Mbiti does, or reaffirm them, as Toni Morrison does. Stating that “discredited knowledge” has “a very strong place” in her work, Morrison refuses to distance herself from a traditional African/African American cultural worldview, despite the fact that academic or social assimilation and advancement “would mean to get as far away from that kind of knowledge as possible.”

Without considering the validity of this “discredited knowledge” or academically marginalized belief system, some may perceive and portray Morrison’s work as romantic, ungrounded mysticism. Outside of a worldview that recognizes the values mirrored in her work, it is difficult to perceive of Toni Morrison as something other than exotic. Yet, her fiction is not mere phantasm: she merely writes within the framework of African American cultural, political-spiritual perspectives—cultural paradigms documented by academics, theologians, and philosophers. For centuries, these paradigms have been derided as primitive supersti-
 Politicizing the Spirit: Toni Morrison 

1. tion, through European colonization and Eurocentric thought, and 
2. racial mythology that constructed a people who ape theory and 
3. superstition, the “discredited knowledge” embraced by the not 
4. fully assimilated endures conquest. Congolese philosopher K. Kia 
5. Fu-Kiau notes in *The African Book Without Title*:
6. 
7. Africa was invaded . . . to civilize its people... [“civilization”] 
8. having “accomplished” her “noble” mission. . . . African people 
9. are still known as people without logic, people without systems, 
10. people without concepts. . . . African wisdom hidden in proverbs, 
11. the old way of theorizing among people of oral literature [cannot 
12. be] seen and understood in the way [the] western world sees and 
13. understands [a proverb]. . . . For us . . . proverbs are principles, 
14. theories, warehouses of knowledge . . . they have “force de loi,” 
15. [the] force of law.15 
16. 
17. A people whose traditional culture is “known” to be illogical and 
18. without complexity cannot contribute to intellectual life, whether 
19. reactionary, conservative, liberal, or radical. 
20. Toni Morrison’s writings are transformative precisely 
21. because—while cognizant of the value of some aspects of European 
22. culture—they reject the Eurocentric mandate of traditional African 
23. cosmology and African American cultural epistemology as primi-
24. tive. Challenging hegemonic paradigms, Morrison deconstructs 
25. the Euro-American muse’s addiction to ethnic notions. She issues 
26. two complementary and intermingled calls that politicize the 
27. spirit: resist racist mythology and reconnect the values rooted in 
28. traditional African American culture. The foundational value for 
29. her work is black community, as she draws down the spirit to call 
30. it home. 
31. 
32. The Centrality of Community 
33. The viability and value of an autonomous African American cultural 
34. community is a “discredited” concept. Yet, the individual’s salvation, 
35. or sanity, comes through relationship in community that inspires 
36. and informs political risk-taking. The black community exhibits a 
37. synthesis of seeming polarities, maleness and femaleness, ugliness 
38. and beauty, good and evil, the spiritual and the mundane—a 
39. complex humanity often erased in writings that objectify it.
In “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” Toni Morrison analyzes her novels; her comments on Beloved and the Song of Solomon emphasize the centrality of community and the individual’s relationship to it. In this essay, Morrison examines how language “activates” and is activated by outlining the backdrop or context for the first sentences of each of her novels. She reminds us that this exploration into how she “practice[s] language” seeks and presents a “position of vulnerability to those aspects of Afro-American culture” shaping her novels.

Beloved is a striking example of awareness of the destructive impact of unbalanced spiritual and political worlds. For Morrison, Beloved’s haunting works in part “to keep the reader preoccupied with the nature of the incredible spirit world while being supplied a controlled diet of the incredible political world.” The novel’s political world is inspired by a specific historical tragedy, the nineteenth-century story of Margaret Garner fleeing slavery with her children. The context of community, and resistance to oppression, ground Garner’s story of the “unnatural” mother who may or may not have demonstrated the fantastic depths of maternal love and political resistance fictionalized in Beloved.

In life and in death, individuals remain connected to and grow within the life of the community. In Song of Solomon, the essentialness of community informs Morrison’s description of freedom and grace found in the fulfillment of the insurance agent’s suicidal promise to fly from (no-)Mercy hospital:

The agent’s flight, like that of the Solomon in the title, although toward asylum (Canada, or freedom, or home, or the company of the welcoming dead), and although it carries the possibility of failure and the certainty of danger, is toward change, an alternative way, a cessation of things—as they are. It should not be understood as a simple desperate act . . . but as obedience to a deeper contract with his people.

Dangerous but not desperate, the insurance agent’s act embraces rather than flees community. His notion of contract is tied to a cultural understanding of community as transcendent; his flight transcends dualities between life and death. The agent acknowledges his not fully comprehensible gift:
It is his commitment to them, regardless of whether, in all its
details, they understand it. There is, however, in their response
to his action, a tenderness, some contrition and mounting respect
(“They didn’t know he had it in him.”) and an awareness that the
gesture enclosed rather than repudiated themselves. The note he
leaves asks for forgiveness . . . an almost Christian declaration of
love as well as humility of one who was not able to do more.22

Exploring the relationship between the community and the
individual, Morrison’s novels involve the reader and narrator in
communal ties. In this worldview, knowledge, insight and wisdom
emerge from communal relationships, despite the flawed character
and alienation of its constituents:

That egalitarianism which places us all (reader, the novel’s
population, the narrator’s voice) on the same footing, reflected
for me the force of light and mercy, and the precious, imaginative
yet realistic gaze of black people who (at one time, anyway) did
not mythologize what or whom it mythologized. The “song” itself
contains this unblinking evaluation of the miraculous and heroic
flight of the legendary Solomon, an unblinking gaze . . . lurking
in the tender but amused choral-community response to the
agent’s flight.23

Morrison’s own unblinking gaze fosters critical self-reflection in
regards to African American communities. It would be simple and
simplistic to idealize an African American community as a haven
of safety and harmony against dehumanizing racism. Nowhere do
Morrison’s essays argue for this perfected black bliss. Everywhere
in her literature there exists the reality of grim, bizarre and deter-
mined struggle in communities grappling with rot and purification.
Morrison resists romantic idealism: “My vulnerability would lie in
romanticizing blackness rather than demonizing it; vilifying white-
ness rather than reifying it.”24 Her deconstruction of Eurocentrism
and Africanisms coexists with a critique of the limitations of black
community. Those limitations partly stem from African Americans’
stunted abilities to be in community, and our refusal to recognize or
honor the ancestors and each other. Morrison details how, in Song of
Solomon, the ancestral figure represented by Solomon who embodies
the ancestors’ flight toward freedom, is not readily recognized by community: “The African myth is also contaminated. Unprogressive, unreconstructed, self-born Pilate [the female protagonist] is unimpressed by Solomon’s flight.”

Rejection, alienation, and violence toward self, others, or the ancestors, however, do not negate the reality of the ties. Relationships are determinant. One cannot erase community. One decides only how to communally relate to self, others, ancestors, and future born. Morrison’s reviews of Beloved and Song of Solomon place ancestors as indispensable to community. Through and in them, the past sits in the present and future, guiding descendants. To the extent that they are recognized, contemplated for guidance and spiritual power, we strengthen our ability to grow in community with them and ourselves.

**The Role of African Ancestors**

When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself . . . nice things don’t always happen to the totally self-reliant.

For some worldviews, the greatest spiritual development is tied to service to the community; in fact, in time through such service one evolves into elder and later ancestor. (Morrison uses the term *ancestor* to refer to physically living elders and ancestral spirits; others reserve the term for the deceased). Members of a community that extends through time and space to include predecessors, contemporaries, and future generations, ancestors anchor transcendence.

“There is always an elder” in black literature, Morrison maintains: “these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom.” Still she observes the ambivalence among black writers:

Some of them, such as Richard Wright, had great difficulty with that ancestor. Some of them, like James Baldwin, were confounded and disturbed by the presence or absence of an ancestor. What struck me in looking at some contemporary fiction was that whether the novel took place in the city or in the country, the presence or absence of that figure determined
the success or the happiness of the character. It was the absence of an ancestor that was frightening, that was threatening, and it caused huge destruction and disarray in the work itself. That the solace comes, not from the contemplation of serene nature as in a lot of mainstream white literature, nor from the regard in which the city was held as a kind of corrupt place to be. Whether the character was in Harlem or Arkansas, the point was there, this timelessness was there, this person who represented this ancestor.  

Speech about the ancestors not only enables critiques of historical oppression (such as the references to slavery made in *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*); it also establishes communal realities to support and reflect political-spiritual, secular-sacred traditions. Within certain worldviews, ancestors illuminate an avenue for liberation; their power does not necessarily promise redemption. In their physical lives, predecessors who attained the stature of elders helped others to develop as free human beings. As spiritual forces after death, they continue to guide human development. According to Congolese philosophy, knowledge is “the experience of that deepest reality found between the spiritualized ancestors and the physically living thinkers.” As a living thinker, Toni Morrison maps recollection sites. Her writings present us with the knower who reaches beyond the straitjacket of Africanisms into the past, which is the present and future, to present both the African presence and the Euro-American imagining of that presence.

Toni Morrison is only one of many following ancestral/communal traditions. References or calls to the ancestral presence and the primacy of historical black figures appear in African American religion, politics, and art; in written, visual, performative, and oral culture. The African American women’s vocal group, Sweet Honey in the Rock, honors the ancestors in “Ella’s Song”; dedicated to civil rights activist Ella Josephine Baker, the song uses excerpts from Miss Baker’s speeches: “We who believe in freedom cannot rest, until the killing of black men, black mothers’ sons, is as important as the killing of white men, white mothers’ sons.” Introducing the song “Fannie Lou Hamer,” Sweet Honey founder, a former SNCC activist and Smithsonian director of African American culture, Bernice Johnson Reagon provides context:
Feminist Race Theory

During the civil rights movement of the 1960s . . . Fannie Lou Hamer . . . became a symbol of the strength and power of resistance. . . . We call her name today in the tradition of African libation. By pouring libation we honor those who provide the ground we stand on. We acknowledge that we are here today because of something someone did before we came.  

Black activists and academics speak of the ancestors in their memoirs. Historian Vincent Harding, who worked with Martin Luther King Jr., pays tribute to the ancestors in There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America. Using we throughout the text, Harding’s narrative history of African American resistance to enslavement over centuries merges past, present, and future. Harding describes as “mentacide” the “breaking in” practices that turned Africans into slaves; to enslave a people, one must destroy their belief systems, their knowledge in themselves, and their understanding of both physical and metaphysical power. As a people, we resist enslavement and genocide because spirits politicize our lives. As strangers in a strange land, our perspectives have politicized the intellectual and moral spirit of our times.

African American Intellectuals and Academic Questions

The education of the next generation of black intellectuals is something that is terrifically important to me. But the questions black intellectuals put to themselves, and to African American students, are not limited and confined to our own community. For the major crises in politics, in government, in practically any social issue in this country, the axis turns on the issue of race. Is this country willing to sabotage its cities and school systems if they’re occupied mostly by black people? It seems so. When we take on these issues and problems as black intellectuals, what we are doing is not merely the primary work of enlightening and producing a generation of young black intellectuals. Whatever the flash points are, they frequently have to do with amelioration, enhancement or identification of the problems of the entire country. So this is not parochial; it is not marginal; it is not even primarily self-interest.

In the interview “African American Intellectual Life at Princeton: A Conversation," Toni Morrison explores the intellectual service of
African American educators, which, like or unlike the flight of the insurance agent, humanizes both African American life and social life in general. If, as Morrison argues, the questions black intellectuals raise for and among ourselves reverberate beyond our own communities, then it would be vital to explore a worldview guiding our writings which presents service and community as indispensable; time and space as expansive; knowledge as intergenerational and responsive to the conditions of people; and community as a transcendent, shared, and thorny tie.

Worldviews shape educators’ lives and determine how they develop curricula, pedagogy, and scholarship to talk about, or silence talk about, racialized knowledge. Teaching Morrison’s writings without a critical discussion of racism and slavery is an appropriation that furthers racial dominance. Morrison weaves the demystification of racism and black well-being into art. Unraveling these ties depoliticizes the radical nature of her writings; in effect, it repoliticizes the work as compatible with paradigms indifferent to antiblack racism. Where analyses of whiteness are absent, critiques of racialized oppression are insufficient to create a learning environment in which Morrison’s work maintains communal ties and subversive insights. Engaging in this “dangerous, solitary, radical work,” one might finally confront the penchant for playing in the dark.

Conclusion

The ability to identify dehumanizing, racialized myth presupposes critical thinking grounded someplace other than the conventional mind. Since critical race thinking is rarely encouraged in racialized settings, we rarely ask how a people, manufacturing and depending on racist myths and ghosts in order to see their reflections in the world, lose more than they gain. It seems that hauntings cannot be restricted. Inevitably the racially privileged caste, and its entourage, finds itself marked and demarcated, more obsessed and possessed than its demonized, Africanist “inferiors.” Morrison’s work clinically, cooly, dissects both production and possession. It brings witness to a literacy that predates and overcomes Africanism, individualism, and materialism. With this literacy, we read of spirit and power through time and space. This knowledge is made meaningful, or meaningless, by the worldviews we embrace to credit or discredit the challenges posed by Toni Morrison.
Feminist Race Theory

There are at least three types of compromised knowers—the unwittingly, the voluntarily, and the forcibly compromised. Bernice Johnson Reagon maintains that the uncompromised knower is the one who straddles, standing with a foot in both worlds, unsplit by dualities and unhampered by a toxic imagination. Morrison’s grace, her ability to walk and call out both the reactionary Africanisms and the revolutionary ancestors evokes the agility of the straddler walking between worlds into a space of communal insight and agency. Between and within worlds, Morrison as a traditionalist and uncompromised knower, blends two worlds in which to stand, and in that rootedness, politicized by and politicizing the spirit, writes:

There must have been a time when an artist could be genuinely representative of the tribe and in it; when an artist could have a tribal or racial sensibility and an individual expression of it. There were spaces and places in which a single person could enter and behave as an individual within the context of the community. A small remnant of that you can see sometimes in Black churches where people shout. It is a very personal grief and a personal statement done among people you trust. Done within the context of the community, therefore safe. And while the shouter is performing some rite that is extremely subjective, the other people are performing as a community in protecting that person.

Notes

2. Ibid., 17.
3. Ibid., 6–7.
4. Ibid., 4.
5. Ibid., 48.
6. Ibid., 38.
7. Ibid., 39.


16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 33.


19. In an interview with the BBC, Morrison describes how her own “haunting” by Margaret Garner’s life and death ended when she wrote *Beloved*.

20. “The insurance agent does not declare, announce, or threaten his act. He promises, as though a contract is being executed faithfully between himself and others. Promises broken, or kept; the difficulty of ferreting out loyalties and ties that bind or bruise wend their way throughout the action and the shifting relationships.” Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” 28.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 29.

24. Ibid., xi.

25. Ibid., 29.


27. Ancestor worship is global. Confederate iconography inspires devotion; the fervor of canonical reverence belies the academy’s “objective” disdain for spiritualism.


29. Ibid.


31. Instructional or inspirational calls to expansive community come from various sites of recollection, which point to unifying elements or commonalities based on shared values.


34. Tsenay Serequeberhan writes in *African Philosophy*: “The calling of
the African philosopher . . . comes to us from a lived history whose endurance and sacrifice—against slavery and colonialism—has made our present and future existence in freedom possible. The reflective explorations of African philosophy are thus aimed at further enhancing and expanding this freedom.” Tsenay Serequeberhan, *African Philosophy* (New York: Paragon House, 1991), xxii. This “call” likely predates imperialism and enslavement.


36. Bernice Johnson Reagon, “‘Nobody Knows the Trouble I See’; or ‘By and By I’m Gonna Lay Down My Heavy Load,’” *Journal for American History* 78, no. 1 (June 1991).

“Limbo” has multiple meanings. In its primary negative usage, it refers to: Christian theological constructs of a site neighboring hell; prison; oblivion or neglect; suspension between two states. In its secondary meaning marked by play, struggle, and pleasure, limbo refers to the black/Caribbean dance where dancers lean backward, with knees bent to pass below an obstacle or bar that blocks their path. When I was growing up in the Southern United States, it was a broom handle that was lowered with each procession. As children, we danced singing, “Do the limbo, limbo rock—All away around the clock!” Only the very flexible and very audacious improvisers were determined and managed to last more than several rounds.

Black feminisms (there is no monolithic black feminism) revolve around the varied meanings, both negative and positive, of limbo. Black feminisms respectively evade and evoke the two types of limbos. Evaded is the relegation of black women’s issues to marginal sites where critiques of racial-sexual oppression are distanced from the centers of social and political debate. Like unbaptized children and the non-Christian righteous, black feminisms have been relegated to an outer realm where, while not exactly punished for their sins, they are ghettoized for an alleged poor timing and inability to encounter the “larger paradigms” undergirding existence. Women from oppressed peoples routinely find themselves in liberation limbos. For instance, when Native American women began to organize the Indigenous Women’s Network, they faced criticism from some men in their communities, through the International Treaty Council and the American...

Indian Movement, who argued that by addressing the specificity of their oppression, indigenous women weakened the collective power of Native Americans. Similar accusations have been made against black feminists. As they interpret and dissect, describe and agitate around human existence via reflections on and interventions by and for black females, African American feminisms display an agility in paradigm-building and trashing, an imaginative power and material resistance that grant fluidity to bend lower and lower and with limber steps dance past a descending bar of political-intellectual dismissals. Their evocative agency reasserts the centrality of struggles and analyses often passed over in mainstream discourse. Still, in the wake of (feminist) antiblack racism and (black and multicultural) antifeminism, black feminisms appear to progress only with considerable effort.

**Criticizing (Black) Feminisms**

Legitimate criticisms of mainstream black feminism include its (neo)liberalism, its failure to sustain economic critiques, its antiradicalism, and its neglect of state violence. Concerning its antiradicalism, some black feminisms elide the radical nature of black women’s resistance to state oppression. For instance, if black women’s associations with the Communist Party, trade unions, the Black Panther Party or Black Liberation Army, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), as well as other self-defense organizations, are omitted from feminist theory, the occlusion of radical praxis is normative in a culture and state where conservatism and liberalism are hegemonic. Having made important contributions to critiques of white (feminist) racism and (black) sexism, black feminisms have offered less focused analyses of class and educational elitism, liberalism, and state nationalism in the general society and among African Americans.

Other accusations leveled by some feminists against black women and black feminisms include the charges that black feminisms speak only to the particular and that black women are, more than their white counterparts, less inclined toward feminism given their allegiance to a romanticized “black community” that privileges males. The criticism that black feminisms are not “feminist” enough simplifies the existential dilemmas of black women’s lives and struggles in a racist state. The liberation of black women as a group rather than
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as atomized individuals is inseparable from—but not identical with or reducible to—the liberation of their people or communities of origin. With historical, cultural worldviews that privilege ancestors and community, and a historical genocidal diaspora in the Americas, and centuries of antiblack racism from a motley assortment of ethnic groups, black women’s associations and experiences of sexual and gender politics—from exploitation in domestic work and the labor market to sexual abuse and reproductive rights and sterilization struggles—will necessarily reflect racist barriers and racialized worldviews. This need not constitute an inherent antifeminism or counterfeminism, although those tendencies exist. Rather, it can lead to a unique form of feminism. In their best forms, black feminisms offer new languages for formulating the well-being of “community” and “family,” expanding and redefining liberation politics and rhetoric to address the issues of power that reflect black women as an outsider group and outsiders within this grouping such as lesbians/bisexual/transgendered women, prostitutes, the poor, incarcerated, and immigrant women.

The dismissive that black feminisms are handmaidens to white feminisms, or are not “black” enough, has no merit, but reflects in part the sometimes corrective instructional roles to white racism where black feminisms served as the “clean-up woman” or domestic of racial messes and seem overly preoccupied with white, privileged women. Also, in their construction as the source of exotic, emotive stories of colored pain and pathology for nonblack consumers, black feminisms have at times been commoditized for nonblacks and nonfeminists. The historic functions of the subjugated black as servant and entertainer endure.

Criticisms that black feminisms divert attention from black liberation (if they are black feminisms) or women’s liberation (if they are black feminisms) construct a binary that obscures the complexities of antiracist and antisexist struggles. The assertions that black feminism privileges antiblack racism to reify the polarized binary between “black and white,” making “race” the central issue and thereby deflecting from “universal” feminism or other “ethnic” women, ignores the material global phenomenon of antiblack violence. In the modern and postmodern eras, dark-skinned or black/Indians, Latinas/Chicanas, Asians, and Arabs contend with an intensity of racialized abuses that their white or light-skinned “ethnic” counterparts are often either spared or perpetrate.
In limbos, one witnesses the incompatibility of linearity to overlapping and contradictory relations of dominance. In this regard, illustrating the intersections of existence, oppression, and freedom with integrative analyses might be one of black feminisms' most important contributions to liberation movements. In limbos of our own progressive movements, time is not linear. One bends backward, in order to move forward: the past, present, and future coexist and overlap. For those who are not first born into color and ethnicity, later into an economic class, next into gender socialization, and finally into sexuality, linearity is dysfunctional. Those who are born simultaneously into experiences and relationships shaped, enriched, or vampirized by cultural, economic, and nation-state policies are assaulted by our society’s acquiescence to classism, and (hetero)sexism. In developing a critique of these experiences and relationships, the notion of linear struggle is inadequate and illusory. Linear projections prioritize abstract “primary” over abstract “secondary” oppression. Expressing an agile ability and willingness to grasp a multidimensional world and its multiplicity and intersection of repression, black feminisms usually forgo reified evil and trickle-down liberation theories. Rather than issue a critique of a succession of oppressive institutions—“patriarchy,” “white supremacy,” “transnational capitalism,” “colonizing culture,” “homophobia”—most black feminisms examine the simultaneity of oppression and the interrelatedness of gender, race, and class struggles.

**Academic Interventions**

Struggling for recognition from dominant intellectuals, academic black feminisms vacillate between conservative and progressive interventions. Academics have been accused of “hyperintellectualism,” of reflecting on abstractions of reality, disdaining and distancing themselves from the ground of everyday life and the specificity of political struggles. Black feminisms seem an unlikely candidate for the label of disembodied theory, given their largely ethical and pragmatic objectives and accessible language. Although a blueprint for liberation is generally disparaged, there are both a need and demand for functional discourse with a liberating intent that reflects peoples’ material and spiritual battles to survive poverty, drudgery in labor, premature births, and deaths. With
women and children of African descent disproportionately in the
ranks of the impoverished, malnourished, illiterate, diseased, and
dying, many of those struggling to survive and resist destructive
conditions are black women and children. A black existence marked
by oppression and resistance has historically galvanized and directed
black women’s intellectual productions.

Making the contributions of “subaltern” survivors and resistors,
making the “invisible” visible has been a good part of the work of
black women scholars and writers. Countering the marginalization
of women’s voices in academic discourse, women of color have
greatly expanded academic discussions and knowledge. Black
feminisms’ antiracism makes it quite distinct from academic,
nonradical trends. There is no such phenomenon as abstract
womanhood or gender. Both are constructed in specific social and
historical context, often using blackness as a foil. Likewise, there
is no abstract “blackness” suffering racism devoid of gender, class,
sexuality, political history. Abstractions create limbos in which the
specificity of liberation struggles is supplanted by the “representa-
tive” or generic woman or black or worker—who tends not to
reflect the lives of black women but benefits from the subordinated
and exploited roles black women have in political economies and
economies of value and desire.

Despite its seeming dependence on the favor of Women’s Studies
or African American/Africana Studies programs, black feminist
studies have provided new dimensions for the study of existential
intersections of economic, racial, and sexual violence and human
rights advocacy. One case in point is the January 1994 conference,
“Black Women in the Academy: Defending Our Name, 1894–1994,”
held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. At the conclusion
of the conference, 2,000-plus attendees (most of whom were black
women) issued a conference resolution to President Bill Clinton:
“86% of black women who voted, voted for the Democratic Party
ticket which brought you and Hilary Rodham Clinton to the White
House and a Democratic Congress to Washington in 1992 . . . this
was the largest proportion of any constituency to vote for your
administration.” With copies sent to the Congressional Black,
Women, and Hispanic Caucuses, the petition requested that the
administration commission a “Blue Ribbon panel on race rela-
tions” building on the 1968 Kerner report, examine that original
report and its 1988 review of a diverging America, and make
recommendations to alleviate “the continuing injuries of racism, sexism and homophobia.” The petition addressed U.S. domestic and foreign policies, calling for the end of antidemocratic covert actions against Haiti and the restoration of Jean-Bertrand Aristide to the Presidency; lifting the embargo against Cuba; aid for Somalia, and U.S. support for the democratic process in Southern Africa.

Intellectual, politicized interventions by black women academics and others are essential yet cannot serve as surrogates for political organizing with working-class and impoverished women. In their work, black feminist educators continue to build on the contributions of their historical predecessors. A black intellectual vanguard such as the “talented tenth”—created by white northern philanthropists and missionaries—is rejected by those who see its constraint of nonelite transformative praxis. The older W. E. B. Du Bois’s reflection on an intellectual cadre hence popularized has currency: “out of the mass of the working classes, who know life in its bitter struggle, will continually rise the real, unselfish and clear-sighted leadership.”

Activism among black nonelites created considerable political and social space for elites. The majority of social change agents continue to be women working in triple shifts for depressed wages, unpaid child-rearing and housework, and volunteer community building black women’s pivotal role struggles that often go undocumented and unnoticed.

Existence in Gray: Historical Political Struggles

Between white and black (and white supremacy and multiculturalism) exist curious sites of amnesia, the gray areas surrounding political agency. Amnesia partly stems from the erasure of historical archetypes (particularly those at odds with neoliberal politics) and the erasure of the ways in which black women ancestors historically fought for racial and gender justice. One of the first U.S. women to lecture publicly on political issues and the first published African-American woman political writer, Maria W. Stewart (1803–1869), called for women of African descent to develop their highest intellectual abilities.

Born a free African American woman in Boston, widowed at an early age, impoverished by white swindlers, and childless, Stewart wrote for the *Liberator*, an abolitionist paper established by David
Walker. After Walker’s death, as copublisher of the *Liberator*, Stewart became noted for an antislavery militancy and religiosity that incensed white racists as well as alarmed Boston’s more conservative, free blacks. Her claims to religious authority through conversations with God (Stewart maintained that divine revelations shaped her speeches, writings, and grounded her hope in African liberation) estranged her from the church’s Paulist scriptures that advocated the subservience of women and their exclusion from ministry. Assuming that the martyrdom that claimed Walker awaited her, Maria Stewart wrote in 1831, that “many will suffer for pleading the cause of oppressed Africa, and I shall glory in being one of her martyrs. . . . [God] is able to take me to himself, as he did the most noble, fearless, and undaunted David Walker.”

Unlike Walker, Stewart was not murdered. Her militant public life, however, was cut short by continuous criticism and censorship from the black Bostonians for violating gender hierarchies of the church and middle-class social values. While proslavery sectors cursed Stewart, Bostonian blacks silenced her. In her last public speech until the end of the civil war (in which she coordinated black refugee camps and served as Matron of the freemen’s Hospital in Washington, DC), “Farewell Address to her Friends in the City of Boston, Delivered September 21, 1833,” Stewart castigates blacks who curtailed her radicalism: “I find it is no use for me as an individual to try to make myself useful among my color in this city. . . . [M]y respected friends, let us no longer talk of prejudice, till prejudice becomes extinct at home. Let us no longer talk of opposition, till we cease to oppose our own.”

Likewise, one might also pull from the gray areas of political memory the work of Anna Julia Cooper (1858–1935). Cooper was ousted from her principalship at the prestigious Dunbar High School in Washington, DC, because of racist and political resentment that emerged from her preparing her black students to attend prestigious white schools, such as Harvard, rather than follow Booker T. Washington’s vocational education mandate. (She herself eventually earned a doctorate from the Sorbonne.) One of three African American women invited to address the World Congress of Women in 1893, Cooper also addressed the 1900 Pan-African Congress Conference in London, which she helped to organize; five years later she cofounded the colored women’s YWCA. In her classic text, *A Voice from the South*, Cooper gauges the progress
of liberation of Africans not by the elevation or achievements of black elites, particularly those by men, but by the freedom from exploitation of the masses of laborers who worked the longest hours, for the lowest wages, under the most arduous circumstances: “Only the black woman can say when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.” Coopert’s calls for a mass standard to measure the efficacy and relevance of black praxis go against the tendency to focus on elites and minimize the significance of laborers, of black women who, as change-agents in local churches, schools, streets, farm fields, factories, and prisons, reveal radical and communal traditions of democratic power.

As the lives of Stewart and Cooper exemplify, historical and contemporary black feminisms are tied to African American struggles. From the nineteenth-century abolitionist movements to the twentieth-century civil rights movement, blacks and nonblacks received and shared political training, language, theory, and strategy from and with black women as movements worked to radicalize intellectual and political formations.

Those unfamiliar with black women’s radicalism will likely not be well-informed on contemporary liberation struggles in the United States, influenced and shaped by the often unacknowledged contributions of antilynching militant Ida B. Wells-Barnett, civil rights revolutionary Ella Baker, and black liberation militant Assata Shakur. Confronting the marginalization of women leaders and activists in historiography, Delores Williams observes that “By uncovering as much as possible about such female liberation, the womanist begins to understand the relation of black history to the contemporary folk expression: ‘If Rosa Parks had not sat down, Martin King would not have stood up.’” More precisely, if Miss Parks had not sat down and later organized with E. D. Nixon, Joanne Robinson and the Women’s Political Caucus, the Montgomery Improvement Association and its Bus Boycott would not have emerged.

Black women abolitionists, Reconstruction radicals, “Second Reconstruction” civil rights activists, and black movement militants fought against racial and sexual restrictions. Their courageous commitments were responses to the threats against black existence posed under a state built on black enslavement and white colonization.
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Today, white supremacy, economic exploitation, and the disenfranchisement of women have mutated rather than disappeared. In the United States, the black life span, already less than that of whites, continues to decline; whereas black poverty, which is greater than that of whites, is increasing. State policing and protection are as selective and as discriminatory as state punishment and execution. Social, political, economic equality are chimerical rights for black peoples, as is equal protection under the law from racial and sexual violence/exploitation. Contemporary “existence in black” occurs among nations where blackness symbolizes sexual pathology, violence, and criminality, and where racial paranoia constructs a fetish for prison and punishment. These constructions ensure that although most violent attacks tend to occur within one’s own ethnic group, the majority of whites are beaten, raped, and robbed by other whites—the dominant image of the batterer, rapist, and thief is “the black,” ergo what needs to be disciplined, policed, and punished (including through punitive policies for the poor is, as Fanon observed, le nègre).

Historically, invoking “the black” as breeder and instigator of violence conveniently masked “white” and state violence. At the same time that blacks gained notoriety as the most infamous perpetrators of crime in a racialized society, they are given less recognition as the victims of violence. Black feminisms that deconstruct “the black” as primitive and degenerate in the Americas and beyond, and counter the mythology that criminalizes black existence and rationalizes antiblack violence, still must contend with the tendency among activists to emphasize the common but sporadic racist violence of police brutality or hate crimes over the more prevalent racial and sexual violence inflicted by blacks on other blacks.8

Conclusion: Bleaching Bodies

As a preteen in the 1970s, visiting my first big city, LA, I met an older play-kin who instructed me on life. My study, sequestered from family trips to Disneyland, was relegated to Hollywood’s drag strip, hanging out in the neighborhood, or running errands to local stores. The most memorable lesson occurred while, with her large Afro, hooped earrings, and dark black skin, she reclined one afternoon in a great-aunt’s claw-foot tub. The visual memory
survived the verbal instruction. With face and knees pointing to
the bathroom ceilings, expounding on racial and sexual politics,
my tutor soaked in hot water splashed with bleach.
Whatever we did or did not talk about had a great deal to do
with bodies, beauty, color, and marketing (but not antiracist or
black feminisms). Her fifteen-year-old savvy at the height of the
Black Power movement recognized aesthetics as socially constructed
and that altering, even mutilating, the body was an investment in
commerce and trade. The point was not to erase but to tamper with
blackness, to alter existence in black in its female teen form. Too
savvy to desire or believe in “whiteness” as an available option, she
opted for some distance from, or at least some control over, black-
ness—but always with an eye on what the market demanded.

In the antiblack performance, shaping some contemporary race
discourse, the play-kin of my youth reappears. The market provides
steady incentives. It seems that bleaching bodies, like bleaching
feminisms, produces a color of ash, a grayness. Those too sophisti-
cated to believe that they can obliterate a seemingly unassimilable
“blackness” might project it into gray areas of intellectual-political
peripheries. Others might seek to manage blackness out of its “too
black” state, altering its appearance to make it more of an inde-
teminate color palatable to market consumers and multiracialism.
Still others, outsiders, in limbo might proceed past lowering
booms—epidemics of race hatred, sexual violence, and poverty,
elites that posit the “irrelevance of race” and black community—to
form black feminisms in liberation movements.

Notes
1. Problematising the heterosexual family as normative, Fran White
notes: “you can read anyone from Ron Karenga to Patrick Moynihan,
from Haki Madhubuti to Bill Moyers, and you will find that the
problem with the black community is that we have weak heterosexual
bonds . . . [these] building blocks for a strong community don’t
include welfare dependent families, single-parent female-headed
households, and especially they don’t include gay, lesbian and bisexual
family members.” See Phillip Harper, Margaret Cerullo, and E.
Frances White, “Multi/Queer/Culture,” Radical America 24, no. 4
Hemphill, Marlon Riggs confront the sexual politics mythologizing
black “family” and “community.”
4. Walker was allegedly poisoned by proslavery whites.
8. With the exception of incarcerated women (whose numbers disproportionately include black women) and indigenous women on reservations, black women’s lives are materially disciplined more by the government than by black males, who control more household violence than household income.
4

Resting in Gardens, Battling in Deserts:
Black Women’s Activism

Reminding you
Sister
It’s okay to rest your feet
from battles
But lay in gardens
warmed by sun
Not in spreading deserts
near convenient wells
—Audre Lorde

INTRODUCTION

The above epigram is taken from Audre Lorde’s inscription for The Black Unicorn. Lorde, a mother, poet, feminist, and lesbian, is one of many black women writers, including Toni Cade Bambara, Sonia Sanchez, bell hooks, and Alice Walker, who have greatly influenced the growth and development, the genius, of womanist or black feminist theory and activism.

Tens of thousands of black women have furthered democratic politics and social justice through their activism and analyses. Black feminist politics display a radical singularity. In its revolutionary tendency (only one of many trajectories within black women’s activism), one finds the framework for an alternative to liberal antiracist and feminist politics. Black women have tended incred-

ible, secluded gardens within the expansive wasteland of this dysfunctional democracy.

What often distracts attention from the fruits of black women’s labors is depoliticizing representations that obscure their political contributions. Commercial, stereotypical portrayals of black females center on fetishized and animalized sexual imagery; consequently, blacks, females, and politics become effaced or distorted. Racial and sexual caricatures corseting the black female body have historical legacies. Progressive intellectuals and activists satirize denigrating stereotypes that recycle vilifying images of black females as “tragic mulattas,” tricksters, and femmes fatales. Nevertheless, commercial images of America’s sexualized attraction as well as aversion to black females eclipse images of black female political agency in conventional culture. Deconstructing representations of black females as sexual deviants and of images that promote antiblack and antifemale contempt and violence has been a primary concern of black women writers and activists in the United States for centuries.

The political agency of black women still seems to be infrequently referenced, perhaps because black males remain the most influential petitioners and pugilists in contemporary American race politics. Although exceptions have occasionally been made for very extraordinary women, historically, the image of “freedom fighters” has been masculinized, a fact that furthers the erasure of black women activists.

**Historical Legacies**

[W]e find our origins in the historical reality of Afro-American women’s continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation. Black women’s extremely negative relationship to the American political system (a system of white male rule) has always been determined by our membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes. . . . Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation, an adversary stance to white male rule and have actively resisted its inroads on them and their communities in both dramatic and subtle ways.

—The Combahee River Collective Statement

2
Most Americans are unfamiliar with the history of militant black female fighters, yet their stories are readily available. Memoirs such as *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells; Angela Davis: An Autobiography*; and *Assata: An Autobiography* touch a raw nerve among those who become politically stressed or polarized when facing radical and revolutionary social justice battles.\(^3\) (Paradoxically, political autobiographies expand an intellectual base for progressives while simultaneously providing images of revolutionaries marketed as commodities through publications for consumers.) Reading such narratives reveals rebellions that democratized American politics. Tens of thousands were and are inspired by Ida B. Wells’s crusade against lynching, Ella Baker’s organizing for civil rights, Angela Davis’s support for prisoners (beginning with the Soledad Brothers in the late 1960s), and Assata Shakur’s revolutionary battles in the black liberation movement (a movement eventually destroyed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s illegal counterrevolutionary program, Cointelpro). The contradictory works of women such as Wells, Baker, Davis, and Shakur, although not consistently “radical” or “revolutionary,” pushed beyond conventional politics. Seeking liberation, each offered models of black female resistance to political, social, state, or gender dominance.

Following the unique political maneuvers executed by Wells at the turn of the previous century, black women continuously organized and shaped liberation leadership, leaving significant imprints on the movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Even women who uniformly considered themselves “antiracists” but not necessarily “feminists” nonetheless expanded antiracist women’s politics, community development, democratic power, and radical leadership. Given the primacy of movements in the formation and articulation of black female militancy, history plays a central role in contemporary analyses.

In the 1960s, black women participated in the Southern Christian Leadership Council, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Congress on Racial Equality, the Organization of Afro-American Unity, and the Black Panther Party.Emerging from the black liberation and antiracist movements that helped to redefine radical action, in the 1970s, black women’s organizations such as the Combahee River Collective issued cogent manifestoes that
articulated a revolutionary black feminism. Reviewing radical and revolutionary politics for contemporary struggles reveals dynamic legacies changing in the activism of prisoners rights advocates and environmental organizers. At a time of mass, militant unrest, through bold confrontations with state authority, black women activists forged prototypes for late-twentieth-century, and early twenty-first-century, radicalism.

Of the many branches of black feminism extending from battles for a liberated African and female existence in America, the most imaginative and transformative are rooted in black female radicalism. It is impossible here to offer a comprehensive survey of the ideological diversity or plurality of black feminist activisms or the more subtle differences found even within radical black feminism. Yet it is essential that we examine the limits of liberalism or civil rights advocacy, as well as black women’s challenges to state power and antiradicalism within conventional feminist and antiracist politics.

The most recognized political activism remains in conventional politics. Despite exclusionary practices set by racism, sexism, and class bias, African American women have made gains in the “public realm” of electoral politics and appointed office; these are the political victories most often seen and celebrated in antiracist feminist politics. The 1992 election of Carol Mosely Braun as the United States’ first black woman senator (whose politics often fell short of progressive), and the re-elections of Democratic leaders Maxine Waters (who helped to publicize the connections between the Central Intelligence Agency and cocaine trafficking in the Iran-Contra scheme), Cynthia McKinney (active in human rights advocacy in U.S. foreign policy), Corrine Brown, Carrie Meeks, and Eleanor Holmes Norton to the U.S. House of Representatives, stand as key examples of black female progress in electoral political power. Outside of congressional halls, black women also have mobilized the “private realm” of local and religious communities, neighborhood schools, and cultural centers. Directly or indirectly opposing institutional control, and social and state neglect or violence, they have informed American political culture by leaving indelible marks in antiviolence campaigns, resource redistribution for underresourced communities, youth and women’s groups, and labor and civil rights activism. Both the highly visible congresswomen and the nearly invisible community activists shape models of political progressivism.
Black women activists and feminists are not uniformly progressive, although they all invariably face marginalization and opposition fueled by white supremacy, corporate capitalism, patriarchy, and homophobia. Radical or revolutionary black feminisms also face resistance from liberal and conservative feminisms and antiracism. Black feminist politics negotiates the “internal” opposition of anti-radicalism among feminists and antiracists and the counterfeminism evident among some radicals.

Battling with state power, patriarchal culture, as well as anti-radicalism and counterfeminism among progressives, subordinate women have forged a feminist politics through militant antiracist movements. Discomfort with black feminist speech and activism in its most radical expressions—those which confront exploitation tied to militarism, corporate dominance, and neoimperialism stems from and fosters restricted notions of “feminism” and “antiracism.” Difficulties in accepting black feminisms on their own terms may stem from not only sexism and racism but a lack of familiarity with critiques of monopoly capitalism and neoliberalism.

Given our economic and ideological diversity, we cannot in good faith posit black women as a class. A homogenized view of women of African descent allows conventional politics to elide historical black militancy. There is no “master” narrative that frames the concerns of all black women and their organizations. The multiplicity of ideologies reveals varying degrees of political efficacy and risk for social change; this diversity is often obscured by the “framing” of feminism in ways that either erase the contributions of radical black women or depict a homogeneous black feminism as an (corrective or rebellious) appendage to either antiracist or feminist struggles.

Resistance has historically challenged and shaped black female praxis across a broad ideological spectrum. Black women’s autonomy from the pervasive dominance of neoliberalism and corporate culture, however, opens new avenues for political activism.

**Continuing Crusades**

Today, black women’s struggles center on related but seemingly diverse issues, such as reproductive rights, environmental racism, child-care and health issues, sexual violence, police brutality, and incarceration. Key intersections along the American political curve
of antiracist, feminist activism include community, ideology and identity, revolutionary iconography, state punishment, sexuality, black male patriarchy and profeminism, economic resources, and social and racial justice.

One area for concentrated focus has been the assault on affirmative action and the expansion of the prison industrial complex. Combined, these form a twinned hydra for racial, economic, and gender repression. A resurgent neoconservatism hostile to “racial preferences” in education and employment acquiesces to racial bias in imprisonment and state execution. The state of California, which leads the nation in incarceration, spends more on prisons than on schools. Of the nearly two million incarcerated in U.S. jails, prisons, and detention centers, over 70 percent are people of color. The Washington, DC–based Sentencing Project has noted that blacks convicted of committing similar offenses are disproportionately more likely to be incarcerated than whites.

Black women are increasingly becoming active around human rights abuses tied to policing and imprisonment given the destructive impact official and unofficial policies have on their families and themselves. A few striking examples illustrate the gross inequality and abuse rampant in the prison industry and state policing: the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution legalizes slavery for prisoners; anyone convicted of killing a white person is three to four times more likely to receive the death penalty, particularly if she or he is not white; over 65 percent of juvenile offenders sentenced to death since the reinstitution of the death penalty in 1976 have been either black or Latino. One of the few democratic nations to execute minors and the mentally retarded, the United States has executed more youths than any other country.

Although they are a minority of the prison population, women, particularly women of color, are increasingly facing the punitive powers of the state. In March 1999, the Amnesty International Rights for All campaign issued a report, Not Part of My Sentence: Violations of the Rights of Women in Custody, documenting the abuses of women in U.S. prisons and jails. By 1997, there were 138,000 women incarcerated in the United States, triple the number since 1985 and ten times the number of women imprisoned in Spain, England, France, Scotland, Germany, and Italy combined. Most of the women incarcerated in the United States are nonviolent offenders convicted of economic crimes or drug use. Eighty percent are mothers, 80 percent are
poor; and the majority are women of color. The less common violent offenses are generally connected to domestic violence. Racial bias in sentencing means that women of color incarcerated for nonviolent and violent crimes will increasingly make up the growing population of incarcerated females. Serving time, this population of caged women finds itself subject to new forms of physical and sexual abuse; and, although the Convention Against Torture, which the United States ratified in 1994, defines rape of women in custody by a correctional officer as torture, the United States government has engaged in virtually no monitoring of the conditions and situations of imprisoned women in respect to human rights violations.

In theory, human rights protections exist for both prisoners and nonprisoners in the United States under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the international conventions ban on racial discrimination, torture, and ill-treatment. The government, however, places itself above the law. In 1998, the United States continued to exempt itself from international human rights obligations that granted protections to U.S. residents and citizens—rights still not available under U.S. law. Even after ratification of key human rights treaties (generally the state weakens such treaties with reservations), the United States fails to acknowledge human rights law: It refused to ratify the International Children’s Rights Convention; opposed human rights initiatives banning landmines, child soldiers; and undermined the International Criminal Court (ICC). At the Rome Diplomatic Conference in July 1999, 120 states voted for and 7, including the United States, against the ICC treaty.

The above are only some of the battles which today’s progressive activists face. Conscious of both U.S. domestic and foreign policies, many black women also continue to organize and theorize around other crises and conditions that erode freedom and democratic culture and destroy life. These include racial and homophobic lynchings; the international AIDS epidemic currently devastating parts of Africa and U.S. cities; refugees and regional wars; embargoes crippling Cuba and killing hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children; decolonization struggles in Puerto Rico and Ireland; Palestinian statehood; political prisoners in China and other countries as well as in the United States; the war on drugs; addictions; the international resurgence of neo-Nazis; nuclear waste and toxic dumping; incest, rape, and domestic violence; underweight babies and infant
mortality; dire poverty amid the increasing stratification of wealth; and, of course, hypertension and high blood pressure.

Conclusion

In a culture that greets antiblack and antifemale violence, and the vilification and abuse of black females and their kin with considerable equanimity, many are compelled to act. Some African American women do so with distinct political intent to revolutionize rather than reform existing power structures, hoping to go to the root, to nurture and grow structural change that alleviates and diminishes oppressive conditions. Although for most Americans the recognized public fighters or advocates remain male, the Others, black female organizers, battle as outsiders, at times criminalized as cultural and political outlaws.

In these struggles, activists find that, on the one hand, the state has the power to extinguish a radical movement; on the other hand, it can modify and absorb that movement so that it no longer functions as resistance to official policy. Sometimes the most convenient resting place seems to be in apolitical pursuits or politics that fit within conventional frameworks. Retreat into isolationist politics of a singular, pressing cause abstracted from other struggles, and demands may fall short of collective abilities to rethink and effectively counter corporate globalization, the stratification of wealth and poverty, the routinization of expanding wars (bombing or embargo), and police powers (War on Drugs and Omnibus Crime Bill).

Despite the institutional force and pervasive presence of state and corporate policies, black feminist activism, like other insurgent action, reveals in its organizing and analyses its own peculiar power. Nowhere is this more evident than in the revolutionary potential of black feminism such as that found among women of Jericho 98, the Black Radical Congress, the prison and death penalty abolitionism, women’s health movement—all activists who take rest and respite—just not by convenient wells.

Notes

1. This epigram is an excerpt from an inscription written by Lorde to the author in September 1989, in Lorde’s collection of poems The Black Unicorn (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978).


6. Ibid., 5.


8. The United States was to submit a report on its compliance with the Convention Against Torture in 1995 but no report to date has been released. In response, a coalition of over sixty nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) issued a report in October 1998 titled *Torture in the United States: The Status of Compliance by the U.S. Government with the International Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*. See Sklar, ed., *Torture in the United States*.

The report notes that the major areas of noncompliance in the United States center on: the death penalty, prison conditions and the treatment of refugee detainees; physical and sexual abuse of women in prisons; the return of refugees to situations of torture and persecution and their long-term detention under abusive conditions.

In order for us as poor and oppressed people to become a part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. This means that we are going to have to learn to think in radical terms. I use the term radical in its original meaning—getting down to and understanding the root cause. It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system. That is easier said than done. But one of the things that has to be faced is, in the process of wanting to change that system, how much have we got to do to find out who we are, where we have come from and where we are going.

—Ella Baker, “The Black Woman in the Civil Rights Struggle”

During the height of the black liberation and black power movements, veteran activist Ella Baker’s cogent assessment of the political contradictions of liberalism among black elites advocating civil rights distinguished between attempts to become “a part of the American scene” and “the more radical struggle” to transform society. According to Baker,

In . . . struggling to be accepted, there were certain goals, concepts, and values such as the drive for the “Talented Tenth.” That, of course, was the concept that proposed that through

the process of education black people would be accepted in the American culture and they would be accorded their rights in proportion to the degree to which they qualified as being persons of learning and culture.¹

For Baker, the common belief that “those who were trained were not trained to be part of the community, but to be leaders of the community” implied “another false assumption that being a leader meant that you were separate and apart from the masses, and to a large extent people were to look up to you, and that your responsibility to the people was to represent them.” This precluded people from acquiring their own sense of values; but the 1960s, according to Baker, would usher in another view: “the concept of the right of the people to participate in the decisions that affected their lives.”²

Despite agitational movements, the concept of African Americans participating in political decisions has historically been translated through corporate, state or philanthropic channels. A century ago, the vision and resources of the American Baptist Home Missionary Society (ABHMS) allowed wealthy, white Christian missionaries to create the black elite Talented Tenth as a shadow of themselves as influential, liberal leaders, and to organize privileged black Americans to serve as a buffer zone between white America and a restive, disenfranchised black mass. Funding elite black colleges such as Spelman and Morehouse (named after white philanthropists) to produce aspirants suitable for the American ideal, the ABHMS encouraged the development of race managers rather than revolutionaries.³ To the extent that it followed and follows the founders’ mandate, the Talented Tenth was, and remains, antirevolutionary.⁴ The formation of the Talented Tenth—supported by white influential liberals—historically included women. It therefore liberalized the protofeminism of historical black female elites. Contemporary black feminist politics as pursued by elites evince an antirevolutionary tendency reflective of the bourgeois ideology of “race uplift.” Vacillating between race management and revolutionary praxes, black feminisms are alternately integrated into, or suppressed within, corporate-consumer culture.

Yet, as Baker noted, the 1960s ushered in a more democratic, grassroots-driven form of leadership. The “new wave” of black feminisms originating from the 1960s, invariably connects with
Radicalizing Black Feminism

historical antiracist struggles in the United States. Black women created and continue to create feminism out of militant national liberation or antiracist movements in which they often functioned as unrecognized organizers and leaders. Equally, their contributions to American feminism are inadequately noted, even among those who document the history of contemporary radical feminism. Emerging from black militant groups, Afra-Americans shaped feminist politics. A critical examination of these sites of emergent feminism and their embedded contradictions reveals black feminisms’ more radical dimensions. For instance, the Combahee River Collective traces its origins to political formations now generally considered as uniformly sexist:

Black feminist politics [has] an obvious connection to movements for Black liberation, particularly those of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of us were active in those movements (Civil Rights, Black nationalism, the Black Panthers), and all of our lives were greatly affected and changed by their ideologies, their goals, and the tactics used to achieve their goals. It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and white men.  

The Combahee River Collective took its name from the guerrilla foray led by the black revolutionary Harriet Tubman on June 2, 1863. This freed hundreds of enslaved people in South Carolina’s Port Royal region, and was the first and only military campaign in the United States planned and executed by a woman. During the Civil War, Tubman headed the intelligence service in the department of the South and was the first American woman to lead black and white troops in battle. Before making a name for herself as a military strategist and garnering the people’s title of “General Tubman,” this formerly enslaved African woman had earlier proved herself “a compelling and stirring orator in the councils of the abolitionists and the antislavers.” Tubman’s distinct archetype for a black female warrior disputes conventional narratives that masculinize black history and resistance. Although males remain the icons for black rebellion embattled with white supremacy and
enslavement, women engaged in radical struggles, including the
strategy of armed self-defense. As fugitives with bounties on their
heads, they rebelled, survived, or became casualties of state and
racial-sexual repression.

Despite being designated “outlaws” and turned into outcasts
because of their militancy, historical or ancestral black women such
as Tubman have managed to survive in political memory. A few have
been gradually (marginally) accepted into an American society that
claims their resistance by incorporating or “forgiving” their past
revolutionary tactics. Tubman’s antebellum, criminalized resistance
to slavery, like Ida B. Wells’s post-Reconstruction, antilynching call-
to-arms, typifies a rebellion that later became legitimized through
American reclamation acts. To recall or reclaim black women who
bore arms to defend themselves and other African Americans and
females against racial-sexual violence remains an idiosyncratic
endeavor in a culture that condemns subaltern physical resistance
to political dominance and violence, while supporting the use of
weapons in the defense (or, in some cases, the expansion) of the
nation-state, individual and family, home and private property.

Seeking explicitly to foster black female militancy in the 1970s,
Combahee black feminists selected an AfrA-American military
strategist and guerrilla fighter as their archetype. Their choice of
Tubman over her better known contemporary, Sojourner Truth,
suggests an intent to radicalize feminism. Truth, not Tubman, is
closely identified with feminism because of the former’s work as a
suffragette and associations with the prominent white feminists of
her day. Tubman is identified with black people—men, women, and
children—and military insurrection against the U.S. government.
Her associations with white men are better known than those with
white women; for instance, she allegedly planned to participate in
John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, despite the warnings of the
prominent abolitionist and profeminist, Frederick Douglass. With
this black freedom-fighter as their feminist model, the Combahee
River Collective emerged in 1977 to contest the liberalism of the
National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) that preceded the
Collective.

In its manifesto, the Collective expressed its “serious disagree-
ments with NBFO’s bourgeois-feminist stance and their lack of
a clear political focus” and offered an activist alternative.\textsuperscript{7} The
Collective, which included Gloria Hull and Margo Okasawa-Rey,
later went on to organize against a series of murders targeting black girls and women in the Boston area. Combahee’s black feminist manifesto emphasized radical activism rather than liberal politics:

Although we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men... Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.\(^8\)

Given the prevalence of antiradical bias in American society, one must wade deeply into the mainstream to retrieve critiques such as the following, also issued by the Combahee River Collective:

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution will guarantee our liberation.\(^9\)

**Ideology and Feminist Identity**

How to maintain Combahee’s integrative analyses—intersecting race, gender, sexuality and class—with more than rhetoric, that is, in viable political practice that organizes in nonelite communities, became a major challenge for feminists. All antiracist and antisexist politics, notwithstanding the rhetoric, are not equally ambitious or visionary in their demands and strategies for transforming society. The majority culture’s desire or need to bring “closure” or containment to the black revolutionary struggles that fueled radical black feminism (such as Combahee) has filtered into black feminist ideology, altering its potential for transformation.\(^10\) “Closure” itself is, likely, either an illusory or a conservative pursuit, given
the continuance of the repressive conditions (impoverishment, abrogation of rights, racial and sexual denigration) that engendered revolutionary struggle.

Although the greatest opponent to antiracist and feminist revolutionary struggles has been the counterrevolutionary state (embodied in the twentieth century by the United States\textsuperscript{11}), black feminist writings have, by and large, paid insufficient attention to state repression and the conflictual ideologies and divergent practices found within black feminisms. This is partly because so much necessary energy has been focused on black feminisms’ marginalization in European American and African American culture (in addition, the impact of black feminisms on Latina, African, Asian, Arab, and Native American women could be more fully addressed), and partly because of the antiradical tendencies found within black feminisms, tendencies that are often obscured.

Liberal, radical, and revolutionary black feminisms are often reductively presented as ideologically unified and uniformly “progressive,” while black feminisms are simultaneously viewed as having little impact beyond black women. Sorting out progressive politics within black feminisms, one may distinguish between ideological trajectories that reveal black feminisms’ at times compliant, often ambiguous, and sometimes oppositional, relationships to state hegemony. Delineating ideology works to contextualize black feminist attitudes toward institutional and political power. In the blurred political spectrum of a progressivism that broadly includes “liberal,” “radical,” “neoradical,” and “revolutionary” politics and their overlap, all of these camps change character or shape-shift to varying degrees with the political context and era. For instance, no metanarrative can map radical or “revolutionary” black feminism, although the analyses of activist-intellectuals such as Ella Baker serve as cartography. Some reject, while others embrace, the self-proclaimed “revolutionary” that manifests through rhetorical, literary, cultural, or conference productions. “Revolutionary” denotes dynamic movement, rather than fixed stasis, within a political praxis relevant to changing material conditions and social consciousness. With a fluid rather than fixed appearance, the emergence of the revolutionary, remains episodic. As conditions change, what it means to be a revolutionary changes (therefore, the articulation of a final destination for radical or revolutionary black feminisms remains more of a motivational ideal, and the pronouncement of an arrival at the final destination a depoliticizing mirage).
Radicalizing Black Feminism

Despite ideological fluidity and border crossings, one can make some valid or useful generalizations. Black feminisms that accept the political legitimacy of corporate state institutional and police power, but posit the need for humanistic reform, are considered liberal. Black feminisms that view (female and black) oppression as stemming from capitalism, neocolonialism and the corporate state that enforces both, are generally understood to be radical. Some black feminisms explicitly challenge state and corporate dominance and critique the privileged status of bourgeois elites among the “Left”: those that do so by connecting political theory for radical transformation with political acts to abolish corporate state and elite dominance are revolutionary.

Differentiating between liberalism and radicalism—or even more so between “radical” and “revolutionary”—to theorize black feminist liberation politics is extremely difficult but essential for understanding some limitations of “left” politics and black feminisms. Part of the difficulty in delineating the “Left” (of black feminisms) stems from the resurgence of the Right and its modification.

New terminology denotes the pervasive influence of conservatism as neo becomes a standard political prefix for the era of post–Civil Rights and postfeminist movements. The efficacy of rightist conservatism has led to the coupling of reactionary with conservative politics to construct the rightist hybrid “neoconservative”; the merger of conservative with liberal politics to create the right-leaning “neoliberalism”; and the marriage of liberalism with radicalism to produce “neoradicalism” as a more statist or corporate form of radical politics. Alongside “neoconservatism” and “neoliberalism,” one finds “neoradicalism.” All denote a drift toward conservatism. This drift has engendered deradicalizing trends that include the hegemony of bourgeois intellectuals within neoradicalism and the commodification of the “revolutionary” as a performer who captures the attention and imagination of preradicalized masses, while serving as storyteller for the apolitical consumer. Responding to revolutionary struggles, the counterrevolutionary, antirevolutionary, and neoradical surface to confront and displace those inspired and sustained by vibrant rebellions.

Neoradicalism, like liberalism, denounces draconian measures against women, poor, and racialized peoples, and, similarly, it also positions itself as “loyal” opposition to the state. Therefore,
what it denounces is not the state itself but its excesses—prison
exploitation and torture, punitive measures toward the poor,
environmental degradation, counterrevolutionary violence and
contra wars. Abolition movements directed by neoradicals rarely
extend their rhetoric to call for the abolition of capitalism and the
corporate state. When led or advocated by those representative of
the disenfranchised, the deradicalizing tendencies are muted by the
appearance of the symbolic radical.

All black feminists, including those who follow conventional
ideology to some degree, share an outsider status in a commercial
culture. That marginalization is not indicative of, but is often
confused for, an intrinsic or inherent radicalism. Ideological
differences among Afra-Americans belie the construction of (black)
women or, even more significantly, black feminists as a “class.”
Refusing to essentialize black women or feminism, writers such
as bell hooks have noted the conflictual political ideologies found
among black women. In 1991, hooks’s “A Feminist Challenge: Must
We Call All Women ‘Sister’?” interrogated feminist championing
of Anita Hill that made little mention of how this then Reaganite
Republican had promoted antifeminist, antigay/lesbian, antidisabled
and anti–civil rights policies at the Equal Employment Oppor-
tunity Commission (EEOC) under the supervision of Clarence
Thomas. The gender solidarity surrounding Hill obscured her
support for ultraconservative policies. Prior to her courageous
testimony at the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings (which
eventually confirmed Thomas as a Supreme Court justice), she had
implemented reactionary attacks on the gains of the civil rights and
women’s movements (gains that had enabled nonactivists such as
Hill and her former supervisor to attend Yale Law School).

Legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw notes the consequences of
African Americans’ failure to distinguish and discuss political
ideologies among black public figures. Crenshaw argues against
a racial uniformity in black solidarity that includes reactionaries.
In July 1998, at a C-SPAN televised gathering of black lawyers
critical of the American Bar Association’s invitation to Thomas to
keynote its annual meeting, Crenshaw gave a scintillating critique of
black support for Thomas. She contended that, because of his race,
African Americans paid little attention to his right-wing politics and
so failed to distinguish between “conservative” and “reactionary”
ideologies. (Neo-nazi David Duke’s endorsement of Thomas’s
appointment to the Court underscores the affinity right-wing ideologues felt for Thurgood Marshall’s Republican replacement. According to Crenshaw, ideological distinctions eroded black opposition to former president George Bush’s Supreme Court nominee, but, if black Americans had maintained and sharpened the distinction between conservative and reactionary positions, more would have actively opposed Thomas’s appointment to the Court.

Crenshaw’s argument has merit. Conservatism has some respectability among black women and men immured in the “race uplift” of Booker T. Washington’s black capitalism (but not fully compliant with his prohibitions against competing with whites). Reactionary politics, however, hold no respectable public place among African Americans. Historically viewed as an extension of white supremacy and racial dominance, reactionaries have been considered anathema to black and female lives. Yet African Americans seem unwilling, publicly and critically, to discuss black reactionaries in service to the state and to distinguish their counterrevolutionary service from the antirevolutionary disavowals of black liberals and neoradicals. (In similar fashion, maintaining distinctions between revolutionaries and radicals appears to be equally problematic for Americans.)

Just as blurring the lines between black reactionaries and conservatives politically accommodates reactionaries by reclassifying them as respectable “conservatives,” black feminists have erased the distinctions between liberalism and the radicalism that incited some of black feminisms’ most dynamic, militant formations (like the Combahee River Collective). Given that liberalism has accrued the greatest material resources and social legitimacy, the coalition of liberals and radicals to foment neoradicalism means that respectability has been designated to dual beneficiaries. Liberal black feminism garner the image of being on the “cutting edge” by appending itself to symbols of radicalism and, hence, increases its popularity as “transformative.” Radicals are able to mainstream or maximize their visibility and the market for their rhetoric via legitimization through association with liberalism. The terms for merger may be weighted toward liberalism, for liberalism—and its offshoot neoliberalism—wields more material resources and legitimacy than radicalism or neoradicalism. Liberalism also allows black feminisms to increase their compatibility with mainstream American politics, as well as mainstream African American political culture.
African Americans generally do not favor political “extremism,” as is attested by their strong fidelity to a Democratic Party that takes black voters for granted and that, under the Clinton presidency, increased police powers and punitive measures against the poor. Rather than rightist reactionary or leftist revolutionary politics, most black Americans support a progressive liberalism (left of center) that has a greater social conscience and, therefore, moral content than that of the general society. This consequently places many African Americans outside the narrowly construed, conventional political spectrum. Due to a tendency to be more socially progressive and supportive of vigorous, sometimes outraged and sometimes outrageous, condemnations of white supremacy, African Americans are often portrayed as political “extremists” or outsiders.

Given that centrism remains the dominant political stance, some black feminisms reconfigure radicalism to fit within liberal paradigms. This enables an erasure of revolutionary politics and a rhetorical embrace of radicalism without material support for challenges to transform or abolish, rather than modify, state corporate authority. An analogy for black feminist erasures can be made with the framing of a painting. The mounting or mat establishes the official borders for the viewer. Often, matting crops off the original borders of the picture. If incorrectly done, the mat encroaches on the image itself and the signature of the image-maker. In matting or framing black feminisms for public discourse and display, the extreme peripheries of the initial creation are often covered over. Placing a mat over the political vision of black feminism establishes newer (visually coordinated) borders that frequently blot out the fringes (revolutionaries and radical activists) to allow professional or bourgeois intellectuals and radicals to appear within borders as the only “insurgents.” With layered or overlapping mats that position rhetoric as representative of revolutionary struggle, the resulting portrait will obscure radicals to portray liberals or neoradicals as gender and race “rebels.”

**Resisting and Reshaping Radicalism**

Although a great impetus for the development of black feminism came from black revolutionary movements, antiradicalism within American feminism (as well as masculinism among American radicals) obscured black female militancy. Antiradical sentiment among some black feminists (which has led some black feminist writers
to dismiss black women’s ideological critiques of black feminist politics as “sectarian”) raises the issue of the place of revolutionary and antirevolutionary thought within progressive black feminism.

Black feminist liberation ideology challenges state power by addressing class exploitation, racism, nationalism, and sexual violence with critiques of—and activist confrontations with—corporate state policies. The “radicalism” of feminism recognizes racism, sexism, homophobia, and patriarchy, but refuses to make “men” or “whites” or “heterosexuals” the problem in lieu of confronting corporate power, state authority, and policing. One reason to focus on the state, rather than on an essentialized male entity, is that the state wields considerable dominance over the lives of nonelite women. The government intrudes on and regulates the lives of poor or incarcerated females more than bourgeois and nonimprisoned ones, determining their material well-being and physical mobility, and affecting their psychological and emotional health. Never the primary economic providers for black females, given the history and legacy of slavery, un- and underemployment, and racialized incarceration, the majority of black men exert little economic control over female life, although they retain considerable physical, sexual, and psychological dominance.

Radical black feminists’ liberation theories address their nemesis: political violence, in both its private and public manifestations; counterrevolutionary state police repression; and a liberal antirevolutionary discourse that seeks to contain radical black feminism by portraying it as an idealistic maverick. Radicalizing potential based on incisive analyses; autonomy from mainstream and bourgeois feminism; independence from masculinist or patriarchal antiracism; a (self-)critique of neoradicalism, and, most importantly, activism (beyond “speech acts”) that connects with “grassroots” and nonelite objectives and leadership—all mark a transformative black feminism.

Yet, radicalism remains problematic for many.

Revolutionary praxis or the radical sentiments of the movement era (roughly 1955–1975 to include the black civil rights struggle, the American Indian Movement (AIM), Chicano and Puertoriqueño insurrections, and militant feminism) were not discarded solely because they became “anachronistic.” These praxes proved to be dangerous and costly in the face of state and corporate opposition and co-optation. The attacks launched against militancy had to do with its effectiveness, its potential to effect radical change.
Today one finds in American politics in general, and black feminisms in particular, the “mainstreaming” of radicalism as a form of resistance to radical politics in which formerly radical means, such as protest marches and demonstrations disrupting civic and economic affairs, are increasingly deployed for nonradical or liberal ends, such as the maintenance of affirmative action. Likewise, formerly radical causes—such as prisoners’ rights activism and advocacy to abolish the prison industrial complex—are increasingly administered through conferences, research, and social service centers financed by corporate philanthropy seeking to influence policy objectives.

In corporate culture, gender and race are filtered through class to juxtapose and contrast “workers” and “professionals.” To the extent that corporate culture has infiltrated U.S. progressivism, the polarities of worker/manager resurface to foster a resistance to, or reshaping of, radicalism embodied in a “corporate Left.” Those able to raise large sums of money through corporate largesse to institutionalize their political formations and identities as astute “organizers,” maintaining a political leadership that reflects the style of chief executives and mirrors state corporate sites (among which academia is included), would qualify as members of the corporate Left. Their status as sophisticated politicos goes unchallenged because of the material resources garnered. That these corporate sites and their corresponding political style are not known for their accountability to disenfranchised communities or democratic processes, but for funding alternative entities to diffuse radical movements, is viewed as irrelevant by some progressives. Joan Roelofs, however, argues that:

One reason capitalism doesn’t collapse, despite its many weaknesses and valiant opposition movements, is because of the “nonprofit sector.” Yet philanthropic capital, its investment and its distribution, are generally neglected by the critics of capitalism. . . . Some may see a galaxy of organizations doing good works—a million points of light—but the nonprofit world is also a system of power which is exercised in the interest of the corporate world.14

Whether through the academy, government agencies, or private foundations, an emergent “corporate Left” has helped to deradicalize
feminism and antiracism and so antiracist feminism or feminist antiracism. Distinguishing between the “revolutionary” and the postmovement hybrid “neoradical” places a finer point on analyses of progressive black feminist politics and their contradictions.

Questions of co-optation and integrity are audible to those who listen attentively for sounds of political independence from corporate (state) influence. The din can be confusing, given that conflictual allegiances abound in American politics and culture. For instance, the oxymoronic wit of PBS “public service announcements” that validate corporate state funders, while broadcasting acquiescence to business elites, reappears in progressive projects funded by corporate entities and severed from nonelite, community leadership. Searching for political independents, one finds that liberalism competes with and censures radicalism, while radicalism competes with and censures revolutionary praxis. Both forms of censorship seem to be guided by an amorphous notion of what constitutes responsible “Left” politics, delineated within a rapacious corporate world funding the political integration of “radicals” on terms favoring the maintenance of stability and accumulation of capital as prime directives.

Corporate culture oils radicalism’s slide into neoradicalism. According to consumer advocate Ralph Nader, being raised in American culture often means “growing up corporate.” (For those raised “black,” growing up corporate in America means training for the Talented Tenth.) One need not be affluent to grow up corporate; one need only adopt a managerial style. When merged with radicalism, the managerial ethos produces a “neoradicalism” that, as a form of commercial “left” politics, emulates corporate structures and behavior. As corporate funders finance “radical” conferences and “lecture movements,” democratic power-sharing diminishes. Radical rhetoricians supplant grassroots organizers and political managers replace vanguard activists. Within this context, feminist “radicals” are encouraged to forgo both effective oppositional politics to social and state dominance and organic links to nonelite communities. Instead, they are encouraged, as progressives, to produce a “ludic feminism” that, according to Teresa Ebert, “substitutes a politics of representation for radical social transformation.”

Ludic feminism has a curious relationship to black feminism because the latter has been shaped and contextualized by radical movements.
In the Politics of “Sisterhood”

In the late 1960s, liberal bourgeois feminism among white women gradually expanded to include black women. This emergent multiracial “sisterhood” transferred the nineteenth-century white missionary mandate (promoting an elite leadership to serve as interpreters of, and representatives for, the racialized and marginalized nonelite) to white bourgeois feminists. The result was a political paradox: on the one hand, black feminisms pushed white feminism (in its various ideologies) to repudiate ethnocentrism and racism and so, to some degree, “radicalized” America’s dominant feminism. On the other hand, the more financially endowed white cultural feminism supported and “mainstreamed” black feminism by rewarding liberal politics within it, and so, to some degree, deradicalized black feminist politics by normalizing its liberalism. This logically follows the historical trajectory of white radical feminism in contemporary American politics.

Amid the political battles waged by white middle-class women in the movement era, Alice Echols’s *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* notes three forms of activism. First emerged the “politicos” who worked in civil rights organizations, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), antiwar and radical youth groups, such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and revolutionary or underground spinoffs, such as the Weathermen. Out of these formations emerged radical women who became disaffected because of the sexism of male-dominated organizations, and who subsequently developed, as “radical feminists,” organizations such as Redstockings, who were opposed to the state’s dehumanizing domestic and foreign policies.

From the gains or concessions that radical feminists were able to wrest in the 1960s from the corporate military industrial complex arose “cultural feminists” who benefited from the radicals’ pathbreaking work; according to Echols, cultural feminists, as liberal feminists, benefited from the militancy of radical feminists, whom they later excised in order to consolidate an image of respectability and to garner corporate support for hegemonic or mainstream feminism. Women such as Gloria Steinem, Robyn Morgan, and other founders of *Ms.* came to represent the cultural feminism that, unlike its radical rivals, defined men, not the state, as the primary
obstacle or “enemy” of women. Radical feminists acknowledged that men needed to change sexist attitudes and behavior, writes Echols, but emphasized structural critiques (of capitalism and the state). Radical feminists became increasingly marginalized and eventually supplanted by cultural feminists who expressed politics less critical of, and so more compatible with, the state and its financial centers. In fact, Ms.’s early funders were white corporate males who, while categorized as women’s “oppressors,” became the financiers of mainstream feminisms.17

Given their accommodationist politics and access to state and corporate resources, one could refer to such feminisms, whether conservative or liberal in ideology, as “state feminism.” Echols’s depiction of cultural feminism, or what is referred to here as state feminism, as supplanting radical feminism because of its compatibility with, or complementarity to, state hegemony resonates with the black liberation struggles of the time period she analyzes.18 This raises important questions about the aspirations and dimensions of today’s black cultural feminism and its relationship to black radical feminism. For instance, one might ask if a cultural form of black feminism (one that essentializes African women or women of color) functions as a buffer against revolutionary (feminist) critiques that cite capitalism and the state as primary obstacles to black and, therefore, female advancement? Can cultural black feminism exist as a hybrid heavily invested in the political appearances of revolutionary symbolism and representations shaped by ludic feminism, rather than political organizing with nonelites for revolutionary praxes?

If the answer to either or both of the questions above is “yes” or even “perhaps,” then neither race, gender, nor class is the radicalizing impetus or deradicalizing tendency influencing black feminisms. Political ideologies shape feminist aspirations. Given that it is more assimilable, liberal black feminism remains more likely to be promoted into the political mainstream as representative or normative among gender-progressive Afra-Americans. Like the general society, mainstream feminism allows scant political space for revolutionary antiracists, even if they are white feminists, whose militant critiques of state power contest the assumptions (and funding) of liberal feminism. Cultural or liberal black feminism wields more influence in bourgeois, European American feminism than revolutionary white antiracist feminism does. Compatible ideologies allow white liberal
feminist politics transracial privileges that mask an alienation from, or antipathy toward, radical antiracism. New forms of multiracial feminism allow dominant white feminists to “ privilege” black female political celebrities over white female political prisoners. Revolutionary, antiracist white women, rarely referenced by feminists (or black militants and white antiracists), are even more isolated than the white radical feminists and groups described by Echols.

The low visibility granted antiracist revolutionary white women in mainstream feminism coexists with their marginalization in discursive “critical white studies” and “abolition of whiteness” and “race traitor” movements, where whites challenge the existential (if not always material) benefits of white supremacy. There is little mention of whites who viewed racism, patriarchy, and economic exploitation as embedded in state power and so who, as revolutionaries, resisted the state. Little is known among liberal feminists or antiracists of Sylvia Baraldini, an Italian national convicted of aiding black revolutionary Assata Shakur to escape from prison, or white female revolutionaries Susan Rosenberg and Marilyn Buck, also convicted of assisting Shakur, who (along with black male revolutionaries) are serving between thirty- and seventy-year sentences. (Baraldini received an additional three years for refusing to testify before a Grand Jury investigating the Puerto Rican Independentista movement.19) Likewise, the case of Judy Bari, the white feminist Earth Firster! garners little attention in liberal feminism, black or white or multicultural, perhaps because it points to the continuance of Cointelpro (under the guidance of FBI veteran Richard Held) in policing white female radical environmentalists.20 Bari, who died from breast cancer in March 1997, survived a May 1990 car bombing. A nonviolent activist, she offered analyses that made connections between the FBI repression of the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement and environmental radicals. The meeting and embrace between Bari and Ramona Africa, who survived the 1985 bombing of the African organization MOVE in Philadelphia, in which eleven African Americans died, reflects radical forms of transracial “sisterhood” and political solidarity.

Revolutionary feminist politics are more likely to note the political ramifications of radical alliances for “sisterhood” and antiracist feminist movements. Such politics are also more inclined to scrutinize coalitions between radical and liberal black feminisms and white radical and bourgeois feminisms. There has been considerable discus-
sion about interracial conflict between black and white women; some focus on collaboration between the two groups, but greater analysis of the ramifications of cross-ideological alliances or coalitions between African American and European American women is required.

Conclusion

The legacies of black female radicals and revolutionaries contest arguments that state repression and subaltern resistance are not “black women’s issues” or are too “politicized” for “feminism.” Such legacies also contradict contentions that feminism is inherently “bourgeois” and therefore incapable of an organic revolutionary politics. Yet, even the “revolutionary” is marketed in a corporate culture (where Revlon commercials once proclaimed that the corporation made “revolutionary cosmetics for revolutionary women”). Revolutionary black feminism transgresses corporate culture in its focus on female independence, community building/caretaking and resistance to state dominance, corporate exploitation, racism, and sexism. Emphasizing economic and political power rather than social service programs for the disenfranchised, it challenges basic social tenets as expressed in “law and order” campaigns, the respectability of political dissent channeled through lobbying and electoral politics, and in the acceptance of the corporate state as a viable vehicle for redressing disenfranchisement.

The blurred lines between revolutionary, antirevolutionary, and counterrevolutionary politics allow, in the United States, for the normative political and discursive “sisterhood” that embraces conservative and liberal women, yet rarely extends itself to radical or revolutionary women. Adherence to mainstream political ideology appears key in the normative appeal of antiracism, feminism, and antiracist feminism. Because political marginalization usually follows challenges to repressive state policies and critiques of female or feminist complicity in those practices, the revolutionary remains on the margin, more so than any other exponent of black feminism.

The symbiotic relationship between subaltern black feminists and the “white” masculinist state contests any presumption of a unified politics. Seeking a viable community and society, antiracist feminism can serve as either sedative or stimulant. Conflicting messages about the nature of political struggle and leadership can
be found within black feminisms. Black feminisms function as a “shadow,” both in the negative aspects attributed to them and in their subordinate status on the American scene. Ever present, often ignored but completely inescapable, their plurality is stereotypically seen as monolithic and depicted as the antithesis of the “robust American” body. Fending their shadows as American alter, political, egos, black women paint varied portraits of the shadow-boxer as radical; as lone warrior; successful corporate fund-raiser for, and beneficiary of, progressive issues; individual survivalist and community worker, disciplined to the leadership of nonelites in opposing state corporate dominance.

The predicament of progressive black feminisms remains the struggle to maintain radical politics despite black feminisms’ conflictual persona. Yet this, after all, is the shadow-boxer’s dilemma: to fight the authoritative body casting one off, while simultaneously struggling with internal conflict and contradictions.

Notes
2. Ibid. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham documents how white Christian philanthropists such as Henry Morehouse and other leaders within the American Baptist Home Missionary Society (ABHMS) in 1896 promoted the concept of the Talented Tenth as black elite race leaders. ABHMS funded the emergence of this elite to serve a population facing severe discrimination and persecution following the aborted Reconstruction; it created the Talented Tenth with a dual function as both a model showcase for whites (and blacks), to discredit propaganda of black inferiority; and, buffer to counterrevolutionary tendencies among a disenfranchised, impoverished black mass. See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois popularized the term in The Souls of Black Folk with his essay “The Talented Tenth.”
4. The antirevolutionary politics of liberals or neoradicals are not synonymous with counterrevolutionary state policies of police terror,
repression, infiltration, and co-optation. The antirevolutionary can also be antireactionary and seek a centrist or center-left politics; the counterrevolutionary is reactionary.


8. Ibid., 279.


10. For an example, see Patricia Hill Collins’s discussion of organizing in *Black Feminist Thought* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990).


16. Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). Echols’s insightful text is limited by her failure to adequately research black feminist radicals such as Frances Beale, cofounder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s Black Women’s Alliance, and Barbara Smith, cofounder of the Combahee River Collective.

17. See Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, for documentation on the initial funding for *Ms*.

18. Echols’s descriptions of the strife between radical and liberal feminists parallel to a certain extent the black liberation movement’s conflictual relationship between revolutionary nationalism of the Black Panther Party and the cultural nationalism of US. The New York Panthers synthesized an Africana aesthetic with critiques of capitalism, war, and police violence.

19. Baraldini, Rosenberg, and Buck fall within the category of prisoner
Feminist Race Theory

of conscience as defined by Amnesty. Amnesty International has also declared U.S. citizen Lori Berenson a Peruvian political prisoner. See Rhoda Berenson, “A Mother’s Story,” Vogue (May 1997).

I felt an almost unbearable tension—it was as if I were two persons, two faces of a Janus head. One profile stared disconsolately into the past—the fretful, violent, confining past broken only by occasional splotches of meaning. . . . The other gazed with longing and apprehension into the a future glowing with challenge, but also harboring the possibility of defeat.

—Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*

**The Janus Head**

In her memoir, Angela Davis evokes Janus—the Roman god of doors or beginnings. Depicted with two visages facing, like portals, in opposite directions, Janus serves as a metaphor for the past and future directions of Davis’s political and intellectual life: the past manifests in the violent repression of blacks in the United States, the future reflects the possibility of an internationalist movement for a socialist, feminist, nonracialist democracy. Janus, like Eleggua, the Yoruba orisha of the crossroads, marks awakenings, polarities, and contradictions. In the autobiography, it references the possibilities of choice and realization within struggles for class, race, and sexual liberation. It also symbolizes simultaneous existence in the seemingly exclusive social worlds of black disenfranchisement and poverty and

white privilege and education. Representing a dialectic of theory and resistance in revolutionary struggle in Davis’s political and intellectual development, Janus signifies conflictual and transitional stages that foster feelings of alienation from the familiar, yet open new avenues. Life is set by a series of decisions, paths taken and paths avoided. The existential dilemmas described in *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* reflect a tension magnified by the heightened expectations and fears characteristic of revolutionary social and political movements. In the United States, during the era of militancy depicted in the memoir, radical choices courted triumphs for liberation, or disasters and the possibility of imprisonment and death. Shaping Davis’s future as a black radical, Communist, and international feminist, the past and present profiles of the Janus head denote transformative thought and personal/political struggle. Such thought, scanning both directions to avoid stagnation, considers the past from which movements originate in order to maintain momentum for the future. For activist-intellectuals, such as Davis, who struggled with exclusionary but overlapping worlds shaped by race, class, sex, gender, and violence, Janus in its positive manifestation represents the opportunity to confront the contradictory existence of abrogated freedom within the world’s most powerful nation-state. In its negative aspect, it represents hypocrisy and denial, a “two-facedness” manifest when states or political systems claim democratic principles while systematically disenfranchising marginalized peoples or political minorities.

**The Formation of an Activist-Intellectual**

Angela Yvonne Davis was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1944, near the close of the Second World War and the emergence of the United States as heir to British hegemony (a dominance which the U.S. militarily retains, despite its slippage in the global economic and intellectual marketplace). She grew up in the Southern United States under Jim Crow segregation and codified racial discrimination. During the late 1940s, her family moved into a neighborhood that subsequently became known as “Dynamite Hill,” because of Ku Klux Klan terrorism against black families being integrated into the previously all-white community. Although the Davis home was never targeted by white arsonists, houses across the street were bombed. Bombings and burnings continued for several years; “miraculously,” recalls Davis, no one was killed.
Racial segregation had created an apartheid-like Southern United States in which African American students, regardless of their economic status, usually attended the same (underfunded) schools. As a child, Davis was considered part of an elite, among impoverished peers. Because of her family’s financial security and the extreme poverty of some classmates, the grade-schooler stole from her father, giving money to children to buy their school lunch. Partly to escape the social roles defined by her middle-class standing in the black community and the educational limitations of local schools bound by Jim Crow and inequitable state funding, Davis left the South in 1959, for Manhattan, New York, where, under the auspices of a Quaker educational program, she lived with a progressive white family and attended a private high school, Elizabeth Irwin/Little Red School House. There she studied Karl Marx and Frederick Engels’s *The Communist Manifesto*, and at age fifteen became active in a youth organization associated with the Communist Party. Familiarity with the Party was part of her family history. Since her birth, Davis’s parents had been close friends with black members of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA). Although neither ever joined the Party, they were black middle-class educators who organized as “communist sympathizers.” Her mother, Sallye Bell Davis, was a national officer and leading activist in the Southern Negro Youth Congress, an organization associated with the CPUSA that had campaigned to free the Scottsboro Nine.2

During her childhood, anti-Communist repression in the McCarthy era forced the elder Davis’s friends—the parents of young Angela’s playmates—underground. Despite the prevalence of repressive anti-Communism, Davis was profoundly affected by Marxism, and sought a disciplined, antiracist movement against racialized economic exploitation. Like Janus, Marxism with one profile surveyed economic, political, and social oppression while the other provided a glimpse of a possible future without the inequities of capitalism.

Upon high school graduation and with a scholarship in hand, Davis left New York to attend Brandeis University in Massachusetts; she studied there with philosopher Herbert Marcuse, and took her junior year in France at the Sorbonne. This was the height of the Civil Rights Movement emanating from the 1955 Montgomery, Alabama bus boycotts that had destabilized U.S. apartheid. The memoir describes the young Davis’s dissonance as she embarks for
Europe to develop as a formally trained intellectual yet desires to remain connected to black liberation struggles in the United States: “The Janus head was still fixed—one eye full of longing to be in the fray in Birmingham, the other contemplating my own future. It would be a long time before the two profiles came together and I would know the direction to both the past and the future.” Janus would continue to haunt Davis politically during the Civil Rights Movement as she furthered her academic studies in France and Germany. Like other influential, progressive writers, particularly the black “public intellectuals,” Davis’s educational and economic privileges both distanced her from the most marginalized (African Americans) and infused her theories of (black) liberation with an internationalist perspective. Parisian anti-Algerian racism had a strong impact on her understandings of international racism and colonialism and their connections to U.S. antiblack racism (European racism also had a marked influence on another black American intellectual living in Paris during that time, James Baldwin). Torn between the desire to learn from different national cultures and political systems and the need to join “the movement,” Davis decided not to pursue a doctorate at Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany, choosing instead to return to the states to work with Marcuse at the University of California at San Diego.

Terrorist assaults against black activists provided the radicalizing impetus to end her European studies in the late 1960s. In fact, the racist murders of childhood acquaintances in her hometown during her first study abroad, in the early 1960s, profoundly affected her. In both the autobiography and a 1993 essay, “Remembering Carole, Cynthia, Addie Mae and Denise,” Davis recounts how, while in France, she learned of the September 15, 1963, bombing of Birmingham’s Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. In that foray by white extremists, fourteen-year-olds Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, and Addie Mae Collins, and eleven-year-old Denise McNair, died. The bombing occurred soon after the historic 1963 March on Washington, DC, and Martin Luther King Jr.’s eschatological “I Have a Dream” speech. Davis reminisces that declining the scholarship to the private school in Manhattan would have probably placed her nearby at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, at the time of the bombing. It was during her stay in Europe, far from family ties and a society schooled in surviving and confronting white violence, that Davis learned of, and became deeply disturbed by, the girls’ deaths:
If I had not been in France, news would not have been broken to me about the deaths . . . in the “objective journalism” of the International Herald Tribune. . . . I was in Biarritz, living among people so far removed from the civil-rights war unfolding in the South that it made little sense to try to express to them how devastated I felt. I wrestled in solitude with my grief, my fear and my rage.5

The absence of public mourning in France for the slain youths—an absence put into sharp relief several months later when French nationals collectively mourned the assassination of U.S. President John F. Kennedy—was strongly felt:

I carried around in my head for many years an imagined representation of the bombing’s aftermath that was far more terrifying than any cinematic image of violence I have ever encountered: the fixed eyes of Carole’s and Cynthia’s bloody decapitated heads and their dismembered limbs strewn haphazardly among the dynamited bricks and beams in the front yard of the stately church. My own private imagination of what happened that day was so powerful that years would pass before I felt able to listen to the details of my mother’s story.6

Three decades later, Davis extensively discussed the tragedy with Sallye Davis. In 1963, on hearing the explosion from her home, the elder Davis had contacted Alpha Bliss Robertson and driven her to the Sunday School class at the church to find her daughter, Carole; instead, the women found debris and parts of the children’s bodies. In the collective remembrance of this tragedy, Davis notes erasure:

The time in the country my mother and I spent remembering that terrible day three decades ago—“Bloody Sunday,” she calls it—was both healing and frustrating. As we spoke about the girls as we had known them, it occurred to me that the way the memory of that episode persists in popular imagination is deeply problematic. What bothers me most is that their names have been virtually erased: They are inevitably referred to as “the four black girls killed in the Birmingham church bombing.” Another traumatic moment occurred in 1964 when James
Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman were killed in Mississippi. A decade earlier, Emmett Till was found at the bottom of the Tallahatchie River. These boys, whose lives were also consumed by racist fury, still have names in our historical memory. Carole, Denise, Addie Mae and Cynthia do not."

"Bloody Sunday," the term used by many activists to describe the atrocity, became a fixture in American political racial memory. Yet few, Davis observes, remember that the girls were young activists, who at the time of their deaths were preparing to speak about civil rights at the church’s annual Youth Day program. For most, the four “function abstractly in popular memory as innocent, nameless black girls’ bodies destroyed by racist hate.” All four shared political commitments with other youths who in that volatile year had confronted police commissioner Eugene “Bull” Conner’s high-powered fire hoses and, according to Davis, “filled the jails in Birmingham in a way that reenergized the Civil Rights Movement like nothing since the Montgomery Boycott.”

Missing the courageous confrontations with repressive state laws waged by youths, particularly girls and young women, Davis spent most of her years between 1959 and 1967 outside of the South and, therefore, distanced from the Southern Civil Rights Movement (as did other African American women, such as Black Panther leaders Elaine Brown, Kathleen Cleaver, and Assata Shakur). However, Davis periodically “touched base” with the movement. For instance, testing voter disenfranchisement of blacks, in 1965, when she became twenty-one, she attempted to register to vote in Birmingham and was denied that right because of her race. In the early 1980s, during a National Women’s Studies Association keynote address, Davis recalled the abrogation of her civil rights to illustrate the political repression of women. Examining the repressive legacy of continuing voter disenfranchisement during the Reagan administration’s destabilization of social and political gains from the Civil Rights and women’s movements, she cited the case of Julia Wilder and Maggie Bozeman of the Black Belt of Alabama who were convicted in January 1982, of voter fraud. Both women had “assisted older people and people who, as a result of the racist educational system that is particularly acute in the South, never managed to learn how to read and write well enough to fill out a ballot . . . [consequently] they were tried and convicted by an
Angela Y. Davis

all-white jury and sentenced to four and five years, respectively, in the state penitentiary.”

With the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the de jure right to vote won by the “second reconstruction,” the de facto abrogation of rights continued. Paradoxically, as repression continued, the definition of rights for the dispossessed expanded beyond that of civil rights to the more encompassing social and economic rights. This growing demand for justice and equality also sparked calls to militancy.

SNCC AND THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY

The search for human liberation greater than the U.S. Constitution’s promise of electoral powers led Angela Davis to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Party (BPP). The Black Panther logo of the Lowndes County, Alabama, Freedom Democratic Party was propelled into the national spotlight in 1966 by television broadcasts of a Greenwood, Mississippi, march. There—with Martin Luther King Jr. in attendance—SNCC’s Stokely Carmichael, having just been released from jail by local police attempting to destabilize the demonstration, galvanized the black gathering to chant for “Black Power!” The “Panther” captured the political imagination of black youths. Speaking to black political frustrations with the intransigence of an entrenched white power structure, one enforced by police malfeasance and brutality, it echoed Malcolm X’s calls for self-defense with the heightened sense of risk and confrontation which followed his 1965 assassination. The Panther—which remains the political-cultural symbol for black militancy and resistance in the United States—became the contested namesake and symbol for several organizations; interestingly, these organizations emerged on the West Coast, far from the civil rights struggles of the north and southeast.

Huey Newton and Bobby Seale’s Black Panther Party for Self-Defense emerged in Oakland, California, in 1966, and later expanded into Los Angeles, where Davis was a member of the Black Panther Political Party. In 1967, at the demands of Oakland’s leadership for exclusive claim to the title and SNCC national leaders Carmichael and James Forman’s suggestion, the Black Panther Political Party became “Los Angeles SNCC.” It was short-lived as a political group. Los
Angeles SNCC women ran the office but men dominated as official spokespersons and media figures, according to Davis, who states that Los Angeles SNCC dissolved because of women’s refusal to accept the sexist and masculinist posturing of male leadership. Other factors leading to the demise of the organization were national SNCC’s anti-Communism, and attempts by the New York–based national SNCC office (under the leadership of H. Rap Brown, but over the protests of Forman) to dictate policy to chapters; one dictate led to an aborted attempt to merge with Newton’s Panthers.

On leaving SNCC, Davis joined the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. She describes her affiliation with the Panther organization as a “permanently ambiguous status” that fluctuated between “‘member’ and ‘fellow-traveler.’” Active in community organizing, temporarily in charge of political education in the West Side (which she worked with Bunchy Carter and John Huggins to open) and formulating political education for the Los Angeles Chapter, Davis remained on the fringes of the Panthers’ internal contestations. Years later, she recalls her doubts about the Party’s militarist posturing:

I thoroughly respected the BPP’s visible defiance and principally supported the right to self-defense. . . . I also found myself using funerals and shootings as the most obvious signposts of the passage of time. However, sensing ways in which this danger and chaos emanated not only from the enemy outside, but from the very core of the Black Panther Party, I preferred to remain uninformed about the organization’s inner operations.  

Part of the contradictions of internal operations revolved around sexual politics. The Black Panther Party as a masculinist, revolutionary organization operated in ways that promoted both males and females to perceive women “as objects of male sexual desire,” according to Davis. No matter how close a woman came to approximating the contributions of the most esteemed male leader, maintains Davis, the respect granted a Panther woman, even those in high-ranking leadership, could be and was “reversed with the language and practice of [male- or female-initiated] sexual seduction.” Davis’s generalizations concerning Panther women (and men) universalize the behavior of elite Oakland leadership (as portrayed by Elaine Brown), suggesting a gender uniformity for the leadership and of chapters and branches across the country.
Despite its sexism, complexity marked Panther sexual politics; for example, the BPP newspaper took a stance for gay/lesbian, and women’s rights as Davis remarks elsewhere.

Davis notes that although some African-American women in revolutionary organizations “detested the overt sexism of male leaders,” they also associated feminism with middle-class white women: “In failing to recognize the profoundly masculinist emphasis of our own struggles, we were all at risk. We often ended up affirming hierarchies in the realm of gender relations that we militantly challenged in the area of race relations.”\textsuperscript{15} Of her romanticizing of the Panthers, Davis writes: “I cannot deny the attraction that the Panther representations of black militant masculinity held for me at a time when precious few of us had begun thinking about the politics of sexism and compulsory heterosexuality.”\textsuperscript{16} The construction of the revolutionary, of the militant leader with transformative agency for social justice, was masculine:

Revolutionary practice was conceived as quintessentially masculinist. The Party’s imagined power was too often conflated with power over the means of violence, wielded both against the “enemy” and in the ranks of the Party itself. This power was sexualized so that women’s place was always defined as unalterably inferior. It articulated notions of revolutionary democracy with gang-inspired, authoritarian organizational principles. It sexualized politics and politicized sexuality in unconscious and dangerous ways.”\textsuperscript{17}

The Black Panther Party, as “part of our historical memory,” provides a contested terrain, one often navigated with blinders of romanticized or demonized iconography. Romanticization and demonization would also extend to the Communist Party, which by the 1960s was a radical (rather than revolutionary) organization, perceived as less of a political threat than the BPP and so less of a target for violent destabilization on the part of local and federal police agencies. The BPP was in decline by 1969 due to infiltration by police and FBI agents and provocateurs, internal factionalism, gender bias, and the corruption of West Coast elite leadership. The CPUSA, which had been infiltrated decades earlier and crippled by the McCarthy era’s persecution, had its own internal contradictions around race and gender.
Davis became a member of the Communist Party USA in 1968, at the same time that she joined the Panthers; however, her ties with the CPUSA proved less problematic than her relationship with the BPP. Her affiliation with the Panthers would last less than two years; with the Communist Party, it would endure for over twenty. Initially Davis joined the CPUSA because of her commitments to internationalist struggle. Like W. E. B. Du Bois, who after the Second World War, began to incorporate Marxist theory into his analyses of oppression, Davis felt that black liberation was unobtainable apart from an international workers’ movement against capitalism, imperialism, and racism. Her understanding that a mass liberation struggle needed to be class-based in order to confront the racist foundations of capitalism was strengthened by a 1969 trip to Cuba. (In 1959, Cuba had waged a successful revolution against the U.S.-backed Batista dictatorship, and in 1963, again successfully, defended itself against the U.S. Bay of Pigs invasion.)

In part, joining the Communist Party was Davis’s response to the deficiencies she found in the black liberation movement’s nationalism. For her, black nationalism inspired African Americans by emphasizing the collective African past and a “black aesthetic,” but its dominant culturalist outlook lacked comprehensive economic and political analyses for black equality and human rights. In her view, black nationalist ideology’s construction of “race” distilled from economic, gender, ethnic, and class considerations erased the connections between oppressed blacks, other racially marginalized peoples, the exploitation of white workers, and sexism. The limitations of cultural nationalism in the 1960s led Davis (by then a Marxist for over a decade) to ideologies such as those espoused by the Che-Lumumba Club of southern California. One of the CPUSA’s few all-black collectives, the Club conducted successful campaigns against police brutality and executions in black neighborhoods. Davis found Che-Lumumba unhampered by the conservative gender and sexual politics undermining radical organizations such as the West Coast Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the West Coast Black Panther Party.

Davis’s political work and personal life within organizations such as the Communist Party and the Black Panther Party made her vulnerable to attacks by university administrations. By 1969, the new
assistant philosophy professor at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) was recognized in the state as a radical antiracist and a Communist. Although it had no formal punitive measures for ousting antiracists (as did schools in the South which had criminalized membership in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), the university administration codified persecution of Communists. In 1949, in the advent of McCarthyism, the University of California Regents had passed a bylaw banning the hiring of Communists. Twenty years later, it terminated Davis’s contract under the leadership of then California Governor and later U.S. President Ronald Reagan (when head of the Hollywood Screen Actors Guild, Reagan had provided the names of film artists/artisans suspected of “communist leanings” to the FBI). It would be two decades before Davis, who had trained for years to become an academic, would be permitted a tenured professorship in the University of California.

Despite the professional costs, she openly served for twenty-three years in active leadership on the Party’s Central Committee and twice ran for Vice-President on its national ticket. In 1991, on the eve of the CPUSA 25th National Convention, seeking with other longtime Party members to democratize the internal life of the CPUSA, Davis and approximately 800 activists and intellectuals formulated, signed, and disseminated an internal document designed to open up avenues of debate, “An Initiative to Unite and Renew the Party.” The “Initiative” criticized the CPUSA for elitism and racial and sexual bias. For example, it argues for the need to restore “the principle of black and white leadership,” maintaining that the Party has “gone backward in attention to the struggle for African-American equality.” Referring to the struggle for gender equality, the document states: “While the ultra-right has furiously attacked women’s rights precisely to divide the people, a kind of simplistic interpretation of a class approach has led us to pay scant attention to the very dynamic women’s movement.” Advocating a stronger grassroots mandate for the CPUSA, the “Initiative” criticizes past Party practices as nondemocratic: “Our participation in mass struggles should be our primary task and yardstick.” The “Initiative” makes no mention of sexuality, homophobia, and gay, lesbian, bi-, and transsexual rights.

During the national elections that followed, Communist Party leaders who signed the paper were refused placement on the official slate; consequently, none of the “Initiative” signatories were...
reelected to office. Later that year, along with most of the 800, including leaders such as Charlene Mitchell, Herbert Aptheker, and James Jackson, Davis left the Communist Party. The following year, at a Berkeley, California, conference, the reformers created the Committees of Correspondence, on whose National Coordinating Committee Davis briefly served.

**Political Trials**

Active in the Communist Party, Davis became engaged in prisoners’ rights activism during the time that she was defending her right to teach at UCLA. Her organizing focused on a mass defense for the Soledad Brothers: George Jackson, Fleeta Drumgo, and John Clutchette. These three incarcerated African American leaders in the California prisoners’ rights movement were falsely charged with killing a prison guard in January 1970. Through the Soledad Brothers’ Defense Committee she met prison intellectual and liberation theorist George Jackson. Author of *Blood in My Eye* and *Soledad Brother*, he would eventually become an intimate friend of Davis. At the age of eighteen, Jackson had been sentenced to an indeterminate sentence of from one year to life for driving a car involved in a gas station robbery, which netted seventy dollars. Jackson, who had served ten years at the time Davis met him, maintained that he was unaware of his acquaintance’s robbery as he sat in the car. On August 21, 1971, at the age of thirty, this Soledad prison leader and field marshall for the Black Panther Parry was shot and killed by a guard, in what many activists viewed as a political assassination.²⁴

Before meeting Jackson, Davis established friendships with his family—mother Georgia, sisters Penny and Frances, and seventeen-year-old brother Jonathan, who eventually became one of her bodyguards. The activist academic was daily receiving multiple death threats. Campus police provided some measure of protection as she taught classes and met with students. Friends and coactivists provided official campus security, often with guns legally purchased by the twenty-six-year-old assistant professor and kept in her apartment. To publicize prison conditions and state abuses against the Soledad Brothers, and out of love for his brother, George, in August 1970, Jonathan Jackson, a member of Davis’s security, carried guns into a courtroom in northern California’s Marin County. With prisoners
James McClain, William Christmas, and Ruchell Magee, he took as hostages the judge, district attorney, and several members of the jury. The high school student and inmates brought the hostages to a van in the parking lot. San Quentin guards fired on the parked vehicle, killing judge Haley, Jonathan Jackson, and prisoners McClain and Christmas, while seriously wounding the district attorney, several jurors, and prisoner Magee who later became Davis’s codefendant. She was not in northern California at the time, but because the guns were registered in her name, Davis was named by police as an accomplice. In that era, at the height of the FBI’s counterintelligence program (Cointelpro) to undermine the Civil Rights and black liberation movements—police, assisted by federal agents, had killed or assassinated over twenty black revolutionaries in the Black Panther Party. Rather than turn herself in to the authorities, Davis went underground and for two months was on the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s “Ten Most Wanted List.” Captured in Manhattan on October 13, 1970, she would spend the next sixteen months in prison, most of it in solitary confinement, before her release on bail.

On January 5, 1971, in The People of the State of California v. Angela Y. Davis, the state arraigned Angela Davis in a small Marin County Courtroom on charges of murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy. Throughout 1971, various judges denied more than thirty pretrial motions made by defense counsel. Responding to the defense team’s motion for a change of venue—the defense hoped that the trial would be relocated to the more racially mixed Alameda county—the state moved the case to Santa Clara County, ensuring the likelihood of an all-white, conservative jury. Nevertheless, the case was closely monitored by progressive activists and intellectuals petitioning for a fair trial. In April 1972, the National United Committee to Free Angela Davis published her opening defense statement in a pamphlet titled Frame-Up, which argues that Davis was prosecuted because of her effective leadership in mobilizing African Americans to support political prisoners such as the Soledad Brothers, and to oppose the state’s efforts to “eliminate” the Brothers and derail the radical movement. California Assistant Attorney General Albert Harris, who was specially appointed to prosecute Davis, would later complain about the “international conspiracy to free the defendant” when Santa Clara County jail authorities were flooded with calls, telegrams, and letters from around the world protesting the conditions under which
Davis was housed. President Richard Nixon, Attorney General John Mitchell, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover (architect of the illegal and violent counterrevolutionary Cointelpro), and Governor Reagan were also deluged with millions of pieces of mail objecting to inadequate conditions hampering Davis’s defense team.

The trial took place in a time of severe government repression against radicals and revolutionaries that included the use of state juries to tie up black activists in court on falsified criminal charges or to falsely incarcerate them. Nationwide though, exposés on Cointelpro, state malfeasance, and flimsy evidence, coupled with educational campaigns and demonstrations to end repressive policing and judiciaries, led juries to throw out cases or rule in favor of activists. In New Haven, New York, New Orleans, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Denver, and Detroit, juries exonerated defendants such as the Harrisburg 7, Ericka Huggins and Bobby Seale, the New York 21, and others. In fact, at the time of Davis’s trial, jurors in a San Rafael court acquitted the Soledad Brothers of all charges (George Jackson did not live to see his exoneration), with some jurors greeting the defendants after the reading of the verdict, according to Frame-Up.

In February 1972, after intense and lengthy lobbying by activists to end dehumanizing prison conditions and judicial racism in sentencing, the state Supreme Court abolished the death penalty in California, a decision that would facilitate Davis’s release on bail. Organizers had effectively mobilized a massive, (inter)national campaign, inundating the trial judge with demands for immediate bail, including a telegram signed by all thirteen of the African American U.S. congresspeople, at that time, the entire membership of the Congressional Black Caucus. On February 23, 1972, noting the magnitude of the public demands, the presiding judge granted bail. Given that her release undermined the presumption of guilt, which had been promoted in most media, prosecutors sought, and were denied, a delay in the trial proceedings. The trial, which progressed throughout 1971 and into the following year, ended just as the Soledad Brothers’ trial had: Angela Yvonne Davis was acquitted of all charges when the jury rendered its “not guilty” verdict on June 4, 1972.

Prison Writings

Davis’s pioneering works include her “prison writings,” and the memoir If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance. Women’s
rights and leadership remain a central theme in her work on liberation politics. Her leadership in the Soledad Brothers’ Defense Committee led to correspondence with George Jackson (reprinted in Jackson’s *Soledad Brother*), whose letters included critiques of the social function of prisons and chauvinism antithetical to liberation praxis. According to Davis, “He seemed to have internalized the notions of black women as domineering matriarchs, as castrating females, notions associated with the “Moynihan Report.” I could detect this in the comments he made in his letters, especially comments about his mother.”

To challenge Jackson’s gender politics, she began to investigate the role of African American females during slavery and eventually developed the essay “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves.” At the time, little had been written on enslaved black women from a feminist perspective. As an inmate, Davis was able to research this article only with extreme difficulty, obtaining books only by stating that they were pertinent to her case:

I informed the jail authorities that I had the right to whatever literature I needed for the preparation of my defense. In a large sense this research really was very helpful for the preparation of my defense because in my trial I focused a great deal on the misogynist character of the prosecution’s case. The theoretical work I did on black women actually assisted me to develop a strategy for my own defense.

Sexist imagery was a pillar in Prosecutor Harris’s March 27, 1971, opening argument in which he depicted Davis as a “student of violence,” and, referring to her relationship with George Jackson, a “woman of uncontrollable passions,” the vicious conspirator blinded by love.

Davis’s autobiography recounts the conditions under which she was held while awaiting trial, describing the penal environment and key moments of her imprisonment and trial defense. Despite adverse conditions while incarcerated, she served as co-counsel, preparing her defense with movement attorneys. Scholarly literature produced while in jail, such as the above mentioned “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” reflected her own political experiences of sexism. Davis traces the thesis of black matriarchy (expressed by Jackson) to various theories, including
E. Franklin Frazier’s in the 1930s, that argue that black women “remained the only real vestige of family life” because slavery had destroyed the black family and consequently created hybrid black women, overwhelming creatures that oppressed or emasculated black males. Senator Daniel Moynihan’s 1965 government report, *The Negro Family—A Case for National Action*, promoted this image as it portrayed black mothers as matriarchs who pathologized the black family through their subversion of gender roles. Davis’s critique of the “Moynihan Report” addresses labor exploitation of black women and men in the community of slaves. Responding to the pervasive depiction of black women as domineering matriarchs, Davis offers one of the earliest analyses of the intersections of racism, sexism, and capitalism within the slave economy and one of the earliest essays on antiracist feminist theory contextualized in the black experience in the Americas. She also provides a corrective to biased historiography that marginalizes or caricatures the realities of enslaved women. Introducing the concept that equal exploitation or “deformed equality” tended to disrupt gender hierarchies for black women and men, the essay both challenges common misperceptions of black female life under slavery and highlights the manner in which stereotypes shape contemporary perspectives and scholarship. Precisely because it demystified stereotypical images of enslaved black women and emphasized the specificity of historical women in resistance, this influential essay became widely circulated among feminist and black studies readers.

Another prison essay, “Political Prisoners and Black Liberation,” first appeared in *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance*, an anthology edited by Davis, from her cell, and activist-academic Bettina Aptheker, with contributions from U.S. radicals such as Aptheker, and political prisoners or prison intellectuals such as Davis and Newton. “Political Prisoners and Black Liberation” is perhaps the first essay authored by an African American woman within the genre of contemporary black protest and prison literature, a genre traceable to Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1955 “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Davis writes in this essay, which was first published in 1971, that “the entire apparatus of the bourgeois democratic state, especially its judicial system and its prisons, is disintegrating. The judicial and prison systems are to be increasingly defined as instruments for unbridled repression, institutions which may be successfully resisted but which are more and more imper-
vious to meaningful reform.” While she was incarcerated, her 1969 philosophy lectures on the Hegelian dialectic and the slave-turned-abolitionist Frederick Douglass (for a course she designed, Recurring Philosophical Themes in Black Literature, as UCLA’s first class on black philosophy, and to encourage philosophical reflections on black enslavement and freedom) were collected. The New York–based Committee to Free Angela Davis printed the lecture notes in 1971, as the pamphlet *Lectures on Liberation*. Later edited into “Unfinished Lectures on Liberation-II,” Davis’s first published theoretical piece appeared in the groundbreaking anthology on African American philosophy, *Philosophy Born of Struggle*.

Davis’s analysis of enslavement and freedom, developed prior to her own incarceration, proves relevant to both the postbellum and postmodern United States, where law codifies slavery. The Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution legalizes “involuntary servitude” within penal institutions, while U.S. politics and racism create a racialist legal system marked by sentencing disparity so that the majority of the nearly two million now incarcerated in prisons or detention centers are African American, Chico-Latino, and Native American. The desire for freedom on the part of the enslaved in the nineteenth century reflects the rights—or limitation of rights—of those incarcerated in the twentieth, and twenty-first, centuries. Her most recent writings return to the consuming interests of three decades ago. Arguing for a new “abolitionism,” Davis maintains that raising “the possibility of abolishing jails and prisons as the institutionalized and normalized means of addressing social problems in an era of migrating corporations, unemployment and homelessness, and collapsing public services [may] . . . help to interrupt the current law-and-order discourse that has such a grip on the collective imagination, facilitated as it is by deep and hidden influences of racism.”

**Antiracist Feminist Writings**

As mentioned earlier, the most distinctive contribution of Davis’s prison writings, in fact her work in general, is the gender analysis in which she radicalizes feminism through a class and antiracist analysis and offers new constructions for black female identity and politics. In the intersectional analyses of Marxism, antiracism, and feminism, exists the body of written work for which Davis
is best known. Activist women’s contributions to Marxism and Communism are frequently and easily overlooked, according to Davis. Citing women such as Lucy Gonzales Parsons and Claudia Jones, Davis notes that many women who devoted their lives to organizing for a revolutionary, socialist society produced neither theoretical nor autobiographical literature. In the absence of such writings, their intellectual and political agency has often “disappeared” or been dismissed. The reappearance of, and recognition for, the contributions of the intersections of Marxist, antiracist, and feminist praxes and radical female activists characterizes Davis’s work.

Her writings examine the contradictions and contributions of contemporary women to radical and feminist politics. Davis asserts that the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s held little attraction for black female militants and other progressive Chicana, Puerto Rican, Asian, and Native American women, despite the gender hierarchies within their respective antiracist or nationalist movements (one exception she notes is the black or Third World Women’s Alliance which grew out of SNCC chapters on the east coast to focus on a tripartite struggle against racism, sexism, and imperialism). In the nascent movements, the bifurcation of antiracist and antisexist struggles took curious turns: (middle-class) white women struggled with learned passivity and a hyperfemininity; black women were castigated for being too assertive and aggressive, or not feminine (passive) enough. In Davis’s evolving feminism, radical black women and antiracist white women altered the nature of feminist theory and feminist practice, expanding praxes and ideologies, and leading to differentiations of feminisms. She maintains that when women “oppressed not only by virtue of their gender but by virtue of their class and their race win victories for themselves, then other women will inevitably reap the benefits of these victories”; asserting the value of Marxism for feminism, she continues, “it is possible to be a Marxist, emphasize the central role of the working class, but at the same time participate in the effort to win liberation for all women.”39 A theory that accepts the overlapping interests of different groups reflects the present range of social and political repression. Drawing on the intersections of racist, sexist, and heterosexist repression, Davis contends that sexism has a “racist component which affects not only women of color but white women as well. Ku Klux Klan-instigated violence
against black people incites, for example, violence against women who attempt to use the services of abortion clinics. Low wages for women of color establishes a standard which leads to low wages for white women. So that white women are the victims of any upsurge in racism.” For Davis, it is “not coincidental that the same forces” attacking “abortion clinics and their personnel have also tried to prevent integrated schools.” Likewise, decrying the lack of a mass effort to challenge homophobia, and the “ghettoization” of the gay and lesbian political movements, Davis writes that the roots of homophobia are intertwined with the roots of racism, sexism, and economic exploitation. Reactionary intellectuals and activists, including extremists, have promoted violence against gays and lesbians, and a “fraudulent analysis holding homosexuals responsible for the so-called breakdown of the family.” Linking the repression of heterosexuals’ sexuality and that of their gay, lesbian, bi-, and transgender counterparts, Davis maintains that racism has played a central role in creating the prevailing repressive sexual environment.

Describing how African American women’s work in black liberation organizations constituted a form of feminist consciousness-raising, she marks the developing feminisms that presented an alternative to the women’s circles in the emerging (white) feminist movement: “Black women and women of color were making important contributions to the effort to elevate people’s consciousness about the impact of sexism. While we didn’t define ourselves as women’s liberationists, we were in fact fighting for our right to make equal contributions to the fight against racism.” Making an equal contribution often entailed confronting sexism both within the movement and embedded in literature and academic discourse about black women.

Unique to mainstream feminist thought of the early 1970s (and still somewhat of a novelty in contemporary mainstream feminism) were analyses of the intersections of racist and sexual violence. Addressing the simultaneous and intersectional appearances of sexism and racism, and by extension sexual and racist violence, Davis’s early work presented a corrective to feminist theory that erased racist violence, and antiracist theory that masked sexist violence. “Rape, Racism, and the Capitalist Setting,” which first appeared in The Black Scholar’s 1978 special issue on “The Black Woman,” critiques the role of class in racial-sexual violence.
Likewise, “Violence Against Women and the Ongoing Challenge to Racism,” 45 issued as a 1985 pamphlet, investigates the function of racist and sexist violence in a racialized, patriarchal society. Nowhere were the intersections of race and gender so volatile as in the antirape movement within the women’s liberation movement, which in the late sixties or early seventies tended to represent rape only as a gender issue of male dominance of females, ignoring the impact of race and class on state prosecution and “protection.” 46 As Davis notes, the black community bore the brunt of white women’s demands for more police and longer prison sentences. In the early days of the feminist movement, the disparity in perspectives promised few possibilities for coalitions between black and white women. Yet they did coalesce, for instance in antirape/antiracist organizing around the JoAnne Little case. In “JoAnne Little: The Dialectics of Rape,” 47 Davis reflects on the case of the young black woman incarcerated in North Carolina for petty theft who in 1974 killed the white prison guard who was raping her. The Little case highlighted the complicitous role of the state in the intersections of racial-sexual violence. Little’s act of self-defense, and subsequent flight, led to charges of murder and a “shoot to kill” edict from authorities. Her extradition from New York and subsequent trial in North Carolina were marked by effective mass mobilization and legal defense, which led to her acquittal. After the trial, according to Davis, Little issued a call for women who had supported her to organize around the Florida case of a young black man fraudulently charged with raping a white woman, yet most white feminist groups initially refused (some later changed their position) to assist in a defense committee for an accused rapist. The possibilities for, and obstacles hindering, multiracial women’s alliances against violence is a recurring theme in Davis’s discourse on freedom.

The issues of women’s emancipation are tied not only to counter-ery violence but also to work—labor, reproductive, and political work. “Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation” 48 explores economic exploitation in the workforce. Exploitation in nonwaged labor or reproductive labor for the household is the focus of “The Approaching Obsolescence of Housework: A Working-Class Perspective;” 49 and its critique of the reconstruction of domestic labor is based in part on the Italian feminist movement’s “Wages for Housework,” which was influential in Europe in the 1970s. Davis presents an economic proposal for
the liberation of women from domestic labor exploitation through restructuring domestic work as government-subsidized wage labor, suggesting that the deprivatization of labor coupled with attractive salaries and generous benefits liberates domestic work from its debased status as women’s “free” contribution to familial and social units, and national and international economies. She briefly discusses how the select group licensed to perform this labor may remain alienated given that the repetitive, isolated nature of the work is not necessarily altered through higher wages. Biological reproduction is another form of women’s unpaid labor addressed by Davis in “Surrogates and Outcast Mothers: Racism and Reproductive Politics in the Nineties,” which reviews the medical ethics, health hazards, and social stigmatism associated with black women’s fertility and reproduction in the late twentieth century. “Black Women and the Academy” raises the issues of women’s political work, responsibilities, and rights in connection with representation and education for social justice.

Conclusion: Revolutionary Actors and Radical Intellectuals

Davis’s writings are surpassed in the popular mind by her iconographic status. This raises a number of questions for our consideration as readers and consumers. In an essay, Davis quotes from Marx’s Eleventh Feuerbach: “Philosophers have interpreted the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.” If the point is to change the world, one must address what constituted liberation praxis in the radical and revolutionary movements and moments of previous decades; and, what constitutes it today for intellectuals and activists at a time when both the Black Panther Party and the Communist Party are considered by many to be anachronistic or romanticized organizations.

Davis herself grappled with these questions in a 1997 course that she taught at the University of California at Berkeley. Discussing the distinctions between radical and revolutionary politics, and intellectual critique and political engagement, Davis recounted how black militant activists would define “radicals” as bourgeois whites who had political critiques and intellectual commitments to opposing racism and economic exploitation but little experiential confrontation with the state; “revolutionaries,” on the other hand,
were those whose philosophical ideals about a just society and
democratic state were manifested in their risk-taking political acts
against oppressive state apparatuses. Today, few, if any, U.S. writers
qualify as “revolutionaries” (perhaps a notable exception, the over
100 political prisoners that Amnesty International documents as
being held in the United States, raises the issue of the relationship
between radical intellectuals and revolutionaries).

Within the context of a past liberation movement, a younger
Davis had offered insights into revolutionary liberation praxis in the
1970 *LIFE Magazine* profile published while she was underground.
*LIFE*’s cover superimposed the caption “The Making of a Fugitive”
over her photograph, while the feature article reprinted the
following quote taken from one of Davis’s speeches for the Soledad
Brothers:

Liberation is synonymous with revolution. . . . A revolution is
not just armed struggle. It’s not just the period in which you can
take over. A revolution has a very, very long spectrum. . . . Che
made the very important point that the society you’re going to
build is already reflected in the nature of the struggle that you’re
carrying out. And one of the most important things in relation-
ship to that is the building of a collective spirit, getting away
from this individualistic orientation towards personal salvation,
personal involvement. . . . One of the most important things that
has to be done in the process of carrying out a revolutionary
struggle is to merge those two different levels, to merge the
personal with the political where they’re no longer separate.52

Merging the personal with the political, young militants faced
the urgent immediacy of struggle in which they attended funerals
of slain activists and, with and as survivors, attempted to continue
in their commitments for radical social change despite deadly state
repression. Although the revolutionary movement of the previous
era was derailed, according to Davis, contemporary progressive
or Left intellectuals have “achieved a measure of lucidity, based
on those experiences.” For Davis, “There is much more extensive
consciousness of that dialectic between the concrete work that we
do, the activist work, and the international context. . . . [The chal-
lenge is to make] the transition from consciousness to action, from
theory to practice.”53 In contradistinction to the construction of the
theorist or philosopher as the disengaged, nonactivist, Davis adds, “while theoretical work, intellectual work, is extremely important, the work of the activist will determine whether or not we will move to a new stage . . . everyone should learn how to become an activist on some level, in some way. Everyone who considers herself or himself a part of this overall progressive movement must establish some kind of organizational ties, and must definitely participate in one or more movements.”

Readers have varying perspectives on Davis as political-intellectual. Some see her as a revolutionary of the late 1960s and early 1970s; still others, as a former political prisoner who now functions as a radical public intellectual. Whatever one’s “read,” it is clear that through her writing and political advocacy, Angela Y. Davis has expanded the scope of social thought and political theory. Scanning both directions, one recognizes Janus at the crossroads. In an encounter with her work, one sees the past revolutionary acts and state repressions that radicalized her political consciousness, the progressive intellectualism of contemporary thinkers, and the fluid, dynamic tension that charges the relationships between the two.

Notes
2. The Scottsboro Nine were African Americans falsely accused of raping two white women. Tried and sentenced in Scottsboro, Alabama, the young males were incarcerated for decades before their pardon.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 123.
8. Carole Robertson had contacted Sallye B. Davis days before the bombing to ask for a ride to a “Friendship and Action” meeting, a new organization formed by black and white parents and teachers to develop grassroots antiracist activism amid school desegregation and allow Birmingham School children to meet each other. Davis, “Remembering Carole, Cynthia, Addie Mae and Denise,” 123.
10. Ibid.
Address was first delivered at the Fourth National Women’s Studies Association Convention at Humboldt State University, in Arcata, California, June 17, 1982.


13. Ibid.

14. While a graduate student in philosophy at the University of California–San Diego, Davis’s first major political project was a campaign on behalf of a young African American Navy-enlisted man who faced court-martial charges during the Vietnam War for having circulated a petition accusing President Lyndon Baines Johnson of racist policies. Working in this campaign as a member of the Black Student Alliance, in 1967/’68 she met Elaine Brown, who like Davis later joined the Panthers. Brown served as Chair of the Black Panther Party, taking over from Huey Newton. Likely Brown became BPP Chair when its function had been reduced to that of a local or regional organization from that of central leadership for a unified (inter)national party.


16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Regents continued to denounce Davis as they demonized past liberation movements in order to oppose contemporary progressivism. In his March 18, 1996 correspondence to Davis, University of California Regent Ward Connolly, Chairman of the conservative Civil Rights Initiative that led California’s anti–affirmative action legislation, castigated her for campus speeches to defeat the Initiative, writing: “your record as a revolutionary is not merely disturbing but it may impair your effectiveness as a member of the faculty of one of this nation’s most highly respected academic institutions.” (Correspondence, author’s papers.)

19. “An Initiative to Unite and Renew the Party.”

20. Ibid., 3.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 2.


25. Ruchell Magee remains imprisoned. The autobiography’s record of the trial testimony includes the defense cross-examination of a prison officer concerning official policy on escapes. To defense attorney Leo Branton’s question, as to whether standard prison policy requires
guards to prevent escapes where prisoners use hostages as shields “even if it means that every hostage is killed?”—San Quentin’s Sergeant Murphy answered: “That is correct.” Davis, *Angela Davis*, 370.


27. Although all deaths resulted from the police, defendants were charged with the killings.


29. The death penalty was reinstated in California in 1977.

30. Geronimo ji Jaga (Pratt) is one such case. After spending twenty-seven years in prison for the murder of Caroline Olson in southern California, he was released on a $25,000 bail in June 1997, when a California judge ruled that his incarceration was based on perjury by a felon, FBI and LAPD informer Julio Butler; and that the District Attorney’s office had withheld information from the jury concerning Pratt’s innocence. Pratt was in northern California at the time of the southern California shootings; FBI wiretaps that could place him at a BPP meeting in northern California mysteriously disappeared when requested by his defense team. See Don Terry, “Los Angeles Confronts Bitter Racial Legacy,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1997, A1, A10.


32. Ibid., 75.


34. Davis, *Angela Davis*.

35. *Frame-Up*, iii (author’s papers).


38. Davis notes the hypocrisy of attacking Mexican and Latin American “migrating working class people” while exonerating “migrating transnational corporations [seeking] cheap labor.” Angela Y. Davis, Keynote Address for Defensa de Mujeres Benefit, Santa Cruz, California, June 9, 1995, author’s papers.

40. Ibid., 71.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
52. LIFE Magazine 69, no. 11, September 11, 1970, 26. The quote, from a speech Davis made for the Soledad Brothers, comes from a June 27, 1970, interview with Maeland Productions, which was doing a documentary on Davis.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
Assata Shakur and
Black Female Agency

How we imagine a revolutionary is shaped by our ideas concerning gender, sex, and race, not just ideology. How we imagine transformative black political leadership is very much influenced by how we think of gender and agency. The absence or presence of maleness shapes common perceptions of women revolutionaries. The same is not true for femaleness in perceptions of male revolutionaries.

One can easily imagine antiracist revolutionary struggle against the state without (black) women clearly in the picture, but to imagine revolution against state violence in the absence of (black) men often draws a blank. Men appear independent of women in revolutionary struggles; women generally appear as revolutionaries only in association with men, often as “helpmates.” As a category, the female revolutionary remains somewhat of an afterthought, an aberration; hence she is an abstraction—vague and not clearly in the picture.

In this regard, former Black Panther Party (BPP) and Black Liberation Army (BLA) member Assata Shakur is extraordinary, as we shall see later. Assata Shakur is unique not only because she has survived in exile as a political figure despite the U.S. government’s bounty—“dead or alive”—on her head but also because she may prove to be “beyond commoditization” in a time in which political leadership seems to be bought and sold in the marketplace of political trade, compromise, and corruption. Above all, Shakur is singular because she is a recognizable female revolutionary, one not bound to a male persona.

Gender Politics and “Panther Women”

Influential male narratives have helped to masculinize the political rebel in popular culture and memory. Nationally and internationally, the most prominently known black political prisoners and prison intellectuals are male. The brief incarceration of Martin Luther King Jr., in Alabama, produced the “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963), which popularized civil disobedience against repressive laws. The imprisonment as a petty criminal of Malcolm X in the 1950s engendered the political man and somewhat fictionalized Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965; published posthumously and creatively embellished and edited by Alex Haley, who had worked for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which sought to discredit Malcolm X). The 1971 killing by prison guards of George Jackson, author of Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson and the posthumously published Blood in My Eye, helped to incite the Attica prison uprising in New York. The violent and deadly repression by the National Guard deployed by New York governor Nelson Rockefeller created more male martyrs and more closely linked incarceration, repression, and rebellion to the male figure. Current organizing for a new trial for former Black Panther Mumia Abu-Jamal is galvanized by his incisive commentaries and critiques in Live from Death Row. Conventional political thought and memory associate few women with revolutionary literature or with armed resistance, political incarceration, or martyrdom stemming from struggles against enslavement or racist oppression.

Along with Harriet Tubman, Shakur would become one of the few black female figures in the United States recognized as a leader in an organization that publicly advocated armed self-defense against racist violence. From its emergence in 1966, originally named the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, given police brutality and police killings of African Americans, and cofounded by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, the Black Panther Party captured the national imagination and inspired its paranoia. The Black Panther Party remains the organizational icon (with Malcolm X the individual icon) for black militant resistance to racial domination and terror.

The average American political spectator was and is more captivated or repelled by the Black Panthers’ stance on armed self-defense and their battles with local and federal police—and
resulting martyrs—than with the BPP social service programs largely organized and run by women. Hundreds of women, including Shakur before she was forced underground, served in the Black Panther Party’s rank and file, implementing the medical, housing, clothing, free breakfast, and education programs. Female Panthers displayed an agency that (re)shaped American politics, although their stories recede in popular culture before the narratives of elites or icons.

Violence, race, and sex mark the symbolism surrounding BPP icons. African American male revolutionaries are not perceived as having been politicized through their romantic or personal relationships with female counterparts; rather, their speeches and deeds mark them for public recognition. Each male in the Panther pantheon can stand individually yet still “possess” a female counterpart: George Jackson was linked to Angela Davis, Elaine Brown to Huey P. Newton, Kathleen Cleaver to Eldridge. Only Assata Shakur stands alone as an iconic figure, embodying masculine and feminine aspects. Her hybridity is a confluence of masculine and feminine (stereotypical) characteristics. Without a towering male persona, Shakur—unlike the “conventional” black female revolutionary—has no shadow of a legendary fighter and revolutionary to shade her from full scrutiny: the speculative or admiring gaze, the curious gawk, the hostile stare.

Black female icons were recognized as the lovers or partners of black male revolutionaries or prison intellectuals (Newton, Cleaver, and Jackson all wrote from prison). Kathleen Cleaver’s tumultuous marriage to Eldridge Cleaver; Elaine Brown’s devotion to her disintegrating, drug-addicted former lover, Huey Newton, who installed her as Black Panther Party chair (from 1974 to 1977); and Angela Davis’s relationship with prison theorist George Jackson, which began while she was organizing to free the incarcerated Soledad Brothers—all serve as markers, promoting the image of black female militants as sexual and political associates, as beautiful consorts rather than political comrades. The American public as spectator would recognize in these personal if not political lives familiar heterosexual dramas of desire, betrayal, abandonment, and battery.

Assata Shakur least fits this scenario, although her memoir speaks volumes about gender politics in the BPP. Shakur was already an incarcerated revolutionary when she conceived and gave birth to
her codefendant’s daughter (who graduated from Spelman College and whose father’s name is eclipsed by the name of her mother). Equally, the names of her BLA comrades linked to her capture at the turnpike police shooting are largely unknown. In the 1973 confrontation with New Jersey state troopers, Shakur was seriously wounded; Zayd Shakur was killed (along with Trooper Werner Foerster, who may have died in police crossfire); and Sundiata Acoli (Clark Squire) escaped to be later apprehended and sentenced to prison.

Assata Shakur’s leadership persona keeps considerable distance from problematic relationships to men. Interestingly, there are no men in the East Coast Panthers whose stature equals hers (although some, such as Dhoruba bin Wahad, who was incarcerated for nearly two decades, were political prisoners). Although West Coast Panther leaders Huey P. Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, Geronimo Pratt, and George Jackson and the Chicago leader Fred Hampton are more prominent, they wear the shroud of “martyrs”—the psychological or physical casualties of a liberation war.5

In some ways the men’s status as icons does not compare favorably with Shakur’s, for she has longevity as a living political figure, one not marred by personal “pathology” or voluntary exile from a U.S. black mass. Shakur’s narrative marks her flight as a revolutionary act in itself. She escaped from prison as “quietly” as she lived and struggled (she writes in the memoir that she planned the escape). Shakur was not released by the courts as were Malcolm, Newton, Cleaver, Pratt, Hampton, and Davis. Assata: An Autobiography makes her continuously (re)appear to progressives, while the police manhunt that commands her reappearance into prison keeps her visible in the conservative or mainstream public mind (to the degree that it is attentive).

Assata Shakur became a fugitive in the only communist country in the hemisphere. Cuba thus shares an “outlaw” status with the black female fugitive it harbors. (Cuba continues to shelter U.S. political dissidents.) The 1959 Cuban Revolution’s ability to expel U.S. crime syndicates and corporations from the island was the ultimate act of enduring revolution within America’s “sphere of influence.” Likewise, Shakur is the only prominent Panther able to “successfully” escape from prison. Her “legend” is augmented through exile and her political sensibilities and literary ability. (That she was trained by the Cubans and received a postgraduate degree at the
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University of Havana suggests a set of skills that surpass those of her revolutionary colleagues who died or imploded while young.) Unlike the men, there is little notoriety of a personal life lived in excess and criminality. Rather, there is a dignified restraint that must seem confusing when juxtaposed with her advocacy of liberation “by any means necessary.”

Shakur is not more reticent than her male compatriots mentioned here; she is more mature—perhaps in part because she lived long enough to see middle age (but so did Newton and Cleaver), perhaps because her political style was less personality driven. It is difficult to compare Shakur’s political legacy with those Panther- and BLA-imprisoned intellectuals disciplined by decades of incarceration who have not been in the public spotlight.

Unlike her female elite comrades, Shakur never had to explain (or forget) a controversial male partner or have his silent presence trail her throughout her political and private life. Women more famous than she—Kathleen Cleaver, Angela Davis, Elaine Brown—do not possess her iconic stature as a revolutionary either. In “Black Revolutionary Icons and NeoSlave Narratives,” I compare in greater detail Black Panther leaders and associates Elaine Brown, Kathleen Cleaver, Angela Davis, and Assata Shakur; here, I only note that she differs from both male and female elite leadership connected to armed resistance.

Shakur’s background is remarkable for its unremarkable nature. Among the women, Brown grew up in Philadelphia slums, became a Playboy Bunny, and moved in circles that included Frank Sinatra. Cleaver was the daughter of a diplomat and went to elite schools before embracing SNCC and then the Soul on Ice author and convicted rapist Eldridge Cleaver. Davis was mentored by the communist leaders the Apthekers in New York City and grew into an international figure in the Communist Party. Shakur came from neither poverty nor wealth or privilege. She was as ordinary a young woman, with the exception of truancy as a teenage runaway, as the working or (lower-) middle-class black society would issue. For some, how frightening must be the prospect that any ordinary colored girl, within the appropriate context, could grow up to become a revolutionary.

Born in a New York City hospital in 1947, Joanne Chesimard would later reject her birth name as a “slave name” to become “Assata Shakur.” In the mid-1960s, according to her memoir, she enrolled at Manhattan Community College to acquire secretarial
skills in order to advance in the labor market. Instead, she became a political activist and began working in the black liberation struggle, the student rights movement, and the movement against the Vietnam War. Upon graduating from college, Shakur joined the Black Panther Party. Although she was active in the social service aspects of the New York BPP, its breakfast program, sickle-cell testing, and health services, she was forced out of this work and into the underground due to violent police repression against black radicals associated with the Party. Assata describes how she sought out the Black Liberation Army, an underground, military wing of largely East Coast Panthers, for self-protection. The BPP had become a primary target of one of the FBI’s violent counterintelligence programs (Cointelpro) and its most murderous intentions. While underground, Shakur became accused of numerous crimes, charges that were eventually dismissed or of which she was exonerated.

However, in March 1977, following a 1973 change of venue and a 1974 mistrial, Assata Shakur was convicted as an accomplice to the murder of New Jersey state trooper Werner Foerster and of atrocious assault on trooper James Harper with intent to kill. Despite the testimony of expert witnesses, who argued that medical evidence showed that Shakur, who herself had been shot by police while sitting in a car, could not have shot either trooper, an all-white jury, with five members with personal ties to state troopers, convicted her. The judge did not allow any evidence of Cointelpro repression to be entered into the case and refused to investigate a break-in at the office of her defense counsel. Two years after her conviction, Shakur escaped from New Jersey’s Clinton Correctional Facility. In 1984, she received political asylum in Cuba, where she remains today, meeting with foreign delegations and working—with a million-dollar bounty on her head.

Waging a People’s War:
Violence and Trauma in the Absence of “Victory”

Historically within the United States, black resistance to domination has been pacifist, militarist, or a creative combination of the two. Most of the violence in resistance movements has been from the state. The story of Cointelpro as a form of state violence is like a Brothers Grimm tale: it is meant to chill and chasten most who hear it. Unlike in the Grimm’s fairy tales, however, the victors in
American stories of political struggle for a greater democracy are not usually the victims-in-resistance. Deployed since the 1920s in some fashion against communists, workers, artists, women, civil rights and human rights activists, and antiwar organizations, the FBI counterintelligence program destabilized progressive political movements by targeting, intimidating, and killing activists. The program remains in effect today, with the continuing harassment and incarceration of its targets. In 1968, when FBI director J. Edgar Hoover designated the Black Panther Party as the “greatest threat to the internal security” of the United States, imprisonment as well as assassinations of key Panther leaders followed. However, no concerted national outrage emerged in response to the state’s violent repression of black insurgency. The lack of concern seemed tied partly to ignorance and partly to the consequence of negative media depictions of black revolutionaries. According to the U.S. Senate’s 1976 Church Commission report on domestic intelligence operations: “The FBI has attempted covertly to influence the public’s perception of persons and organizations by disseminating derogatory information to the press, either anonymously or through ‘friendly news contacts.’”

While Angela Davis’s 1972 acquittal proves to some liberals that the “system” works (and, conversely, for some conservatives, that it is dangerously flawed), Assata Shakur’s escape from prison in 1979 invalidates that conviction. Shakur’s political life reworks the neoslave narrative to invert its deradicalizing tendencies with the testimony of an unreconstructed insurrectionist. She is disturbing because she was never exonerated, because her 1979 prison escape rejects “the system,” because she bears witness as an unrepentant insurrectionist and “slave” fugitive. Shakur represents the unembraceable, against whom (and those who offer her refuge) the state exercises severe sanctions. Nevertheless, her case has received support from ideologically disparate African Americans, ranging from incarcerated revolutionaries and prison intellectuals to neoliberal black studies professors. Her narrative, which is more that of the revolutionary slave than the slave fugitive, seems to construct Cuba, not the United States, as the potential site for (black) freedom.

Assata Shakur’s political contributions to black liberation are enmeshed in high controversy and life-and-death crises. Scholar Manning Marable writes in his essay “Black Political Prisoners: The Case of Assata Shakur” (1998):
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If Assata Shakur is involuntarily returned to the U.S. . . . she will be imprisoned for life, and very possibly murdered by state authorities. The only other Black Panther who survived the 1973 shoot-out, Sundiata Acoli, is 61 years old and remains in prison to this day. No new trial could possibly be fair, since part of the trial transcripts have [sic] been lost and crucial evidence has “disappeared.”

Assata Shakur is less marketable in mainstream culture given that her life and writings present a narrative similar to that of Mumia Abu-Jamal. As the unrepentant rebel, she calls herself “slave,” rejects her “slave name,” and denounces the white-dominated corporate society and state as “slavemasters.” Aspects of her narrative (found in the memoir, interviews, documentaries, and media reports) link her more to the underground Black Liberation Army than to the Black Panther Party, which has become on some levels a cultural commodity. Hence she is not only a rebel but also a militarist.

Shakur thus functions as political embarrassment and irritation for the police and conservative politicians, and conversely as political inspiration, or at least quiet satisfaction, for some of their most ardent critics. Those who worked above ground with the courts saw and see in Angela Davis’s release and exoneration a vindication of their political agency. Likewise, those who did advocacy work or worked underground, or who understood that circumstances and police malfeasance required extralegal maneuvers, see in Shakur’s self-liberation an affirmation of their political efficacy or the practicalities of resistance. That her escape entailed neither casualties nor hostages obviously helps pacifists to support her strategies.

*Assata: An Autobiography* depicts a public persona hardly compatible with commoditization by those who romanticize political or revolutionary violence. Rejecting the image of violent black revolutionaries, her account offers a complex portrait of a woman so committed to black freedom that she refused to reject armed struggle as a strategy to obtain it. Even during violent upheavals, community remains central for Shakur. Refusing to make revolutionary war synonymous with violence, she writes of a “people’s war” that precludes elite vanguards. *Assata* describes the limitations of black revolutionaries:
Some of the groups thought they could just pick up arms and struggle and that, somehow, people would see what they were doing and begin to struggle themselves. They wanted to engage in a do-or-die battle with the power structure in America, even though they were weak and ill prepared for such a fight. But the most important factor is that armed struggle, by itself, can never bring about a revolution. Revolutionary war is a people’s war.\(^\text{10}\)

The “people’s war,” however, retained a military dimension for Shakur. Her memoir cites the importance of organizing an underground, the serious consideration of “armed acts of resistance” in scenarios that expand black people’s support for resistance.\(^\text{11}\)

In news interviews and documentaries, narratives have emerged to portray the black revolutionary as a political icon and the lone active survivor of a tumultuous era.\(^\text{12}\) Shakur’s image in Lee Lew-Lee’s documentary *All Power to the People! The Black Panther Party and Beyond* appears with archival footage in an exposé on the murderous aspects of Cointelpro. What Lew-Lee labeled “death squads” and I term “state violence” operated against both the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the documentary, former New York Panther Safiya Bukhari is one of the few black women—women are not prominently featured in *All Power to the People!*—who discusses the emergence of the BLA as an underground offshoot of the Panthers. According to Bukhari, New York Panthers, accused of breaking with the West Coast leadership, were caught between “a rock and a hard place.” Huey P. Newton had allegedly put out a death warrant on them, condemning them as traitors and “government agents”; the New York Police Department (NYPD), assisted by the FBI, had done likewise, marking them as traitors and “terrorists.”

The BLA formed against the frightening background memories of Malcolm X’s 1965 assassination and healthy paranoia inspired by the unclear roles played by the Nation of Islam, Louis Farrakhan, and NYPD undercover agent who had infiltrated Malcolm’s organization to serve as his “bodyguard.” Likewise, the 1969 executions of Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in a predawn raid by the Chicago police coordinated by the FBI (survivors would later collect a large settlement from the government, which admits no wrongdoing) framed the choices of black radicals as life-and-death options.
In *Still Black, Still Strong: Survivors of the War Against Black Revolutionaries*, former Panther Dhoruba Bin Wahad offers insights into the underground organization and reveals the complex gender and race dynamics surrounding Shakur. Assata Shakur’s revolutionary icon exists sans celebrity posing or adulation for past dramatic and traumatic clashes with the state. Her solitude—in prison, as a fugitive, as a revolutionary woman not tied to a dependent relationship with a man—epitomizes the aloneness, if not loneliness, of the unrepentant revolutionary.

Physical violence and battlefield knowledge and fatigue foster a unique black female political being. Her encounters with police both in the street and in “safe havens” such as hospitals are revealing. Shakur was shot while unarmed, with her hands raised, then taken to the hospital, where she was brutally beaten. The memoir describes her being shackled to a hospital bed with bullet wounds, while New Jersey state troopers tortured and threatened to kill her. Assata recounts how medical staff and poetry kept her alive despite police assaults:

> They gave me the poetry of our people, the tradition of our women, the relationship of human beings to nature and the search of human beings for freedom, for justice, for a world that isn’t a brutal world. And those books—even through that experience—kind of just chilled me out, let me be in touch with my tradition, the beauty of my people, even though we’ve had to suffer such vicious oppression . . . it makes you think that no matter how brutal the police, the courts are, the people fight to keep their humanity.¹³

**Revolutionary Fugitive and Slave Rebel**

At first confined in a men’s prison, under twenty-four-hour surveillance, without adequate intellectual, physical, or medical resources during the trial, Shakur was later relocated to a women’s correctional facility in Clinton, New Jersey. Sentenced to life plus thirty-three years, after being convicted of killing Werner Foerster by an all-white jury in 1977,¹⁴ she was initially housed in facilities alongside women of the Aryan Nation sisterhood, the Manson family, and Squeaky Fromme, who had attempted to assassinate former-President Gerald Ford. Shakur maintains that her escape
was motivated by a fear of being murdered in prison. In her memoir she also writes that she ultimately decided to “leave” after dreaming of her grandmother instructing her to do so, and realizing that she would not be able to see her young daughter while incarcerated.

In a 1978 petition concerning political prisoners, political persecution, and torture in the United States, the National Conference of Black Lawyers, the National Alliance against Racist and Political Repression, and the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice brought Shakur’s case before the United Nations. The petition stated that Assata Shakur became a hunted fugitive after and due to: the FBI and NYPD charging her with being a leader of the Black Liberation Army, which the agencies characterized as an “organization engaged in the shooting of police officers”; the appearance of public posters that depicted her as a dangerous criminal involved in fabricated terrorist conspiracies against civilians; and her appearance on the FBI’s “Most Wanted List” which rendered her “a ‘shoot-to-kill’ target.”

In 1998, black activist-intellectuals S. E. Anderson, Soffiyah Jill Elijah, Esq., Joan P. Gibbs, Esq., Rosemari Mealy, and Karen D. Taylor circulated, via e-mail, “An Open Letter to New Jersey Governor Whitman.” This letter to Christine Todd Whitman (who would later head the Environmental Protection Agency in the first administration of George W. Bush) protested the $50,000 bounty the governor had placed on political exile and fugitive Shakur. (In 2006, Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez, who would later resign from the Bush administration due to abuse of his office, raised the bounty to $1 million.) The letter castigated the Republican governor: “In seeking her apprehension by . . . ‘kidnapping,’ you have engaged in the kind of debased moralism that the former slave masters in this country resorted to when seeking the return of runaway Africans to slavery.” For the letter’s authors, Assata Shakur “followed in the footsteps of Harriet Tubman, who instructed: there was one of two things I had a right to, liberty, or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other; for no man should take me alive; I should fight for my liberty as long as my strength lasted.”

In early 1998, concurrently with the circulation of “An Open Letter to New Jersey Governor Whitman,” an “Open Letter from Assata Shakur” circulated online. Shakur’s letter begins: “My name is Assata Shakur, and I am a 20th century escaped slave.” Of herself and her codefendant, Sundiata Acoli, she writes that they were both
convicted in pretrial news media, and that the media were not allowed
to interview them although the New Jersey police and FBI gave daily
interviews and stories to the press. Shakur's conflictual relation-
ship with mainstream media would be rekindled a decade later.

On December 24, 1997, a press conference was held to announce
that New Jersey State Police had written a letter (which was never
publicly released) to Pope John Paul II asking him to intervene on
their behalf and to aid in having Shakur extradited to the United
States. In response, Shakur wrote to the pope, explaining her story.
Then in January 1998, during the pope's visit to Cuba, Shakur granted
an interview with NBC journalist Ralph Penza. For this three-part
“exclusive interview series,” NBC advertised on black radio stations
and placed notices in local newspapers. The series erased or distorted
much of the information Shakur and other progressives had presented
concerning her case.

However, most striking here is the bizarre polarization of female
identities with images so antipodean that the only comparable
extremes in American cultural iconography are the neoslave narra-
tives, those of the white plantation mistress and the black field
slave. In a media interview, Governor Whitman expressed outrage
at Shakur's happiness about being a grandmother, and her haven
or home in Cuba. Shakur's rejoinder notes that she has never seen
her grandchild. She argues that if Whitman considers that “50 years
of dealing with racism, poverty, persecution, brutality, prison,
underground, exile and blatant lies has been so nice, then I'd be
more than happy to let her walk in my shoes.”

During the NBC special, one interviewee suggested that the
New Jersey police would do everything to extradite Shakur from
Cuba, including "kidnapping" her and using bounty hunters. Shakur
responds in her “Open Letter”:

I guess the theory is that if they could kidnap millions of Africans
from Africa 400 years ago, they should be able to kidnap one
African woman today. It is nothing but an attempt to bring about
the re-incarnation of the Fugitive Slave Act. All I represent is just
another slave that they want to bring back to the plantation. Well,
I might be a slave, but I will go to my grave a rebellious slave.
I am and I feel like a maroon woman. I will never voluntarily
accept the condition of slavery.
Leadership Without a Vanguard?

What could have protected Shakur and other militant black leaders in liberation organizations from the counterrevolutionary war and murder waged by a democratic state? In theory, the answer to that question is: a politicized mass base that demanded and enforced their human and civil rights, one that could negotiate the end to police surveillance and brutality that sought to undermine legal and productive organizing in black communities ignored by the welfare state. These communities desperately needed what the BPP provided without fostering dependency on an aloof and depoliticizing bureaucracy: breakfast and educational programs, literacy and newspaper publishing, drug counseling and health care. Yet the problem in leadership would emerge for this black revolutionary woman, and all revolutionaries, if the mass lacked not only the will but also the desire to constitute itself as leaders, as a political vanguard.

During her time in prison, Shakur became familiar with the mass base, or its most depressed sectors, in ways that her organizing outside of prison, providing social services largely denied to blacks at that time by the state, never permitted. While incarcerated, she was housed with the sector of the population most in need of transformative politics or revolutionary struggle. But this sector proved ambivalent toward organized political struggle. In that space, prison, she and the other incarcerated women functioned less as members of a vanguard and more like social workers. Her writings on her time in captivity are quite revealing about the disparities within black female agency. Throughout her time and trials of being hunted and prosecuted, Assata Shakur would write and publish mostly essays. Assata both reveals her skills as a poet and reveals in many ways the triumphal black woman despite institutional trauma. But that memoir was written and published in Cuba, several years after her self-emancipation from prison. The writing during incarceration is filtered with despair for vanguard formations among severely oppressed black women in repressive sites.

A year before Shakur’s escape, the Black Scholar published her April 1978 essay “Women in Prison: How We Are.” Here Shakur describes New York Riker’s Island Correctional Institution for Women, arguing that at the prison “there are no criminals . . . only
victims.” The environment is uncomfortable and the food inhospitable. The name of the space they occupy, with a heating system whose thermostat cannot be adjusted for more warmth, is the “bull pen.” The women held in the pen are “all black” and “all restless” and freezing, according to Shakur. But the physical discomfort is less disturbing than the frightening and embarrassing emotional and psychological decay of the black women caged in the pen. Shakur observes the state of her fellow inmates:

All of us, with the exception of a woman, tall and gaunt, who looks naked and ravished, have refused the bologna sandwiches. The rest of us sit drinking bitter, syrupy tea. The tall, forty-ish woman, with sloping shoulders, moves her head back and forth to the beat of a private tune while she takes small, tentative bites out a bologna sandwich. Someone asks her what she’s in for. Matter-of-factly, she says, “They say I killed some nigga’. But how could I have when I’m buried down in South Carolina?” Everybody’s face gets busy exchanging looks. A short, stout young woman wearing men’s pants and men’s shoes says, “Buried in South Carolina?” “Yeah,” says the tall woman. “South Carolina, that’s where I’m buried. You don’t know that? You don’t know shit, do you? This ain’t me. This ain’t me.” She kept repeating, “This ain’t me” until she had eaten all the bologna sandwiches. Then she brushed off the crumbs and withdrew, head moving again, back into that world where only she could hear her private tune.

The nameless woman, in comparison to whom all the other incarcerated women can feel superior, appears in the first of several short vignettes. The essay provides a framework for seeing a number of representational black women. There is the mother of teenage children, Lucille, who defends herself from her violent domestic partner. He had mutilated her arm and partially severed her ear the night she finally killed him. But a jury seeing no vulnerability, and hence no need for self-defense, in a black woman with a drinking addiction gives her a felony “C” conviction. Working as “jailhouse legal counsel” on the women’s behalf, Assata, rather than the salaried court attorney or judge, informs her that the sentence can carry up to fifteen years. There is “Spikey,” a drug addict scheduled for release; her appearance is so altered by her addictions, and her violations and abusiveness have
so damaged her relations with her mother and her children, that she prefers to spend the Christmas holidays institutionalized rather than with her family and experience the shame that would follow.

The majority of the women inside are black and Puerto Rican survivors of childhood abuse, abuse by men, and abuse by the “system.” Shakur’s memoir chronicles suffering from political violence rather than social or personal violence (the most traumatic recorded memory is her escape from a “train,” or gang rape, by teenage boys). Yet she expresses empathy with the seemingly apolitical women: “There are no big time gangsters here, no premeditated mass murderers, no godmothers. There are no big time dope dealers, no kidnappers, no Watergate women. There are virtually no women here charged with white collar crimes like embezzling or fraud.”

The dependency of the women’s criminality strikes her: their dependency on drug addiction, on male “masterminds” for whom they work as runners, mules, prostitutes, and thieves. Shakur radiates a sympathy or perhaps empathy for what she views as impoverished rather than criminal people: “The women see stealing or hustling as necessary for the survival of themselves or their children because jobs are scarce and welfare is impossible to live on. . . . amerikan capitalism is in no way threatened by the women in prison on Riker’s Island.”

American capitalism and racially driven incarceration coexist with patriarchy and the mystique of “home.” And the women are not fans of white supremacy, or even the nation-state, but are loyalists toward consumer-driven capitalism and the fetish of “home.” Shakur writes that the “domesticity” of the women’s prison, its brightly colored walls, television, plants, rooms with electronic doors (rather than bars), and laundry facilities, produces in the incarcerated a sense of well-being among emotionally and materially deprived women: “Many women are convinced that they are, somehow, ‘getting over.’ Some go so far as to reason that because they are not doing hard time, they are not really in prison.” Yet the women’s relationships, not their attachments to material resources, comfort, and structured predictability, unavailable in their lives outside of prison, reveal their convictions to be false. This false consciousness is dispelled by the relations that women have among themselves as prisoners and with their jailers. The women who police the lives of the incarcerated are also black. Their particular type of black female agency in service to
and on the payroll of the state works against the agency of both black
radical women prisoners such as Shakur and destabilized black women
prisoners such as Spikey. This presents a range of contradictions for
progressive politics and absolute Manichean divides. Assata Shakur
writes disparagingly of the bonds of “affection” exhibited between
black female jailers and their black wards:

Beneath the motherly veneer, the reality of guard life is [ever]
present. Most of the guards are black, usually from working
class, upward bound, civil service oriented backgrounds. They
identify with the middle class, have middle class values and are
extremely materialistic. They are not the most intelligent women
in the world. . . . Most are aware that there is no justice in the
amerikan judicial system and that blacks and Puerto Ricans are
discriminated against in every facet of amerikan life. But, at
the same time, they are convinced that the system is somehow
“lenient.” To them, the women in prison are “losers” who don’t
have enough sense to stay out of jail. Most believe in the boot
strap theory— anybody can “make it” if they try hard enough.25

American exceptionalism filters down to the lowest reaches of the
social strata (which does not mean that black women can be general-
ized). Shakur’s problematic black women manage Frantz Fanon’s
“wretched of the earth” by ensuring the smooth operation of systems
that cage them. As guards, their dispensing of affection for the caged
(presumably based on some shared condition or affinity) pacifies
the wretched. American exceptionalism worn by the black woman
(guard) becomes a form of self-validation and social superiority.

Shakur grimly (or sadly?) notes: “They congratulate themselves
on their great accomplishments. In contrast to themselves they see
the inmate as ignorant, uncultured, self-destructive, weak-minded
and stupid.” She next proceeds to identify the source of black
achievement for these women (and, by extension, an extensive
segment of the black working-and middle-class): “They ignore the
fact that their dubious accomplishments are not based on superior
intelligence or effort, but only on chance and a civil service
list . . . no matter how much they hate the military structure, the
infighting, the ugliness of their tasks, they are very aware . . . [that
if] they were not working as guards most would be underpaid
or unemployed.” The absence of their employment in the prison
industries would mean existential and material losses: “Many would miss the feeling of superiority and power as much as they would miss the money, especially the cruel, sadistic ones.”

Among the incarcerated, drug use and abuse provide the topics for most conversations. Hence, Shakur argues: “In prison, as on the streets, an escapist culture prevails.” She estimates that half of the prison population is prescribed and required to take a psychotropic drug (what contemporary incarcerated women have referred to as “chemical handcuffs”).26 Other forms of addiction, socially acceptable ones, manifest in television, prison love/sexual relations, and games of distraction. Few women engage in academic, political, or legal studies, and even fewer in radical politics such as feminism, antiracism, or gay liberation politics. Their dependency on institutionalized life moves beyond the borders of physical need expressed in shelter, health care, food, and safety from violent males.

Assata Shakur observes gender disparities as marking the existence and expression of political agency of black incarcerated people: “A striking difference between women and men prisoners at Riker’s Island is the absence of revolutionary rhetoric among the women. We have no study groups. We have no revolutionary literature floating around. There are no groups of militants attempting to ‘get their heads together.’ The women at Riker’s seem vaguely aware of what a revolution is, but generally regard it as an impossible dream.”27 Revolution, of course, requires risk, sacrifice, discipline, and work. Ironically, the women seek the “American dream” and find that more attainable than the dream of revolution for a society free of capitalism, institutional racism, and (hetero)sexism.

Noting that some women find prison “a place to rest and recuperate,” Shakur sees that the trials of captivity in some ways reflect the outside: “The cells are not much different from the tenements, the shooting galleries and the welfare hotels they live in on the street. . . . Riker’s Island is just another institution. In childhood school was their prison, or youth houses or reform schools or children shelters or foster homes or mental hospitals or drug programs and they see all institutions as indifferent to their needs, yet necessary to their survival.” Here, there are rings of captivity to be explored, theorized, and resisted. The striking problem, though, is whether or not the women have the agency and energy to undertake such a task. In her inability to assert that they do in this essay, Shakur functions as witness and advocate.28
In the final section of the essay, titled “What of Our Past? What of Our History? What of Our Future?” Shakur notes that trauma and grief are not new to black/red women: “I can imagine the pain and the strength of my great great grandmothers who were slaves and my great great grandmothers who were Cherokee Indians trapped on reservations.” She then references the pain of contemporary women in liberation movement(s), those supposedly so unlike the “apolitical” women in Riker’s Island who are functioning at low levels of consciousness with no level of active resistance. For Shakur, movement women mirrored the dysfunctional attitudes and behaviors of incarcerated or mass women:

I think about my sisters in the movement. I remember the days when, draped in African garb, we rejected our foremothers and ourselves as castrators. We did penance for robbing the brother of his manhood, as if we were the oppressor. I remember the days of the Panther party when we were “moderately liberated.” When we were allowed to wear pants and expected to pick up the gun. The days when we gave doe-eyed looks to our leaders. The days when we worked like dogs and struggled desperately for the respect which they struggled desperately not to give us. I remember the black history classes that did [not] mention women and the posters of our “leaders” where women were conspicuously absent. We visited our sisters who bore the complete responsibility of the children while the Brotha was doing his thing. Or had moved on to bigger and better things. . . . And we had no desire to sit in some consciousness raising group with white women and bare our souls.29

According to Shakur, the specificity of oppression that black women, including the most “liberated” who manifested as “revolutionary,” faced in the frame of a Black Panther is strikingly unique. The essay focuses on women in prison, but the forms of containment and abandonment that black women face radiate beyond the prison walls. Shakur maintains that women’s liberation is predicated on a liberated country and culture, and that capitalism forecloses that possibility. Her final injunction in the 1978 essay, one of the last pieces written for publication while she was incarcerated, was that black women must form a movement: “Under the guidance of Harriet Tubman and Fannie Lou Hamer and all of our foremothers,
Assata Shakur and Black Female Agency

let us rebuild a sense of community. Let us rebuild the culture of giving and carry on the tradition of fierce determination to move on closer to freedom.” But what that “freedom” is, what it is not—that is, capitalist, racist, sexist/misogynist, homophobic—cannot be specified in her essay.

**Conclusion: Honoring the Panther Woman**

Assata Shakur’s power as a narrator of black struggles and freedom movements would become eclipsed itself as she evolved, along with the BPP, into an icon. The reified thing, the icon, replaces the dynamic human being who changes her mind, her practices, her desires as a living entity. As a living entity she grows. A fixed site of notoriety, in which the stories that could be told about freedom struggles increasingly become eclipsed by caricatures of the antisocial black militant, is a conceptual and political grave.

In her “Open Letter,” Shakur evokes one of Martin Luther King Jr.’s sermons from 1968 that alludes to his imminent assassination. King states that he does “not mind” dying because he has been to the “mountain top.” Shakur reflects:

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Everybody has to die sometime, and all I want is to go with dignity. I am more concerned about the growing poverty, the growing despair that is rife in America . . . our younger generations, who represent our future . . . about the rise of the prison-industrial complex that is turning our people into slaves again . . . about the repression, the police brutality, violence, the rising wave of racism that makes up the political landscape of the US today. Our young people deserve a future, and I consider it the mandate of my ancestors to be part of the struggle to ensure that they have one.31
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Arguing for young people’s right to “live free from political repression,” Shakur—with “a special, urgent appeal” for struggles for the life of Mumia Abu-Jamal, the only political prisoner on death row—urges the readers of her letter to work to free all political prisoners and abolish the death penalty.32

Assata Shakur’s story depends in part on the frame that establishes the borders or boundaries for its telling. There is the antiracist feminist, the prison intellectual, the party member, the
underground revolutionary, the lone iconic militant. There is fierce resistance and profound grief. Shakur’s somber, measured response to losses provides a word ritual for the dying and dead—whether those entombed in Riker’s Island twenty years ago or a recently fallen comrade.

Her eulogy for Safiya Bukhari, given in Havana on August 29, 2003, is haunting. Bukhari collapsed hours after she buried her own mother—the grandmother who raised Safiya Bukhari’s young daughter the day her own daughter became a BLA fighter and fugitive, going underground only to surface for an eight-year prison term. Bukhari survived the maiming medical practices of prison doctors (although her uterus did not) only to succumb to the “typical” black women diseases of hypertension, diabetes, obesity, and heart failure in 2002. The eulogy could also be read as Assata Shakur’s—and that of all revolutionary black women who refused to circumscribe their rebellion, and paid the costs for that decision:

It is with much sadness that i say my last goodbye to Safiya Bukhari. She was my sister, my comrade and my friend. We met nearly thirty-five years ago, when we were both members of the Black Panther Party in Harlem. Even then, i was impressed by her sincerity, her commitment and her burning energy. She was a descendent of slaves and she inherited the legacy of neo-slavery. She believed that struggle was the only way that African people in America could rid ourselves of oppression. As a Black woman struggling in America she experienced the most vicious forms of racism, sexism, cruelty and indifference. As a political activist she was targeted, persecuted, hounded and harassed. Because of her political activities she became a political prisoner and spent many years in prison. But she continued to believe in freedom, and she continued to fight for it. In spite of her personal suffering, in spite of chronic, life-threatening illnesses, she continued to struggle. She gave the best that she had to give to our people. She devoted her life, her love and her best energies to fighting for the liberation of oppressed people. She struggled selflessly, she could be trusted, she was consistent, and she could always be counted to do what needed to be done. She was a soldier, a warrior-woman who did everything she could to free her people and to free political prisoners.33
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For Assata Shakur, the weight of isolation, alienation, and vilification are scars that are borne. Redemption does not occur on this plane or in this life. Betrayal by nonblacks and blacks, by men and women, is part of the liberation narrative. There will be no gratitude, no appreciation, no recognition equal to the insults and assaults. So, Assata Shakur, in true revolutionary fashion, must conclude her testimonial embracing a community that radiates beyond our immediate boundaries and limitations: “I have faith that the Ancestors will welcome her, cherish her, and treat her with more love and more kindness than she ever received here on this earth.”

Notes

1. This chapter is based on “Black Revolutionary Icons and ‘Neoslave’ Narratives,” in Joy James, Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000). In that essay, I discuss gendered differences among and between Black Panther leaders and associates. For additional writings on Assata Shakur, see the Harriet Tubman Literary Circle digital repository.


5. In Still Black, Still Strong: Survivors of the War Against Black Revolutionaries, Dhoruba Bin Wahad offers insights into the underground organization
and reveals the complex gender and race dynamics surrounding Shakur. Her solitude—in prison, as a fugitive, as a revolutionary woman not tied to a dependent relationship with a man—epitomizes the aloneness, if not loneliness, of the isolated revolutionary. Physical violence, battlefield knowledge, and fatigue foster a unique black female political being who is susceptible to being either romanticized or demonized.


7. Although publicly condemned, the program allegedly remains in effect today with the continuing harassment of “targets” such as the San Francisco Eight.

8. The 1976 Church Committee Report on Domestic Surveillance and Other Illegal Activities by U.S. Intelligence Agencies was named after Frank Church (D-Idaho).

9. According to Shakur, she has never been “free”; even in Cuba, protected and valorized as a “black revolutionary,” she remains a “slave” because of her status as a black or African woman, a status that she sees as inseparable from the state of subaltern Africans throughout the diaspora.


11. Ibid., 243.

12. Assata Shakur continues to maintain her innocence in the shooting of Werner Foerster. Her case was reintroduced to mainstream black America in the mid-1980s through a segment on New York–based black journalist Gil Noble’s television talk show, *Like It Is*. Noble traveled to Cuba to interview Shakur and with archival footage of the Civil Rights and black liberation movements set the context for their discussions. Following the two-part segment, a panel that included the Reverend Jesse Jackson was convened to talk about her case. In the 1990s, Shakur appeared in various documentaries including Cuban filmmaker Gloria Rolando’s *Eyes of the Rainbow*, which intersperses images of a serene Shakur with African Orisha, or Yoruba female warrior deities and entities of love and community.


14. Malfeasance was the norm during her discontinued 1973 trial in Middlesex County. The court ruled that the entire jury panel had been contaminated by racist comments like, “If she’s black, she’s guilty.” Most whites—and Shakur was tried and convicted by an all white jury—continued to equate “black militancy” or a “black revolutionary” with criminality. Both Shakur’s political affiliations and race marked her as criminally culpable.
15. In closing, the signatories admonish Whitman concerning her civic and political responsibilities:

The people of New Jersey, particularly people of African descent, other people of colour and the poor, as well as your political aspirations, would be better served by your attention to reducing poverty, unemployment, underemployment, the incidence of AIDS, police brutality and corruption and improving housing, public education and health care.

16. More contemporary media portrayal of victims of the 1973 tragedy that ended in two deaths focused only on whites. Images of Foerster’s weeping widow were broadcast (in similar fashion to 20/20’s use of images of Daniel Faulkner’s distraught widow in a segment, hosted by Sam Donaldson in January 1999, was hostile to calls for a new trial for Mumia Abu-Jamal). No references were made to slain Zayd Shakur, or incarcerated Sundiata Acoli, or their families. Images are, of course, the dominant factor for creating icons, particularly demonized ones. NBC repeatedly aired a photograph of a black woman with a gun implying that it was Shakur, although the photograph was taken from a highly publicized case where she was accused of bank robbery but later acquitted (during the trial, several witnesses, including the manager of the bank, testified that the woman in that photograph was not Shakur). Despite NBC’s extensive resources for research, it failed to establish the photograph as misidentified; although a subsequent fax and e-mail campaign protested the misinformation, the network continued to broadcast the woman in the photograph as Shakur.


20. Ibid.


23. Ibid., 10.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 11.
28. Ibid., 13.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.

Between 1850 and 1860, escaped slave Harriet Tubman guided several hundred enslaved people to free territories in the North on the Underground Railroad. During the Civil War, she served as liaison between the army and newly freed African Americans, and following the war she raised money for the education of former slaves and founded a home for the old and poor.

Fannie Lou Hamer was fired from her work as a sharecropper after she attempted to register to vote in 1962 as part of the SNCC voting rights campaign. Jailed and severely beaten in Mississippi in 1963 for her activism, she gave a rousing speech on behalf of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. For Hamer’s speech, see http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/sayitplain/flhamer.html (accessed February 16, 2009).
31. “Open letter from Assata Shakur.”
32. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
Part 2.

DEMOCRACY AND CAPTIVITY
Democracy and Captivity

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

—Thirteenth Amendment, Section 1, U.S. Constitution

[T]he post-Civil War southern system of convict lease . . . transferred symbolically significant numbers of black people from the prison of slavery to the slavery of prison.

—Angela Y. Davis

As a slave, the social phenomenon that engages my whole consciousness is, of course, revolution.

—George Jackson

“What Is in a Name?”

From its origins as a democratic slave state or a slave democracy into its current manifestations as a penal democracy, the United States of America has produced a wealth of writings constituting perhaps the world’s largest collection of (neo)slave literature. A singular achievement. This literary productivity will continue given that the United States has the greatest incarceration rate in the industrialized world—estimated at about 2.5 million (counting children, nonlegalized immigrants, and the mentally disordered). Overwhelmingly, these detainees are poor and people of African,

Latino, Asian, and Indigenous ancestry. The United States also possesses the technological means and wealth to record and to preserve (or censor and disappear) its captive/penal discourse as part of its vast warehouse of “(neo)slave narratives.”

The above epigraphs are part of the abolitionist literature that exists as subcategories of a genre that I identify as “(neo)slave narratives.” (Neo)Slave narratives emerge from the combative discourse of the captive as well as the controlling discourse of the “master” state. (Neo)Slave narratives focus on the punitive incarceration and containment of designated peoples in the United States (and its “territories,” such as the prisons at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba and Abu Ghraib in Iraq). Here, I focus on three categories of (neo)slave narratives: those of the “master-state”; those of the nonincarcerated abolitionist and advocate; and those of the “prisoner-slave.” Ideologically, these narratives range from conservative and liberal to radical and revolutionary. The above epigraphs proffer fragments of abolitionist (neo)slave narratives that clash in ideology and political objective as they seek to alter the reality of enslavement in the United States. (Narratives shaping penal/slave democracies intend different, and at times complementary or contradictory, abolitionisms; among African Americans, the most intensely policed in the United States, (neo)slave narratives possess no uniform ideology.)

Of the state narratives, the most significant to this discussion is the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The Thirteenth Amendment ensnares as it emancipates. In fact, it functions as an enslaving antienslavement narrative. In contradistinction, slain prison rebel, author, and theorist George Jackson—his 1971 death at the hands of California prison guards would spark New York’s Attica rebellion weeks later—calls into question the very right of the state (as master) to exist. In abolitionists’ insurrectionary narratives, such as those offered by Jackson, what is sought is not the mere abolition of penal captivity or slavery, but the abolition of all masters, including the state-as-master or master-state. Not all abolitionists seek the same “freedoms” or even freedom at all. Some seek management and containment of social or state violence. At times, both a visionary freedom and an immediate emancipation are sought.

Advocacy abolitionism and its narratives by nonprisoners—like state narratives—grant only “emancipation.” Neither advocacy abolitionism nor state abolitionism can control or create “freedom”
for the captive. These terms cannot be fully explored here. Yet, we can note that despite the common assertion that “Lincoln ‘freed’ the slaves,” the President issued proclamation and legislation to establish emancipated people. Emancipation is given by the dominant, it being a legal, contractual, and social agreement. Freedom is taken and created. It exists as a right against the captor and/or enslaver and a practice shared in community by the subordinate captives. (In fact, as W. E. B. Du Bois notes in Black Reconstruction, some 200,000 African Americans fought in the Civil War—for emancipation and freedom.) Freedom is an ontological status—only the individual or collective—and perhaps a god—can create freedom.

Narratives by penal slaves seek and demand freedom (no matter for how limited a time, in what limited space). However, penal captives or slaves conditioned by the state can see freedom and emancipation as one and the same. As a consequence, not all penal slave narratives offer new visions of freedom. Some yearn for emancipation (parole, clemency) but not freedom (liberation from racial, economic, gender repression) and the political agency and risk-taking that could realize it.

Racially fashioned enslavement shares similar features with racially fashioned incarceration. Plantations, historically, were penal sites—prisons for the exploitation of agricultural, domestic, and industrial labor and the dehumanization of beings. Prison is the modern-day manifestation of the plantation. The antebellum plantation ethos of dehumanization was marked by master-slave relations revolving about sexual terror and domination, beatings, regimentation of bodies, exploited labor, denial of religious and cultural practices, substandard food, health care, and housing, forced migration, isolation in “lockdown” for punishment and control, denial of birth family and kin. That ethos is routinely practiced and reinscribed in contemporary penal sites. Physical, emotional, sexual, and economic exploitation and violence are visited upon bodies with equal abandon and lack of restraint in sites disappeared from conventional scrutiny. The old plantation was a prison; and the new prison is a plantation. Both reconfigure the (white) rural landscape, receiving and processing bodies forcibly transported, at times from “black” spaces into often culturally unfamiliar territory. In alien terrain, isolated captives witness and participate in a conditioning in which their civil or human rights are reduced to the rights of slaves.
This discussion, by now, will have ignited old and heated arguments about the “legitimate” use of the term slavery. Certainly, ambiguities exist concerning the definition of *slavery* in modern usage. Most likely debates center on the deniability of contemporary enslavement—as a noncriminal or legal state enterprise—in a Western, democratic nation-state. For example, Matthew Mancini argues in *One Dies, Get Another* that the convict prison lease system emerging in the late 1800s did not constitute slavery. While Orlando Patterson suggests in *Slavery and Social Death*—by his failure to mention the Thirteenth Amendment and to analyze U.S. penal slavery—that “slavery” is not terminology applicable to the postemancipation United States.\(^{11}\)

The political and ideological debates seem sharply drawn. However, despite the contributions of these and other noted scholars, the above three epigraphs were chosen to remind readers that the state through legal narratives, the academic through her scholarship, and the prisoner from his cell, all assert the presence of slavery in the United States as a postemancipation reality. The state has explicitly identified the slave; its narratives, as a subset of (neo)slave narratives, both illuminate and obscure the racialized body of the slave and/or prisoner. According to the U.S. Constitution, “other persons” (racially fashioned without any racial marker in the text to designate them as African), and later, according to the Thirteenth Amendment, “other persons” (criminally fashioned again with no apparent racial referent) are designated real and potential slaves. I highlight the Thirteenth Amendment to argue this: *The state does not create legal categories in abstraction.* Legal narratives materialize and manifest in political practice(s). Within its possessions and territories, in the very act of (re)naming involuntary servitude, the United States re-created rather than actually abolished slavery.

Generally, most abolitionist discourse (excepting radical discourse) tends to avoid the debate over naming, and to focus on the rights of the incarcerated (or enslaved). Consequently, the important contributions of advocacy organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and various policy and organizing groups, tend to emphasize the conditions of penalty and servitude (or slavery), not the ontological status of the servant (or slave). If the question of “slave” status is a critical one and not merely an exercise in semantics, then it might be that some types of
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abolitionism, just like the master-state narratives that they counter, seek less than freedom—the agency of the captive individual or community to chart their humanity through transforming and negating slavery and social death.\(^{12}\)

Historically, legal discourse and institutions have manufactured illegal or criminal races as slaves. Laws maintained the plantation and reservation as penal camps, and fuel for labor in consumption for those designated as socially living and free. Democracy rooted in captivity and social parasitism meant that the civic body fed itself through the state’s legal (criminal) apparatus and procurement and containment of racially fashioned bodies. Although master-state narrators maintained, for moral and political legitimacy, that it was they who suffered the presence of social parasites—the plague of criminal, antisocial savages poisoning the citizenry—still, in the frame of the nation-state, they became engorged. The state fed the master race (constructed by racial supremacy and propertied “free person” status) with the bodies and lands of its captives. The master race fed the state with the fruits of captive labor. Laws codified, regulated, and policed the exchange.

The official narratives of the nation-state itself—which were legally binding and enforceable—proved coercive and fashioned not only the language of (neo)slavery but slavery itself. The narratives reflect the languages of master, slave, and abolitionist. State, master, and slave in an interminable battle over freedom created the language of the fugitive or incarcerated rebel—the slave, the convict. The language of the illegal or criminalized in turn created the conditions for freedom not rooted in captivity.

Law mandated that to be socially alive, to be fully human and part of the civic body, required the marking of the white European body (of course gender, sexuality, and property would have significance as well). Hence it assisted and encouraged the European body (both individual and civic) by developing a relationship of social parasitism through genocidal anti-Indigenous wars and the African slave trade. The white civic body was strengthened by feeding off those designated as socially dead. The encoding of slavery or criminality onto blackness reflected a counterpart construction: the inscription of “whiteness” and nonincarceration as freedom and civility, hence as property or existential wealth.

The currency of white skin with its parasitical relationship to red, black, brown, and yellow skin would spark centuries of
antiracist abolitionism. Perhaps it did and does so because racism is best expressed in the violence of penal culture; and the symbolic and real renderings of penology, as a form of [sur]reality, are shatteringly visceral. Penal culture inverts conventional reality to link the presence of torture and abuse to the law abiding civic body, “civil” and “civilized state.” It thus places into question where to locate the “savage.”

Abolitionists are heirs to their ancestors’ strengths and limitations in combating violent captivity. It is impossible to survey here all of the significant and lengthy history of abolitionist discourse. Still, in order to place this anthology by contemporary imprisoned writers advocating and agitating for justice within a historical context, it is useful to review key state legal narratives that shaped both slave and abolitionist narratives.

**Law and Master-State Narration**

In an European settler colony, in 1661, the Virginia State Assembly became one of the first legislative bodies to equate enslavement with racial standing by legally coding enslavement as ethnicity/race: “Slave” would be synonymous with African/Black. At the time, there were indentured Europeans as well as indentured Africans and Native Americans; so, captivity was a penal designation applicable to all.

One century after the legal codification of slavery as racially driven, the new republic, triumphant in its war for freedom from its British colonial master, issued its guiding laws and principles: the Constitution of the United States. That document would also codify the socially living and the socially dead, respectively as master (race) and enslaved (race). (White women of course would not garner the franchise until the 1920s, and so existed in between both sites, masters of the enslaved race[s], subjects to their male counterparts.)

The Preamble of the U.S. Constitution sets the template for the construction of “we, the people” to be understood as white and propertied. In 1787, Article I, Section 2 of the Constitution establishes the political profit tied to enslavement. Curiously, what is so present in that document—the most famous issue of the founding fathers—is what is unspoken. There is the specter in the subtext; she appears in
the disappearance of the words *black, African, or slave*. No reference
to races binary in construction, designated as nonbeing/noncitizen
or being/citizen manifests in this document. Yet, without mentioning
the phenotyped captive (one must acknowledge that reservations to
warehouse and decimate Indigenous peoples were also penal sites),
race is everywhere:

Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among
the several States which may be included within this Union,
according to their respective Numbers, which shall be deter-
mimed by adding to the whole Number of free persons, including
those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians
not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons.

The Constitution’s three-fifths clause demarcates social life
from social death; thus it created a political opportunism to
benefit electoral elites. Those barred from voting could still accrue
political power for whites, increasing not only their congressional
representation but also their electoral votes.\(^1\) Ironically this would
be revisited over a century after the formal abolition of chattel
slavery. (For instance, the majority of prisons located in rural
Upstate New York house a considerable number of men and women
shipped in from downstate or urban areas such as New Y ork City;
the state employs largely white prison guards and administrat-
ors to police largely black and brown bodies; largely conservative,
white congressional representatives are elected in rural districts
augmented by [re]apportionment expanded by the incarcerated
who cannot vote while the urban congressional representation
in prisoners’ home districts in Harlem, Brooklyn, and the Bronx
shrinks with their enforced absence and appropriation or theft of
their electoral value.)

For the slave to attain civic identity and power required her
to possess freedom. The republic mandated that freedom could
not be obtained by virtue of any haven within its borders or act
of autonomy by the captives. Linking the prisoner with the slave,
Article IV, Section 2 of the Constitution stipulates that there is no
“free” space or site for the prisoner or the slave; no place within
the nation where the register of social death would be erased by
the captive’s volition:
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A Person charged in any State with Treason, Felony, or other Crime, who shall flee from justice, and be found in another State, shall on Demand of the executive Authority of the State from which he fled, be delivered up, to be removed to the State having Jurisdiction of the Crime.

No Person held to Service or labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour, but shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due.

Insurrectionists though would contest the absence of freedom (rejecting the possibility of manumission or purchasing themselves and family from their captors). In 1822, Denmark Vesey led a slave uprising followed in 1831 by the bloody revolt of Nat Turner. In 1857, the U.S. Supreme Court confirmed the absence of free space for blacks with its majority decision in the Dred Scott Case in which a former slave who had moved to free territory and who had lived as a free man returned voluntarily to slave territory only to lose his free status. Two years after the Supreme Court tendered its verdict on the fixed nature of blackness as property, white abolitionist militant John Brown executed the 1859 raid on Harper’s Ferry and was summarily executed by the state after forty days in prison. That armed rebellion, as did the earlier Dred Scott ruling, hastened war—apparently the only avenue to resolve the contestations over the disturbing presence of the socially dead amid the larger civic culture populated by those granted social life by the master-state.

In 1861, following the secession of southern states in the wake of the election of Republican Abraham Lincoln as the sixteenth President of the United States, the Civil War commenced. Two years later, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. This pronouncement was to abolish slavery; it garnered for Lincoln—who felt that African Americans had no social life to give to the nation and therefore should be “repatriated” to Africa or shipped to the Caribbean—the title of the so-called great emancipator. On September 22, 1862, Lincoln gave the following declaration, as the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation:

That on the 1st day of January, AD 1863, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State the people
whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.

And I hereby enjoin upon the people so declared to be free to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defense; and I recommend to them that, in all cases when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages.

And I further declare and make known that such persons of suitable condition will be received into the armed service of the United States.

Presidential cautiousness is evident in this abolitionist narrative. All enslaved people of African descent are not “freed,” only those in the territories or states in rebellion against the union. The President furthermore pledges the use of the government’s military force to ensure the “freedom” of those seeking liberation in the recognized territories, and cautions blacks to remain “law abiding”—that is, to continue in the workforce and to abstain from (political) violence except in the case of self-defense. Over 200,000 African Americans would serve in the Civil War; likely their armed status would have prevented any forcible repatriation after the exhausting and bloody confrontation (a war preceded by the written and oral narratives of nineteenth-century antebellum abolitionists such as David Walker, Maria Stewart, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Henry Lloyd Garrison, and John Brown).

Lincoln, the most venerated of the antislavery abolitionists, was assassinated two years after he issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Also that year, Congress passed the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution; thus, after two years of wrangling, it reinstated slavery that Lincoln abolished. Ratified in 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment, Section 1 rebranded the captive: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” Now, slavery would operate in a restricted fashion. Congress resurrected social death as a permanent legal category in U.S. life, yet no longer
registered the socially dead with the traditional racial markings. Breaking with a 200-year-old tradition, the government ostensibly permitted the enslavement of nonblacks. Now not the ontological status of “nigger” but the ontological status of “criminal” renders one a slave. Yet, as became apparent in the convict prison lease system, blackness remained the signifier of social death, although now all those relegated to prisons would be imbued with that pariah race status. Law mandated the transition from chattel slavery to penal slavery, from personal property to “public” property owned by the state (and leased to corporate interests). In doing so, it established new obstacles and challenges for abolitionism.

Constitutional amendments during and following the Civil War, a war ostensibly to resolve institutional captivity, provide a mixture of abolitionist victory and venality, of euphoria and despair. Three years after the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, the Fourteenth Amendment’s Section 1 amplified the parameters of freedom: “No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” Yet, contemporary abolitionists recognize that judicial rulings do not allow prisoners full or equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment.

The Fifteenth Amendment (1870), Section 1 expands the franchise: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” Yet, in 1877, federal enforcement was rendered null and void in the Hayes Compromise to secure electoral votes and the presidency of Rutherford Hayes: Social slavery would remain intact and the radical experiment of Reconstruction for a nonapartheid democracy would end. Of the postbellum years, W.E.B. Du Bois’s Black Reconstruction notes the Hayes Compromise and federal complicity (reminiscent of the compromise reached in the 1787 Philadelphia convention); that compromise promoted the rise of racial terror through the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), an aristocratic invention, romanticized in D. W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation, aligning poorer whites with the economic interests of the plantocracy. The government and its deputized civil society, enforced the institutionalization of Black Codes (formerly Slave Codes) to re-create dead bodies—those
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denied political electoral power, and those bodies subjected to ritualized and routinized violence.\footnote{Democracy and Captivity} Following the end of Reconstruction and large-scale black (male) voter disenfranchisement, began the massive growth of the convict prison lease system. In that system, primarily blacks, arrested in “sweeps” of streets and communities, were worked to death in mining, agriculture, and forestry in joint ventures between the state and private industry, essentially, dying at higher rates than they had during enslavement on plantations.

Coexisting with the convict prison lease system was the racial-sexual terror and policing of lynchings (largely to prevent black political and economic gains) that dominated the land from the 1880s to 1920s.\footnote{Democracy and Captivity} Although reform movements were initiated, they were met largely with general indifference by the general society and by Congress (which refused to pass any antilynching legislation).

Apparently, terror directed against the captive (black body) appeared as “routine.” Normalization of terror and the invisibility of racially fashioned bodies rendered state and master social violence key obstacles for abolitionists searching for narratives to expose the dehumanizing continuation of enslavement in the “postslavery” era. The narratives of the prisoners themselves would mark and reveal the continuation of violence and degradation and the arguments that legitimized captivity and abuse. Although reform and penitence were ideological and moral motivations for early penitentiary life, the mass introduction of the “slave” body into prisons following the legislative “abolition” of slavery, altered the “reformatory” aspects of incarceration.

Insurgency: Prison-Slave Narratives and the New Abolitionists

John Edgar Wideman’s introduction to Mumia Abu-Jamal’s \textit{Live from Death Row}\footnote{Democracy and Captivity} cautions the reader and seeks to protect the imprisoned author by demystifying the “reading” of former Black Panther Abu-Jamal as spectacle and entertainment.\footnote{Democracy and Captivity} In his introduction, Wideman argues that many Americans encounter the trials and trauma of black life and political struggles through the “(neo)slave narrative.” Here he limits the definition of (neo)slave narrative to that authored only by the captive black woman or man. Traceable to the nineteenth century, this particular narrative is marked by
key characteristics connected to enslavement, abolitionism, and consumerism. It is marketed through literature accessible to and desired by (curious or moral) readers. In addition, according to Wideman, such (neo)slave narratives identify fixed sites of freedom and enslavement. They juxtapose the southern plantation with the northern city in the “free” or nonslave state. In these narratives, the triumphal slave must engage in flight—from captivity, penal or plantation misery—in order to triumph through an exchange of social death for civil life. Coded as “north versus south,” this assertion of identifiable sites of freedom and democracy suggests a continual path of warfare or flight. (Neo)slave narratives can provide illusory landscapes. Romantic evasions assume that the duality is real; that there is a “free zone” in a democratic slave state, that the “north” as haven, in fact, exists.  

In the prison narrative, the successful escape or emancipation and liberation manifest as physical and metaphysical fleeing from the penal site through parole, exoneration, disappearance into fugitive status, or abolitionism. In conventional (neo)slave narratives, or a subcategory, prison narratives, the state, despite its abusive excesses, provides the possibility of emancipation and redemption.  

According to such narratives, the state cannot therefore be considered or constructed as inherently and completely corrupt; for the state enables and maintains the sites of freedom (open society), as well as those of enslavement (prison). As the sympathetic reader lives vicariously through the dangerous risk-taking that typifies the life of slave-as-prison-rebel and fugitive, these narratives reassure her of reconciliation with prevailing power structures that allow for or provide emancipation and democratic culture. These structures then must be maintained if not revered despite the “dead zones” within which democracy is made incompatible with the life of specific subcultures. The dead zones, such as the penal site, the immigrant detention center, the military camp, the police station, the foreign prison in Cuba or Iraq or Afghanistan—all deny the possibility of “new life” or rebirth. All are manifestations of institutional and rational and irrational violence; all are antidemocratic.  

Although terror functions as entertainment, disciplinary performance, and incitement to abolitionist activity, some abolitionist texts fail to record or comprehend such terror inflicted on racially marked bodies and thus erase racist violence. Yet any narrator not (racially) blinded recognizes the body in penal sites, sees its trauma
and scarring. The visual sparks reform and revolution—lynchings of personal friends mobilized Ida B. Wells in 1892 to initiate abolitionism. In 1955, months before Rosa Parks sat down and would not voluntarily rise, the Mississippi lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till ignited the Civil Rights movement, not only because he was murdered but because his mutilated corpse was viewed in an open casket in a Chicago funeral that drew thousands; and the image of that tortured body was disseminated to tens of thousands through photographs published in the black magazine Jet. Whether expressed in the popular nineteenth- and twentieth-century black-and-white paper postcards depicting lynchings of blacks by whites, as preserved in the exhibit “Without Sanctuary,” or illustrated in the twenty-first-century color digital postcards depicting the torture and rape of Iraqi prisoners by their U.S. captors, the violent (racial-sexual) dehumanization and dismemberment of the captive have proven how memorable terror and sexual violence are. This suggests that textual (neo)slave narratives have been buttressed (and may at times be supplanted in their evocative power to affect civil society and mobilize resistance) by visual or pictorial (neo)slave narratives.

Prison narratives as (neo)slave narratives represent border crossings; just as did Charon, they ferry the dead and the living. The lingua franca of (neo)slave narratives is all discourse that posits distinct worlds: that of criminal and civil, that of outlaw and law abiding, that of slave and freeman or freewoman.

Rhetoric instructs that there are contained sites of nonfreedom and freedom. Yet, enslavement is manufactured in the “free” world; “freedom” is imagined and created in the slave world. When the two worlds meet, as they do incessantly and creatively and violently, there is a border crossing, an intermingling of subordinate and dominant narratives. In narratives—of the master race, the state, the slave, the prisoner, the abolitionist, the advocate—redemption and safety continue to appear as a variation of prison success stories tied to “rehabilitation” rather than to rebellion. For instance, in contemporary parole hearings for self-identified political prisoners, supporters are asked to “tone down” their political rhetoric, to emphasize that the individual on trial or up for parole poses no “threat” to general society; and that their contributions to “social service” were exemplary. Advocates are asked to make their letters for clemency and parole abolitionist texts that harmonize with master-state (neo)slave narratives.
Contemporary insurrectionist penal-slave narratives, such as Abu-Jamal’s *Live from Death Row* or Assata Shakur’s *Assata: An Autobiography*, can question the very premise of rehabilitation, indicting the state and society, contextualizing or dismissing individual acts of criminality by nonelites, the poor and racialized, to emphasize state criminality or the crimes of elites. Some prison narratives issue calls for dissent for a greater democracy. Dual narratives—those of the petitioners and those of the antagonists to state authority—shape political discourse. The narratives are in dialogue. As they debate with each other, they are differently weighted—some abolitionist (neo)slave narratives are considered more “respectable” and more “valued.” Yet, when they emanate from the site of the noncitizen, from men and women in cages, regardless of their outlaw and disreputable status, they illuminate past, present, and future possibilities for the reinvention of democracy.

**Contemporary Policing and Political Repression**

Through their narratives, imprisoned writers can function as progressive abolitionists and register as “people’s historians.” They become the storytellers of the political histories of the captives and their captors. These narratives are generally the “unauthorized” versions of political life, often focusing on dissent and policing and repression. The more contemporary political activists represented in this volume have intimately interwoven their own autobiographical resistance and subsequent capture into their (neo)slave narratives.

Those currently incarcerated were largely politicized either in pacifist activism during World War II, or more recently in the 1960s and the following decades marked by political dissent and unrest. In the 1960s, in response to radical and progressive social movements, the “law and order” rhetoric and campaigns fed the contemporary imprisonment crisis fueled by resistance and backlash to the turbulent decades of protest against the prevailing order. A rapid review of that history will be useful to situate some of the essays and chapters that follow and help us to better understand the writing of incarcerated radicals.

The year of 1963 proved to be a pivotal one. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and the triumph of the March on Washington transformed civil rights “troublemakers” and “criminals” into respectable citizens seeking to contribute to a democratic
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culture. Turmoil and tragedy ensued throughout the year which witnessed: the murder of civil rights leader Medgar Evers; the bombing of a black church in Birmingham, Alabama, which resulted in the deaths of four girls; and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. President Lyndon Johnson used the national mourning for Kennedy to shepherd civil rights legislation through Congress, ostensibly to abolish the social death of blacks. In 1964, the Voting Rights Act was passed as another emancipatory gesture, part of the state’s expanding abolitionist narrative. Yet riots followed in urban communities. That year, the Grand Old Party (GOP) presidential candidate Senator Barry Goldwater (R-Arizona), who influenced Richard Nixon’s and Ronald Reagan’s positions on policing and imprisonment, stated in his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention: “Security from domestic violence, no less than from foreign aggression, is the most elementary form and fundamental purpose of any government.”

By 1966, segregation abolitionism in the Civil Rights Movement was being replaced in popular culture by the militancy of younger antiracists in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover’s 1966 Memorandum on Cointelpro established the parameters for social and political containment, reserving the harshest punishment for rebels who militantly resisted social death: “The purpose of this new counterintelligence endeavor is to expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities of black nationalist organizations and groupings, their leadership, spokesmen, membership, and supporters.” Hoover’s fear that the militancy of black emancipators would “infect” white America was also shared by elected officials.28 In 1968, the assassination of Robert Kennedy during his presidential campaign was followed several months later by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. In the wake of those killings, with a national heightened sense of fear and uncertainty, Congress passed and President Lyndon Johnson signed the “Omnibus Crime and Safe Streets Act.” This act led to the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration and created SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) teams, setting the stage for Richard Nixon’s “law and order” campaigns.

In the 1980s, during the administrations of Ronald Reagan and his former vice president George Bush, the war on drugs,25 contra wars, and “constructive engagement” with apartheid along with the
funding of contra or counterrevolutionary terrorists-insurgents in Latin America and Africa would be normative. These domestic and foreign policies would lead to a growth of both social and political prisoners. The former were/are largely incarcerated for crimes tied to drug use or sale (and poverty); the latter were/are incarcerated for their rebellion against U.S. domestic and foreign policies. In the 1990s, prisons saw an exponential growth in incarceration, largely from drug sale and consumption. During the Clinton administration, the 1996 “Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act” broadened the use of the death penalty and diminished federal habeas corpus; and the 1996 “Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act” abolished due process for undocumented persons. Both laws were passed the year after the Oklahoma City Bombing.

The diminishment of free acts—acts that can be engaged in without fear of surveillance or reprisal—signals the shrinkage of free democratic space. The penal state grows not because of the proliferation of prisons per se, but because “free” space diminishes or disappears. Part of this diminishment stems from legislation. The state shrinks, and alternatively can expand, democratic space through its criminal/civil codes. Currently, it has chosen shrinkage as evidenced in the passage of legislation such as the 1996 Omnibus Crime Bill and the 2001 USA Patriot Act.

Despite increasing police powers, and prison, police, and military violence, the narratives and agency of imprisoned political dissidents continue to redefine and revitalize struggles for a greater democracy. In movements influenced by prisoners, gays/lesbians, feminists, antiracists, and peace activists express insurgent desire and discourse; whether pacifist or militarist, they have refashioned (neo)slave narratives. Out of antiwar and social justice movements, insurgency has produced and will continue to produce imprisoned abolitionists and political icons.

However, the state continues to provide the midwifery to rebirth disenfranchisement despite the civil, human rights, and liberation movements of the twentieth century. The status of felon is used to strip tens of thousands of people (from mostly poor or black and brown communities) of the vote. In the 2000 Presidential election, Florida voters, overwhelmingly registered with the Democratic Party, in low-income, high-minority districts were over three times more likely to have their votes discarded than voters in high-income,
low-minority districts; and voters in some low-income, high-minority districts were twenty times more likely to have their votes discarded than voters in other districts. In 2004, similar controversy emerged concerning Ohio. Yet to focus on Florida or Ohio and the role of the Republican Party in the disenfranchisement of black voters would miss a crucial point: Both national parties, Republican and Democrat, routinely undercount African American votes nationwide, jettisoning some one in seven according to a 2004 study.  

Hence “voting while black/brown” suggests a rupture with the civic body—some form of nonbeing interjected into restrictive democratic processes. That is, the black body shares a proximity or positionality with the felon/prisoner—that of the suspect or noncitizen. Consequently, contemporary radical penal narratives as (neo)slave narratives denounce the State for manufacturing slavery on both sides of prison walls.

Conclusion

In previous centuries, forging a new language, the modern anti-slavery movement marked a significant awakening of the public moral conscience in the Western world. In this century, antiprison movements offer the same possibilities: to struggle by dismantling mechanisms of incarceration and dehumanization.

Writings by prisoner-abolitionists (some identify as “slaves,” all as former or current captives) focus on the captured rebel, visionary or insurrectionist. New abolitionists shape and contest (neo)slave narratives and penal democracy. They suggest that in America, as in its Athenian progenitor, there is no free space, as we know it, without penal or slave space, as we fear it.

Notes

1. Infused as they are with economic and ethnic-racial bias, the massive incarceration and detention apparatuses constitute a crisis in American democracy. In critiques of the incarceration industry, what is reasonably contested is not the responsibility and need to contain people to prevent them from harming themselves or others; what is contested is containment fashioned as enslavement and policing and imprisonment shaped by racial and economic status. The most disturbing features of contemporary incarceration are its abuses of humanity and its racially and economically driven punitive characteristics. Poor people comprise the majority of those
imprisoned and on death row. Some 70 percent of the more than 2 million incarcerated in U.S. prisons, jails, and detention centers are African American, Latino, Native American, and Asian; approximately 1 million or 50 percent of the incarcerated are African American. The racially driven features of punishment, detention, and imprisonment are documented. The Sentencing Project has noted disparity in sentencing in which blacks convicted of the same crimes as whites are much more likely to be sent to prison. The American Bar Association has advocated a moratorium on executions citing the rampant racial bias in determining death sentences given that the race of both defendant and victim is the primary factor in capital punishment. Those convicted of killing a white person are significantly more likely to receive the death penalty, particularly if they are not white themselves. The abysmal living conditions and treatment of detained immigrants in camps in the United States and “unlawful combatants” at Guantánamo Bay have led to hunger strikes, riots, or attempted suicides. See Joseph Lelyveld, “In Guantánamo,” New York Review of Books, November 7, 2002.


3. The ways in which (neo)slave narratives are written and spoken by African Americans deserves more careful scrutiny than can be provided here. However, we can note how black Americans reinvigorate old language concerning captivity. For instance, African American families and friends visiting their incarcerated relatives have been known to refer to black guards as “Uncle Toms.” And abolitionists in civil society who have married prisoners create new narratives that conflate their experiences as synonymous with those of prisoners and prison rebels.

4. (Neo)Slave narratives can seek to expand or expel freedom; only those that seek to diminish or destroy slavery are abolitionist. Abolitionist discourse can also refashion shackles as in the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which abolished slavery during the Civil War only to legalize it today.


6. In some abolitionist texts, what is sought is not “freedom” per se,
because the master-state will not or cannot offer that. It cannot provide what it does not possess. What the master-state grants, and often what the incarcerated acquiesce to, is emancipation. Yet this emancipation cannot fulfill the conditions for a decent life or livelihood.

Consider that in referring to the California Youth Authority, MSW candidates in California universities speak disquietingly about the “emancipation” of children who are wards of the state, in the foster care system (also a prison, according to some who were warehoused there during their youth). One is “emancipated” when one reaches the age of eighteen. Emancipation suggests that prior to that moment, children were in bondage, housed in private or group homes. Upon emancipation, technically no longer on the rolls to have their actions directly dictated, that is, no longer the direct property of the state, they are “free.” Essentially at the age of eighteen, whether or not they have matriculated from high school (such students would disproportionately not graduate by age eighteen having had their schooling delayed because of frequent moves, familial disruption, and childhood trauma), formerly captive children, now free adults, are put out—without housing, without advanced schooling, and with no income. As in 1865, slaves would ask, emancipated for what end—subsistence, starvation, or entry into the illegal, underground economy?

7. A study of maroon societies in the United States—that is, the Seminoles—an amalgamation of Indigenous peoples and runaway African slaves, the only entity to defeat the U.S. army on its own soil—the Americas, or the Haitian revolution illustrates the sporadic appearances of freedom struggles. See C. L. R. James, The Black Jacobins (New York: Vintage Books, 1963); and Sibylle Fischer, Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

8. Rather than conflate penal and carceral, some scholars coin the term punitive carceral(ity), drawing from Foucault in order to foreground the distinction between punishment and incarceration. I find this distinction to be somewhat unnecessary. The United States has rendered the two as synonymous for racialized bodies on or in plantations, reservations, prisons. When the quest for rehabilitation, for the individual as opposed to the collective body, became severed from incarceration, incarceration became reduced to punishment.

10. Some 40 percent of the nation’s prisons are housed in rural areas. Given draconian drug laws, such as the Rockefeller Drug Laws, many prisoners from urban areas serve long prison terms in remote areas that are highly inaccessible to low-income families without private transportation.


13. Political scientist John Aldrich has noted that the 1800 presidential contest between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, which was determined, as all U.S. presidential elections are, by the electoral college, would have likely been settled in favor of the latter, the loser, if the three-fifths clause were not law.

14. The impact of the abolitionist John Brown, although erased or vilified in conventional memory, would spark continued abolitionist struggle, ranging from the song “John Brown is moldering in his grave . . .” sung by Union soldiers, a song which would later become “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” (and later still, “Solidarity Forever,” written in a prison cell by Joe Hill, the labor activist and socialist), to twentieth-century white antiracist/imperialist revolutionaries such as the John Brown/Anti-Klan network of former and current political prisoners such as Linda Evans, Laura Whitehorn, David Gilbert, and Marilyn Buck.


18. An award-winning journalist, Mumia Abu-Jamal began writing at age fifteen as lieutenant minister of information for the Philadelphia branch of the Black Panther Party. Mumia Abu-Jamal has been incarcerated for over twenty years for a crime for which he maintains his innocence, that of killing a (white) policeman. In 2003, he was
declared a Citizen of Paris, an award the city last bestowed in 1971 on Pablo Picasso.

19. This illusion justifies the forcible “democratization” of other peoples and cultures and nations. Historically the democratic enterprise waged by the United States has meant the concentration of economic wealth and property, the expropriation of the material wealth and cultural-political autonomy of those Indigenous and African peoples initiated into the “free” world, and the phantasm of civilizing missions which made profitable the discourse of slave trades.

20. Of course, the exception in historical slave narratives would be the Dred Scott case and the Supreme Court ruling that occasioned a mass exodus of black Americans to Canada and elsewhere.

21. The language of academic abolitionists varies in its political intent. Consider only a small selection of Michel Foucault’s work: Discipline and Punish and the “Attica Interview” (John K. Simon, “Michel Foucault on Attica: An Interview,” Telos 19 [1974]: 154–161). In the interview conducted in 1972, during his tour of Attica, the site of the prison rebellion brutally repressed by then Governor Nelson Rockefeller and the National Guard, Foucault does not once mention the men who rebelled in Attica and who were killed there.

   Equally problematic is Foucault’s inadequate attention to the state’s investment in criminality. Foucault in this interview asserts that crime is a “coup d’état from below” and hence has a “proto-revolutionary” function. Yet, the largest criminals are from “above”—in terms of property theft (white collar crime), drug trafficking (laundering is the most profitable; growers and street dealers garner only a fraction of the take), and organized violence. The Bureau of Indian Affairs reveals the structural or state nature of institutional theft and the nation-state as criminal enterprise. The state is a manifestation of organized criminality against certain bodies.


24. Lynchings, with the racial-sexual terror that accompanies them, are warfare. As do prisons, they represent the ultimate spectacles of physical and sexual terror.

25. In Greek mythology, Hermes brings Charon, the ferryman of the dead, the souls of the deceased, and Charon ferries them across the river Acheron.

26. Protesting at the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia in 2000, Camilo Viveiros, a Portuguese organizer with the Massachusetts Alliance of Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Tenants, was arrested for allegedly striking Philadelphia Police Commissioner John Timoney with a bicycle. Of the 420 protestors arrested along with Viveiros, over 95 percent had their...
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charges dismissed for lack of evidence or were acquitted shortly after the arrests. In April 2004, Viveiros, Eric Steinberg, and Darby Landy (known popularly as the “Timoney Three”), were the only three protestors left facing charges. Viveiros, who was being tried on three felony charges and four misdemeanors, faced up to forty years in jail and $55,000 in fines. On April 5, 2004, the first day of his trial, Judge William Mazzola exonerated Viveiros and his two codefendants due to inconsistencies in the prosecution’s testimony and video footage that showed Viveiros did not resist arrest and was punched on the back of the head by an officer as he was handcuffed. See “Friends of Camilo,” accessed December 28, 2011, http://www.friendsofcamilo.org.

27. The 1950s and 1960s constituted the “second reconstruction,” as liberals in Martin Luther King Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) would refer to it, and the “second civil war,” as radical “shock troops” of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) would describe it. Historian Howard Zinn, a former mentor along with Ella Baker of SNCC, documented the important contributions of the young activists in the book *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: South End Press, 2002, reprint).

Much of Southern activism centered on the right to vote. The Twenty-fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution promised the franchise and hence, theoretically, recognition of full citizenship with the mandate that made the poll tax or any tax as the precondition for voting illegal.

28. As reported in Eldridge Cleaver’s obituary, California governor Ronald Reagan, responding to Black Panther Party leader (and former convict) Eldridge Cleaver’s invitation to lecture at the University of California–Berkeley, warned: “If Eldridge Cleaver is allowed to teach our children, they may come home one night and slit our throats.” See *New York Times*, May 2, 1998, B8.

29. In *Lockdown America*, Christian Parenti notes that during the Reagan administration’s “war on drugs,” prisons and police departments grew, along with poverty and cuts to grants for child nutrition, education, and urban development. The Federal Crime Bill of 1984 created assets forfeiture laws that enabled police departments to keep up to 90 percent of “drug tainted” property that they confiscated; police revenues from drug forfeiture laws grew from $100 million in 1981 to over $1 billion in 1987. The Anti-Drug-Abuse Act of 1986 created twenty-nine new mandatory minimum sentences and disparity in penalties for (“suburban”) powder cocaine and (“urban”) crack (100:1). The majority of powder and crack cocaine users are now white “suburbanites,” yet the majority of those incarcerated for drug offenses are African American or Latino. Four years later, a new federal crime bill would mandate a “one strike” policy in


31. Punishment meted out to political prisoners or prisoners of conscience tended to be the most severe. See the Amnesty International reports on torture and sensory deprivation at the Lexington Control Unit for women, and at Marion Prison in Illinois for men. See Amnesty International USA, *Allegations of Mistreatment in Marion Prison, Illinois, U.S.A.* AMR 51/26/87, May 1987.

32. See Parenti, *Lockdown America.*

Following the September 11, 2001 tragedies, Attorney General Ashcroft issued directives for “lockdowns” of U.S. political prisoners. The 2001 USA Patriot Act passed later that year provided provisions that enable the government to: detain noncitizens indefinitely at the discretion of the Attorney General; conduct searches, seizures, and surveillance with reduced standards of cause and levels of judicial review; and construe guilt by association.


35. *The New Abolitionists*’ chapters are organized into four sections interconnecting issues of activism, gender, resistance, and dialogue. The narratives presented depict progressive polities. At times, social inequality is reproduced in the volume through an author’s language of class, sexual, or ethnic chauvinism. Yet the pieces reflect humanity struggling to reinvent and assert itself. Such writings and narratives reveal social life amid social death with the urgency and power of the political speech of prisoner and fugitive abolitionists representing historical and contemporary struggles. Often referencing a political present inextricably linked to the past, captives frame a future for abolitionism, emancipation, and freedom. The table of contents to *The New Abolitionists* (2005) is available at: http://www.sunypress.edu/p-4133-the-new-abolitionists.aspx (accessed September 21, 2012).
Black Suffering in Search of the “Beloved Community”

INTRODUCTION

The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled . . . the cry is always the same: “We want to be free.”
—Martin Luther King Jr.

The concept of the “beloved community,” as a desirable and achievable American phenomenon that encompasses black freedom, can be traced to human rights activist and pacifist Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. January is the month of King’s birth. April—the time of Easter and political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal’s birthday—is the month of King’s assassination. In remembrance, we would rather recall King’s entry into the world. The birth of any baby—with sustenance and protection from a mother possessing the same—offers promise. A prince of peace born in the winter and murdered in the spring can be immortalized if his life struggles and violent death are viewed as necessary sacrifices for the greater good. King surely knew that Jesus was both a black Jew and a political prisoner. He, like so many of his era, understood blacks as being political captives occupying a unique position in society, unique but universal to the human condition of struggle for liberation.

Some witness the hieroglyph of scars imprinted on the enslaved, and see spirit and malevolence singing about the black body in the diaspora. King preferred Negro spirituals. Yet the diaspora reflects multiple forms of communication about the gravity of antiblack

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racism. When the Rastafarians reframed Psalms 137, the Melodians and Bob Marley held sway as Jamaicans personalized the Bible to black suffering, mapping the rivers of Babylon into the Atlantic slave trade’s genocidal logic:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down
Ye-eah we wept, when we remembered Zion.
When the wicked
Carried us way in captivity
Required from us a song
Now how shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land

Old Testament corollaries to Marley’s rendition of the self-defense ballad, “I Shot the Sherriff,” exist. However, these would be repudiated by King who, guided by the New Testament, Gandhi, and love, saw only one redemptive route out of black suffering. Other routes though would be explored by radical freedom lovers.

The Mandate for Nonviolent Civil Disobedience

King gave the 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech/sermon on the Washington Mall, mesmerizing an international audience with the image of the beloved community where all God’s children can play together. The March on Washington occurred in the absence of W. E. B. Du Bois, the intellectual victim rebel of so much suffering and resistance on American soil. Du Bois chose to die in Ghana, an exile from the United States that had sought to imprison him during the McCarthy era for his socialist views and antiracist activism. Du Bois had a passion for justice, much like that of antilynching crusader Ida B. Wells, whom he helped to marginalize and alienate from the NAACP, an organization that would eventually itself alienate and oust Du Bois. Despite his contradictions, he understood the value of revolutionary struggle. W. E. B. Du Bois maintained that his biography on John Brown, a book largely shelved by his white liberal publishers because of its content, was the favorite of the many he authored. For forty days and nights white abolitionist militarist John Brown was held captive as a political prisoner for the antebellum raid on Harper’s Ferry; then the state executed him. In service to the underground movement, Harriet Tubman had found a compatriot in Brown. Naming themselves the heirs to Brown’s
legacy, a century later, white militant antiracists, such as Marilyn Buck—released from a California prison in 2010 to die from cancer among her beloved community in New York City—would support the Black Liberation Army, an offshoot of the Black Panther Party, formed in response to violent state repression.

Historical political imprisonment, black suffering, and death have become familiar—forming a backdrop to everyday reality. Premature violent death and captivity cease to astonish or seem unusual in this landscape. They no longer register as political phenomena. Consequently, when suffering blacks and their rare militant allies break into rebellion, most people seem surprised and outraged. They seem less disturbed by the repression, which they accept in resignation or complicity, and more by the resistance.

According to the state, no suffering warrants rebellion; although “freedom from tyranny” is one of its hallmark phrases. Perhaps what is explicitly meant, but only implied, is that no black suffering warrants rebellion.

King had to think critically, as he grappled with an emotional landscape littered with bodies, trauma, and social and physical death. (Initially, he focused on the domestic scene; later as had Malcolm, he became an internationalist, fluent in the language of global suffering but alphabetized in black vulnerability and resistance). Some of King’s best thinking occurred while he was either imprisoned or being threatened with death, which was likely most of his days and nights as an activist for social justice and peace. Although Martin Luther King, and other activists, were influenced by the teachings of Jesus, Ghandi, and Thich Nhat Hahn, they still needed the transcendent, beloved community as a political phenomenon and escape. One’s instinct for self-preservation forms one’s mode of self-defense and shapes pragmatic politics that are useful.

This is the irony or paradox. Political resistance could kill you, well actually the state could in response to your resistance, but the beloved community could save you. Not from physical death. Nothing would do that, not even god. But from meaningless death and despair. One does not negotiate with the state’s use of terror, violent and premature death (actual physical death or disappearance through incarceration). One opposes it and in that opposition finds meaning in black suffering.

Given the scope and urgency of the suffering rooted in black captivity, questions persisted: What is to be done? or King’s “Where
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do we go from here, chaos or community?” Martin King answered in the April 16, 1963, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” There he writes that, having waited more than 340 years for our Constitutional and God-given rights, we must break unjust laws through civil disobedience in order to alleviate our suffering and the suffering of others. He states essentially that nonviolent crimes against the state are a moral mandate. (Hence the adamant opposition by Republican Party visionaries—from Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan to present-day spokesmen—to King, and by extension “his” holiday.) King qualifies as he strategizes from his jail cell in Birmingham. Addressing the charges against him by clergy who demand “Why protests in Easter season?” he delineates the principles of struggle. Principled participants in a nonviolent campaign must: (1) determine the facts of injustice; (2) negotiate; (3) engage in self-purification; and (4) take direct action.

He does not explicitly state what one should do when: (1) facts are on your side but few listen; (2) negotiations fail because you lack existential or monetary capital; (3) self-purification becomes self-mortification; and (4) direct action is met by state violence.

There are other primary questions, that King does not address, to ask about our suffering and our activism: What is its relationship to black political death and political prisoners? How is it relevant to the issues of sexual violence and exploitation of black women, children, and LGBT communities? What are sustainable commitments and organic organizing for black freedom? How shall we remember the political dead and disappeared?

Remembering the Dead as Political Phenomena

State indifference toward, or complicity in, antiblack political violence makes certain passings first frighteningly significant, then hazily familiar, and finally depoliticized memory. When one fails to recognize political trauma as domination, one is more likely to personalize and internalize violence rather than move against it. So, the beloved community seems to be immobilized, preoccupied with personal rather than political issues, avoiding a conversation about and with the dead.

What is black death in American democracy but a political phenomenon? We observe political passings—from premature death, assassination, disappearance into prisons for decades—as
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museum pieces, far removed in emotive and intellectual importance from our personal lives and present traumas. We are troubled by current black sufferings fueled by the “new Jim Crow” or “neoslavery” in a punitive mandate, organized by a racially driven state, increasingly fragmenting us through poverty, abuse of power, and predation. Yet our language is rarely considered political when we speak of these challenges and the fragmentation that dismembers the beloved community that King promised we would see from the mountaintop.

King died the year before the FBI engineered killings of Black Panther Leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in Chicago on December 4, 1969. The joint FBI and Chicago police raid on Panther headquarters killed the twenty-something revolutionaries in their apartment while they slept. The black-and-white images captured in the documentary *Eyes on the Prize, Part II, A Nation of Law?* disturb my students screening self-defense organizing (the original name of the Party, sparked by police killings of unarmed black male, was the Black Panther Party for Self Defense) that preceded their births by several decades. Perhaps it is not only the blood-soaked mattress and Fred’s bleeding skull that no one dares to cradle that stuns them into suffering. Perhaps they grieve the remorseful narrative of the FBI informant, William O’Neil, who was coerced into providing detailed drawings of the apartment to the police—and who committed suicide after the documentary was made public—apparently because there is no room for his suffering on these shores. I imagine that the twenty-something students in the privileged classroom want what they cannot or will not name. Not the self-indulgence of revenge; the crimes are too old and revolutionary struggles too distant. Yet their shock and outrage at the vulnerability of the black body is apparent; and the U.S. government’s $1.8 million settlement to the young black Panthers who survived, or the family members of those who did not, does not muffle mute calls for “self-defense.”

Self-emancipated political prisoner Assata Shakur repeats the demand for self-defense in her memoir, *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987). Exiled in Cuba, with a million dollar “dead or alive” bounty on her head, Shakur writes of her youth and of her work in the Black Panther Party. As a child she confides that she could not participate in civil rights nonviolent civil disobedience training advocated by King because the thought of some white racist spitting on her with the mandate that she turn the other cheek shocked her. Should there be
a limit to suffering, even the redemptive kind? Shakur emphatically
answers “Yes” and is consistent in this affirmation. As a teenager,
she successfully resists a “train” or gang rape from black teens by
threatening to destroy the vases and lamps of one youth’s mother’s
apartment where she is trapped. Later driven underground by a
murderous FBI that has targeted her and her work in free breakfast
programs and sickle cell testing clinics, she is shot by New Jersey
State Troopers. Retaliating for the death of one of their own (who,
unlike Assata’s slain companion Zayd Shakur, may have died from
“friendly fire”), troopers torture her while “guarding” her as she
lays shackled to a hospital bed awaiting trial. There are acquittals
and hung juries in several trials, and court malfeasance before she is
convicted. While incarcerated, prison doctors actively “encourage” her
to abort through miscarriage her daughter. Through all, Assata Shakur
rebels. She fights as a political prisoner. She gives birth to a healthy
daughter who eventually permits her to be a grandmother—of the
revolutionary kind. Shakur survives to author an influential memoir,
one that embodies the fugitive slave rebel, and lives, for now, to tell
the tale of black suffering, resistance, and state violence. She wrestles
with the community, asking for more for the present, the captive, the
“free,” the young, the yet to be born.

WRESTLING WITH THE BELOVED COMMUNITY

[W]e’ve got to give ourselves to this struggle until the end.
Nothing would be more tragic than to stop at this point. . . .
We’ve got to see it through. . . . [E]ither we go up together, or
we go down together. . . . Let us develop a kind of dangerous
unselfishness. . . .

—Martin Luther King Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”

The FBI and the CIA’s clandestine counterintelligence programs,
documented in Shakur’s memoir and the Freedom Archives docu-
mentary *Cointelpro 101*, devastated black liberation movements.
The long arm of state violence with its international human rights
violations extended furthest into black communities to inflict pain
on bodies organizing for democratic rights and self-defense in
search of the beloved community. In the 1960s, during rebellions
against racism, the FBI’s counterintelligence program led future
Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall to report the activities
of SNCC students as subversive radicals when he worked with the NAACP. FBI agents sent Martin Luther King Jr. anonymous letters suggesting he commit suicide before being exposed as a moral fraud. Through associates and journalists, the FBI influenced Republican integrationist Alex Haley while he edited and posthumously completed *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

We belong to a beloved community that has an extensive police file, and a bottomless bag of dirty tricks historically deployed by the state to foster black suffering reserved especially for it. That bag encompasses whatever enables black suffering to serve others. Centuries old machinations reinvent themselves. The three-fifths clause in the U.S. Constitution, without racial referent, gave southern presidential candidates greater electability as their slaves garnered electoral votes: Sally Hemings “voted” for Thomas Jefferson, as did her children by him, allowing the author of the virulently racist *Notes on the State of Virginia*, to defeat his presidential rival John Adams in 1800.

Following the Civil War, the Thirteenth Amendment “rectified” the three-fifths clause by legalizing slavery for those duly convicted of a crime, which in the postbellum era included blacks seeking economic or political equality. The convict prison lease system was not only the source of massive suffering and premature and violent death for captive blacks after Reconstruction; it was also a vehicle for the transference of black wealth to whites.

Today, the shipping of black and brown bodies from New York City into Upstate New York prisons increases census numbers and federal resources for largely white conservative congressional districts while diminishing federal dollars and votes for black/brown urban districts: prisoners are counted where their jail cells are, although they cannot vote. Current political mandates (most incarceration stems from nonviolent drug offenses) have led to the majority of the 2 million imprisoned being black and Latino while the majority of illicit drug consumers are white. The presence of political prisoners in the United States, such as Jalil Muntaqim, Sundiata Acoli, Mumia Abu-Jamal, and Mutulu Shakur, is rarely discussed.¹ Political prisoners cannot be easily interwoven into our everyday history, particularly for those who trace their lineage of antiracist struggle only to King. Most political prisoners were and are not pacifists. They will not be mainstreamed and sanitized as icons for national holidays. Their belief in self-defense is more
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tied to chaos than organized, structured community. The question is what is our relationship to them, political violence, and their quest for freedom not just for themselves but also for the beloved community.

**Conclusion: “It Doesn’t Really Matter What Happens Now”**

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over.

—Martin Luther King Jr.

The demise of individual or collective humanity leads us to mourn what we never accomplished, either as individual or community. Regret over loss of time, ability, and will to forge a memorable life is a form of suffering. This is particularly true, if one mourns a life that sought to forgive all failings, one’s own and those of one’s oppressors, but still demanded justice.

We know that suffering unfolds or folds in on itself even if no one immediately talks; yet we still lack a shared, common language for political violence. Death and mourning are universal human traits. Black suffering and black resistance are part of the human condition conditioned by white supremacy, imperialism and capitalism, homophobia, patriarchy, female, and child sufferings. We share universality with the particularities of black suffering that suggest that this wilderness experience has lasted too long.

King did not live long enough to wander in retirement. At thirty-nine, he was still young by Western standards. At Memphis gatherings where King spoke, thousands came; police arrested hundreds, injured scores, and shot and killed sixteen-year-old Larry Payne. King’s last speech in Memphis foretold his premature, violent demise. There were constant reminders of longevity’s elusiveness. King recalls them in his “I’ve been to the mountaintop” sermon: the mentally disturbed black woman who stabbed him at a book signing in New York City, and the letter from the little white girl who wrote King that she was so glad that he did not sneeze and rupture his aorta; the firebombing of homes; the constant death
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threats. Later, the coup de grace: the sniper’s shot awaited him at the motel balcony in Memphis.

We are not surprised. Death stalks us as a political reality. Striking sanitation workers mobilized when inclement February weather, and Jim Crow laws banning blacks from the city’s “white only” shelter, forced several men to climb into the back of a garbage truck to escape the rains. The accidental starting of crushing machinery birthed a Memphis militancy unseen since Ida B. Wells confronted the lynchings of her law abiding fictive kin.

Memphis was King’s last service to and in search of the beloved community. The challenging promise he leaves us with, in addition to his confidence that we will make the climb, is how we will care for, defend ourselves, and reconcile communities to political imprisonment as part of the journey.

Notes

1. In December 2010, New York Governor David Patterson offered clemency, parole in his last days in office much as President Bill Clinton had a decade earlier. Patterson, New York’s first black governor, did parole or pardon several Latinos with immigration and criminal violations, and one black man, John White, who had shot and killed a white seventeen-year-old, Daniel Cicciaro, in August 2006.

Cicciaro with other white male youths appeared on White’s Long Island suburban lawn late on August 9, threatening harm to his family, particularly his teenage son who had been falsely accused of harassing a white female youth by text at a party. Racial epithets, white threats of killing black bodies, allegedly sparked memories John White held of the lynching of a male relative in the South; after testifying that the old family gun he brought outside to protect his wife and son accidentally went off killing Cicciaro, he was convicted of involuntary manslaughter. (Patterson later stated that he regretted not informing the Cicciaro family before the pardon.) Activists had petitioned the governor to pardon former members of the Black Panthers and Black Liberation Army who had been incarcerated for decades for the deaths of white police or guards during a robbery to finance their underground liberation movement. There was no language of black suffering as an acceptable political phenomenon that would merit recognition.

2. The strike ended when the widow Coretta Scott King co-led a march in Memphis; and President Lyndon Johnson forced a settlement to the violations of black workers.
American Prison Notebooks

Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison.

—Henry David Thoreau

It is the action, not the fruit of the action, that’s important. You have to do the right thing. It may not be in your time that there will be any fruit, but that doesn’t mean you stop doing the right thing. You may never know what results come from your action. But if you do nothing, there will be no result.

—Mahatma Mohandas Gandhi

American “Prison Notebooks”

Antonio Gramsci, while imprisoned in Mussolini’s Italy for his political beliefs and socialist activism, wrote in his Prison Notebooks that, “Every social group . . . creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields.” For Gramsci, because everyone thinks critically and philosophically, everyone is an intellectual; but not everyone officially functions as such in society.1

In a stratified culture, one may superficially assume that only professional intellectuals, recognized writers and pundits in the public realm, academics, and policy makers constitute an intellectual formation. However, every group has an “organic” intellectual

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caste, one that functions as a vehicle to articulate, shape, and

Hence, the “public intellectual” encompasses the oft-forgotten

“prison intellectual.” That is, the imprisoned intellectual is a public

intellectual who, like his or her highly visible and celebrated
counterparts, reflects on social meaning, discord, development,

ethics, and justice. Prisons function as intellectual and political

sites unauthorized by the state. Yet, when and where the imprisoned

intellectual gives voice to the incarcerated or captive, those denied

social justice and full democratic power on both sides of the

concertina wire, then and there our stories of war and love shaping

visions of freedom and fulfillment take on a new life—often a quite

disturbing one.

Editing writings by imprisoned intellectuals, political prisoners

in the contemporary United States, reveals the impossibilities of

filtering language in harrying and prophetic narratives. One cannot

bring some definitive “academic” meaning to this collection, a

gathering of words in resistance, words written by revolutionaries

captured and detained—for days or years, decades or life—by

the leviathan against which they rebelled. This is the leviathan to

which most readers of this volume pledge their allegiance in some

fashion or another—tithing to domestic and foreign policies that

increase military and police powers, and concentrations of wealth

and poverty. The rebels went to prison; and, passing through or

surviving incarceration, they wrote as outlaw intellectuals with

unique and controversial insights into idealism, warfare, and social

justice.

When writing is a painful endeavor, marked by political struggle

and despair as well as determination and courage, it is potentially

transformative. Reading may also share (in an attenuated fashion)

the impetus and ethos of the writing. Yet it will not necessarily

compel the reader to moral and political acts. Author and academic

Barbara Harlow cautions, “Reading prison writing must . . . demand

a correspondingly activist counterapproach to that of passivity,

aesthetic gratification, and the pleasures of consumption that are

traditionally sanctioned by the academic disciplining of literature.”

An “activist counterapproach” to the consumptive indifference is

infrequent, but it does occur. If the circulation of rarely referenced

or vilified “resistance literature” reflects the growing public interest

in incarceration sites, intellectual and political dissent for social
justice, and the possibilities of democratic transformations, then
collections such as this should spark new debates about “reading”
and activism and political theory.

Reading and editing, from the bipolar lens of academic and
radical intellectual, I see that the purpose of this work was to foster
or force an encounter between those in the so-called free world
seeking personal and collective freedoms and those in captivity
seeking liberation from economic, military, racial/sexual systems.
Like all good and necessary encounters, this one between writers
and readers is provocative and elicits more questions than can be
answered within the confines of a book—even an anthology of
critique, confrontation, and radical risk-taking.

Debates, Disobedience, and Dissent

Amid the debates about “political prisoners” in the United States,
one can distinguish between those engaged in civil disobedience
who identify as “loyal opposition”—and by their very dissent
the institutions of American democracy—and those so alienated
by state violence and government betrayals of humanitarian and
democratic ideals that their dissent chronicles their disaffection at
times insurrection.³ Such insurrection may also at times become
(proto)revolutionary.⁴

“Law-abiding dissent” represents a political risk taking with
broader social acceptance. This is largely due to its adherence to
principles of nonviolent civil disobedience, widely shared moral
values, and, sometimes, proximity to the very “corridors of (institu-
tional) power” closed to the disenfranchised; such adherence spares
dissenters the harshest of sentences. Although not emphasized
in this volume, the narratives of influential political detainees
offer important insights. For example, after being imprisoned for
engaging in civil disobedience to protest U.S. military bombing
practices on Vieques Island, Puerto Rico, Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

wrote:

I arrived at my difficult decision to join the invasion of Vieques
only after I was convinced that its people had exhausted every
legal and political avenue to secure their rights. In my 18 years as
a lawyer and environmental advocate for the Natural Resources
Defense Council and the Riverkeeper movement, I had never
engaged in an act of civil disobedience. As an attorney, I have
a duty to uphold the law. But I also had a countervailing duty
in this case. The bombardment of Vieques is bad military policy
and disastrous for public health and the environment. But the
most toxic residue of the Navy’s history on Vieques is its impact
on our democracy. The people I met there are United States
citizens, but the Navy’s abusive exercise of power on the island
has left them demoralized, alienated and feeling that they are
neither part of a democracy nor the beneficiaries of the American
system of justice.  

Kennedy narrates that upon returning for trial, he encountered
Rev. Jesse Jackson, who was in Puerto Rico to support his wife,
Jacqueline, while she served a ten-day jail sentence for protesting
against military violations. Upon informing the civil rights leader
of Kennedy’s expectant wife Mary’s insistence that her husband not
take a deal to delay his sentencing, Kennedy recalls that Jackson
responded, “Suffering is often the most powerful tool against
injustice and oppression. If Jesus had plea-bargained the crucifixion,
we wouldn’t have the faith.”

Unlike Kennedy, Jesse Jackson is a veteran of civil rights protest
and civil disobedience. Leading demonstrations against domestic
infractions such as “driving while black/brown” or “voting while
black/brown,” the former aide to Martin Luther King Jr. has for
decades vocally criticized U.S. foreign policy and vocally supported
Palestinian self-determination and the abolition of apartheid states.
In the 1980s in solidarity with Nelson Mandela and other South
African political prisoners, Jackson encouraged U.S. citizens to
trespass at the offices of South African government agencies.
This civil disobedience, often by middle-class Americans, usually
resulted in several hours of detention in city jails, and became seen
as a “badge of honor” or rite of (political) passage. Such short-term
(symbolic?) jailings prompt several observations. First, it is likely
that it is not political incarceration per se that is stigmatized but
incarceration based on a refusal to suffer violence without resorting
to armed self-defense; the choice of the latter surely leads to
one’s “disappearance” from conventional society and “respectable”
politics. Second, even nonviolent conscientious objectors (COs)
during World War II—who sought to “redeem” themselves as
patriots by risking their lives as human guinea pigs in U.S. military
medical experiments—and religious pacifists in the civil rights and antiwar movements that followed were disavowed once designated as “unpatriotic.”

Consider that despite his adherence to Christian faith and Gandhian principles of nonviolent civil disobedience, Martin Luther King Jr. lost considerable support and organizational funding from both white and black liberals after he publicly criticized imperialism (and capitalism) and the U.S. war against Vietnam. What is largely condemned in American political culture is not the risk taking that leads to incarceration but the radicalism that rejects the validity of the nation-state itself and the legitimacy of its legal and moral standing. How does one reconcile the proximity and distance between the law-abiding loyalist and the pacifist or militarist radical who appear in the same courts, often using similar legal arguments, but with very different political intentions and consequences seem to stand a world apart in their dissent?

Diverse worlds or parallel universes hover about this volume. Contributors disagree about strategy and morality ("nonviolence or violence") and politics ("loyal or revolutionary"). Toward a work such as this, one intended to raise queries, eyebrows, and passions, there appear many questions and debates—particularly for those informed about and disaffected by the criminalization of dissidents amid state criminality and abuse of (police and war) powers. Many debates seem to center on the question of what constitutes shared community, one in struggle for commonly held ideals of justice, individual freedom, collective liberation, and material well-being in civil society marked by growing state control.

Radical philosophers have argued that street and prison gangs are forms of “civil society” conditioned by the state and government apparatuses’ manipulation of the drug trade, control of territory, and deployment of police repression. Philosopher Michael Hames-Garcia raises cogent questions about the relationships between the incarcerated and those in the “free world,” asking, “how might one situate the specifically intellectual activity of organic prison intellectuals in relation to the state? To what kind of ‘civil society’ or ‘counterpublic’ are prison intellectuals directing their writings and how is this audience [readership] positioned in relationship to the state?”

State conditioning is not the only force destabilizing progressive politics. The prison movement has grown immensely over the last
decades. Yet, it still has its own internal demons to fight concerning coalitions and efficacy. Activists as “official representatives” can invoke the political prisoner-as-icon in order to derail external and internal criticisms of their strategies, and wield surrogate iconic powers in an uncritical fashion. This raises the question of whether the imprisoned—as political “dependents” relying on those outside to garner support—might engage in self-censorship concerning the limitations of their allies. Such “self-censorship” and self-conditioning work both ways. The privileged academic might hesitate to criticize a progressive “folk hero” sentenced to life or death in prison, although, in a culture that widely disparages prisoners, the repercussions of academic criticisms seem to be fairly limited. This suggests additional queries about the nature of “parity” between political prisoners and their political allies: In theory and practice, the imprisoned intellectual can be ideologically “frozen” in or physically “freed” by the work of nonincarcerated academics and activists.

Scholar Dylan Rodríguez questions whether, given the constraints, an imprisoned intellectual can truly become a “public intellectual.” Arguing that while in prison such writers are “disabled from meaningful participation in the interpretation and translation of their works,” Rodríguez references “radical/revolutionary intellectuals whose praxis is in irreconcilable opposition to the very historical and political logic of the ‘public’ (civil society) as it exists for the endorsement of their virtual (and biological) death.” I both agree and disagree with this assessment. True, the general or mainstream public constitutes a mostly hostile or indifferent readership and respondent. Yet, there are multiple “publics” and varied “civil societies”; the “public sphere” is shaped, to varying degrees, by whoever enter as engagees. The intent of imprisoned intellectuals to influence “the public” in its multiple formations is a complicated proposition but a real endeavor. No monolithic “radical political prisoner” exists. Despite shared antiracist and anti-imperialist politics, U.S. political prisoners differ in identity, ideology, and strategy. Rodríguez, though, makes an essential point about how imprisoned intellectuals are “read”: “[T]here is rather widespread, normalized disavowal of the political and theoretical substance generated by imprisoned radical intellectuals.”

This “abolitionist” assertion is further complicated if we consider how contemporary racism and penal captivity likely evolved from
within a historical colonial-settler state built on, and enriched by, anti-Indigenous genocide and African enslavement. Some contributors to this volume argue in their respective chapters that there is a “normalized disavowal” of the presence of (radical or independent) blacks or Indians in conventional “civil society.” Hence, they call for some form(s) of independence or autonomy from what they view as an enveloping and destructive formation (what some have called an “empire”). The racially marked political prisoner tends to be most forgotten, and to serve the longest sentences. Some of the longest sentences and most violent punishments have been meted out to African and Native Americans in the Black Panther Party or American Indian Movement and their allies, and Puerto Rican Independentistas. To rationalize the sentences and punishments by pointing to the advocacy or use of armed struggle or armed self-defense by some of the incarcerated ignores the fact that a number of those slain or incarcerated (for decades) were innocent of charges. Their innocence is attested to as in the cases of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, who were slain, and Dhoruba Bin Wahad and Geronimo ji Jaga (Pratt), who were finally released in the 1990s, by the multimillion-dollar settlements paid out by the U.S. government, ostensibly for wrongful deaths and incarcerations.

It is assumed that some readers of this volume will be critical of the “prison industrial complex,” and so, to varying degrees, self-identify as “abolitionists.” The most militant wing of the twenty-first-century abolitionist movement will likely be that antiracist minority who argues that the abolition of the death penalty, and of (human rights abuses in) prisons and Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) detention centers, and of the widespread racial bias in sentencing, merely addresses the symptoms of a pervasive disease. Revolutionary abolitionists offer their own readings, drawing from insights from contemporary battles and historical lessons (following the Civil War, Congress abolished slavery to sanction the convict prison lease system and sharecropping, new forms of legal servitude to be endured and fought by African Americans for 100 years).

In the wake of the New York Police Department’s brutality against people of African descent—viscerally recorded in the 1997 beating-rape of Abner Louima, and the 1999 firing of forty-one shots at Amadou Diallo—theorist Frank Wilderson III, writes:
If we are to follow Frantz Fanon’s analysis [in The Wretched of the Earth], and the gestures toward this understanding in some of the work of imprisoned intellectuals, then we have to come to grips with the fact that, for Black people, civil society itself—rather than its abuses or shortcomings—is a state of emergency. . . . In “The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy,” [Steve] Martinot and [Jared] Sexton assert the primacy of Fanon’s Manichean zones (without the promise of higher unity) even in the face of American integration. . . . [T]his Manichean delirium manifests itself by way of the U.S. paradigm of policing which (re)produces, repetitively, the inside/outside, the civil society/black world, by virtue of the difference between those bodies that don’t magnetize bullets and those bodies that do. “Police impunity serves to distinguish between . . . those whose human being is put permanently in question and those for whom it goes without saying” (Martinot and Sexton, 8). . . . Whiteness then, and by extension civil society . . . must be first understood as a social formation of contemporaries who do not magnetize bullets.10

Whether pacifist or militarist, responding to violence and racism in domestic or foreign policy, these works will remain suspect and heatedly debated by many in the public realm. Fine. Our goal here was to ensure that they not remain largely overlooked or erased. Paradoxically, those most passionately seeking collective liberation—from racial or economic or military dominance—are those most likely to lose their individual freedoms. The captive/free dichotomy is a paradox rich in irony: imprisoned intellectuals, the most intensely monitored and repressed by the state’s police apparatus, might in fact be those most free of state conditioning. Existing not merely as the output of “victims” of state responses to radical opposition, the analyses of imprisoned intellectuals both deconstruct dominant ideologies and reconstruct new strategies for humanity. Their writings proffer reactive and proactive readings of struggle and freedom.

So the questions and answers continue. How do you make the “disappeared” (the captive rebel, the impoverished, the racialized, the addicted, the “queer”) reappear? When is a democracy not a democracy? Have slavery, surrogate forms of captivity, and social death11 been reinstated through the Thirteenth Amendment?12 To what degree does self-critique in liberation movements prevent
radical responses to state and racial violence from becoming self-inflicted wounds? This collection raises and addresses queries and explores the implications of responses.

Tracing a Historical Trajectory

The United States has a long and terrible history of confinement and disappearance of those it racially and politically targets. Include those captives in slavery and on reservations, and it becomes a longer narrative of torture and resistance. W. E. B. Du Bois notes in *Black Reconstruction in America* how over 200,000 African Americans served in combat during the Civil War. Their ancestral line included Denmark Vessey, Nat Turner, and Harriet Tubman and their political lineage, John Brown. With the rise of lynching after the aborted Reconstruction era, investigative journalist Ida B. Wells, armed with a pistol, vigorously organized against racial terror in which as many as 10,000 whites attended “parties” that toasted and dismembered black victims. There has always been resistance. The colonized, subaltern, and subjugated have continuously fought genocide and social death, and in battle called on progenitors for guidance, and, in failure, for forgiveness.

Contemporary incarcerated writers and political theorists are no different. Housed in San Quentin, Vietnamese activist and author Mike Ngo writes of prisoners’ forced complicity with authorities and his own shame in participating in the disciplinary machinery, alleviated when he finds comfort in conversation with slain prison writer, revolutionary strategist-turned-icon, George Jackson. For Ngo, if it does not destroy, imprisonment teaches power and political theorizing that emanate from intimacy with death: social, physical, sexual, emotional. Intimacy with death, whether one’s own or those prematurely engineered by the voracious appetites of expanding military-corporate power, is written all throughout the following pages: death in resistance to the Klan; death through assassination; death in battles with the police; death in opposition to U.S. military incursions and interventions; death execution chambers; death on street comers; and death to the very concept of blind civic obedience and patriotic fervor. This intimacy is accompanied by death’s companion, life, and, if not the inevitability of political and military victory for the rebels (who, in the phrase of Black Panther Party [BPP] cofounder Huey P. Newton, seemed
to court “revolutionary suicide”), the possibility of liberation and freedom, and the certainty of striving for it.

The endemic flight from death in American culture (via its fetishism of youth, technology, and immortality tied to materiality and science) indicates a marathon of avoidance politics and censorship. The disappearance of the incarcerated and the inhumane punishment for rebels suggest that intimacy with the imprisoned, particularly political prisoners, will be embraced and known by only a few. For many “law-abiding Americans” are (or socially seem) embarrassed by a family member’s incarceration and the realities of political incarceration in their democracy. With some 2.5 million imprisoned or detained by the state, 70 percent of whom are African, Latino, Native, or Asian American, many families could claim this intimacy. Like families in denial, U.S. government officials fervently deny the existence of U.S. political prisoners. State employees do so by defining political militants as “criminals.” Yet, who is the “criminal” whose crime is his or her physical opposition to state criminality (as determined by UN conventions, human rights law, and non-apartheid-based morality)—crimes against humanity in warfare and profiteering, crimes against the poor, against the racially subordinate, crimes against children, against women? To address the issue of incarcerated intellectuals, one would have to examine the reasons for their incarceration; examine not just the acts of which they were accused and convicted (at times with court malfeasance), but their commitments. Perhaps discussions of political incarceration in the United States fail to register in conventional speech and education because of political ignorance and a moral reluctance to attain intimacy with life-and-death confrontations.

The volume, largely by writers incarcerated because of their legal or illegal, pacifist or violent resistance to repression, constantly references antiracism. African Americans constitute the greatest percentage not only of those incarcerated for crimes against private property, drug violations, and social violence, but also of those incarcerated for political acts (including armed struggle) in opposition to repression. As the largest contingent of (social and) political prisoners, African Americans tend to draw the longest sentences with fewer possibilities for clemency or parole. There is a specificity and temerity about black liberation struggles that relate to and infuse political prisoners in the United States. From
enslaved insurrectionists to their multiethnic progeny, antiracism defines but does not dominate this collection. There remains the question(s) of gender, community, culture, art, spirituality. I read the connection of white anti-imperialists and peace activists, Puerto Rican Independentistas, and Native American resistors through the black gaze. Hence, there are two sections to the volume, the first on black liberation, the second on internationalism and anti-imperialism. The importance of various struggles is not reduced to but is framed by the context of racial dynamics of state repression. Such a context raises another series of questions that also have no easy answers, ones that, hopefully, will be pursued in continuous, painstaking dialogue: How and why do repressive conditions create a certain brand of intellectualism? What roles do the voices of incarcerated intellectuals play in moral and political thought and action, and social consciousness? What makes someone a political prisoner?

The last question, being the “easiest” to answer, reveals the varied debates waged among those who acknowledge the existence of political prisoners in the United States.

Political Prisoners

There is a continuum of debate on who or what constitutes a political prisoner. The debate wages among prisoners and the nonincarcerated. A political prisoner can be someone who was put in prison for nonpolitical reasons but who became politicized in his or her thought and action while incarcerated. Incarceration is inherently political, but ideology plays a role. If everyone is a political prisoner then no one is. Although the meaning of who is a political prisoner appears to be expanding to include more structural critiques of the state at large, I reserve the use of (a somewhat awkward term) political-econ prisoners for those convicted of social crimes tied to property and drug-related crimes and whose disproportionate sentencing to prison rather than rehabilitation or community service is shaped by the political economy of racial and economic privilege and disenfranchisement. As a caste, political-econ prisoners can and do develop and refine their political critiques while incarcerated. (For example, of the contributors, Malcolm X, George Jackson, and Standing Deer were incarcerated for social crimes against property or people,
and politicized as radicals within the penal site; also, paradoxically, youths who renounced their gang memberships and social crime, in order to bring about social change through the Black Panther Party, would find themselves later targeted and imprisoned for their political affiliations.) Those whose thoughts of social justice lead to commitments and acts in political confrontation with oppression acquire the standing of political prisoners. For those who (continue to) prey on others in physical and sexual assaults on children, women, and men, “political prisoners” would be an obscene register; for they do not manifest as liberatory agents but exist as merely one of many sources of danger to be confronted and quelled in a violent culture.

Victimization by a dominant culture and aggrandizing state is not sufficient to qualify one as a “political prisoner.” Although the strategies vary concerning violence in resistance politics, if agency and morality are prerequisites shaping the political being, then we speak of a fragment of the incarcerated population, just as we would speak of a fragment of the nonincarcerated population. Here, our discussion centers on revolutionary and radical activists who also constitute intellectual formations influencing political contemporary culture. Some progressives assert that to construct an entity called “political prisoners” creates a dichotomy between a select group and the vast majority of prisoners, and thus in fact promotes a new form of elitism—the iconic prisoner. Yet, these men and women are different. They were different before their incarceration, marked by their critical thinking and confrontations with authoritarian structures and policies and violence. Also, they were and are treated differently by the state, often receiving the harshest of sentences, relegated to solitary confinement or “lockdown” in control units so that they cannot “infect”—really infuse—other prisoners with their radical politics and aspirations for freedom.

Mondo we Langa (David Rice), incarcerated in Nebraska prisons for decades for a crime that he states he did not commit, one for which his attorneys argue that there is no physical evidence implicating him, writes in “Letter from the Inside”:

I know what I mean by “political prisoner”: someone who, in the context of U.S. laws and court system, has been falsely tried and convicted of a criminal offense as a means of ending his or
her political activities and making an example of the person for others who are espousing, or might espouse, ideas that those in power would find offensive. By this definition, I might be the only political prisoner in this joint. But in a broader sense, most people behind bars could be considered “political prisoners,” inasmuch as the process of lawmaking, law-enforcing, and the criminal “justice” system are all driven by a political apparatus that is anti-people of color and anti-people of little economic means. At the same time though, many, if not most of the people who are locked up have acted in the interests of the very system that oppresses them and victimized people who, like themselves, are oppressed. 

Attorneys Michael E. Deutsch and Jan Susler describe in “Political Prisoners in the United States: The Hidden Reality” (1990) three types of political prisoners. For Deutsch and Susler, U.S. political prisoners are

1. Foreign nationals whose political status or political activities against allies of U.S. imperialism (e.g., Israel, Great Britain, El Salvador) result in detention or imprisonment;
2. Members of U.S. oppressed nationalities (African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Chicano/Mexicanos, and Native Americans) who are prosecuted and imprisoned for political activities in furtherance of their [liberation] movements. . . . Included in these groups are anticolonial combatants or prisoners of war (POWs)—members of national liberation movements who as part of clandestine organizations have employed armed struggle as a means to achieve self-determination and independence for their nation and upon capture have the right, under the Additional Protocols of the Geneva Convention and the UN General Assembly Resolutions, to POW status and not to be tried as domestic criminals; and
3. White people who have acted in solidarity with the liberation movements of oppressed nationalities or against U.S. foreign or domestic policies. 

Deutsch and Susler offer a useful categorization of political prisoners; however, the first category could be expanded to include nonresident or immigrant detainees awaiting deportation. Following
September 11, 2001, the sweeps of noncitizens legally organizing for workers’ rights in Florida, mostly young people of South Asian origin, construct a new category—that of political prisoner awaiting deportation. Although the United States has a history of deporting militants—Emma Goldman, Marcus Garvey, Claudia Jones, C. L. R. James—there appears to be a schism in alignment with “foreign” political prisoners housed in the United States and awaiting deportation and U.S. citizens who are political prisoners in other countries, as exemplified by the case of Lori Berenson (now on parole in Peru). In radical politics around incarceration and the “prison-industrial-complex” most of the strategies regarding political prisoners have focused on the release campaigns of those incarcerated for decades, and rightly so. However, preventive measures and strategies to counter the increasing ability of the government to “disappear” political prisoners (as was the case following September 11, when Attorney General Ashcroft held Sundiata Acoli, Philip Berrigan [who died of cancer in December 2002], Marilyn Buck, as well as other political prisoners, incomunicado) do not appear clearly defined by advocates of prisoners’ rights.

In its 2002 letter to Governor George Pataki and the New York State Parole Board, the New York Task Force on Political Prisoners states that in Europe, Africa, and the United States, “prisoners long incarcerated for their political beliefs and actions have been set free—and in their freedom, have given the world back some hope and dignity. The release, for example, of Nelson Mandela, who spent twenty-seven years in prison for revolutionary actions against [the apartheid government] . . . has proved a catalyst for healing and justice in South Africa.”

Signatories, attorneys who work pro bono for the release campaign for political prisoners attest:

These prisoners’ convictions reflect as yet unresolved issues of civil, racial, and economic justice of the 1960s and 1970s, a time when thousands of people of all races, young and old, women and men, formed militant movements to demand fundamental social change. Their trials occurred during a time when their juries and the general public did not know that, in response to these movements, the government was engaging in illegal and unconstitutional acts—acts of infiltration and surveillance which,
according to the government’s own documents, carried over into the legal arena. Foremost in the government’s campaign was the FBI’s now-infamous Counter-intelligence Program [Cointelpro], condemned by a 1975 United States Senate Committee which became known as the “Church Committee” [named after Senator Frank Church (D-Idaho), the committee’s proceedings were published in 1976].

The legal challenges brought by the prisoners referenced in this letter have been denied, primarily due to the 1996 federal law drastically limiting prisoners’ access to *habeas corpus*. Heartbreakingly for their families and communities, some of these prisoners have repeatedly been denied parole because of their political views or offenses despite the fact that they more than meet current parole standards. . . . Some of the actions for which these men were convicted were taken in response to severe social repression and government misconduct. Some convictions, for example, arose directly from the targeting of activists by Cointelpro. Others sought to defend themselves and their communities from police violence [or drug dealers]. All of them devoted their hearts, their minds, and their lives to working for a world of justice, peace and human equality. Whatever one’s opinion of their political beliefs or alleged actions, not one of these men was motivated by personal gain. All have served enough time and all would be a credit to their communities if released.

The imprisonment of those seeking social and political change in the United States is as old as its elite-based democracy rooted in slavery, anti-Indian genocidal wars, and “manifest destiny.” Yet the attempts to bring the voices of imprisoned intellectuals to the general society and petition for their release remain a constant (re)invention of strategic interventions, using the language of “rehabilitation” commingled with the language of rebellious resistance.

**Anthologizing Imprisoned Intellectuals**

Prisons constitute one of the most controversial and contested sites in a democratic society. The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the industrialized world, with over 2 million people in jails, prisons, and detention centers; with over 3,000
on death row, it is also one of the few developed countries that continues to deploy the death penalty. Examining intellectuals whose analyses of U.S. society, politics, culture, and social justice are rarely referenced in conventional political speech or academic discourse, *Imprisoned Intellectuals* takes shape along the contours of a body of outlawed “public intellectuals” offering incisive critiques of our society and shared (in)humanity.24

*Imprisoned Intellectuals* begins with European anarchist Emma Goldman’s “A New Declaration of Independence” as a contrast to calls for “patriotism” as unquestioning obedience to the state. The collection ends with the poem “Incommunicado” by Marilyn Buck, written after September 11, 2001, during and following her weeks in detention in solitary confinement without access to attorneys or family on the orders of Attorney General John Ashcroft.25 Buck, imprisoned in the 1980s for her work with the militant sectors of the black liberation movement, of course, has no actual or ideological connections with reactionary al-Qaeda forces. Yet, the foreign war on terrorism provided an excellent opportunity for expanding repressive measures in the United States.

Confrontations combating state censorship of dissent and critical voices reached their apex in the mass movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s. In the postenslavement era of the mid-twentieth century, the Civil Rights Movements, referred to by some activists and academics as the “second Reconstruction” and by their more radical counterparts as the “second civil war,” brought the new wave of protests and dissent. Arrested while organizing a bus boycott, Rosa Parks became briefly a political detainee. The young man whom she and the organizers of the bus boycott chose as their titular leader, largely because of his status as formally educated clergy and middle-class, was the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. His missive opens the first section of the collection of writings by imprisoned intellectuals.

“Letter from Birmingham Jail” was written the same year as the 1963 March on Washington, where King gave his famous “I Have a Dream” speech-sermon; the same year that the Ku Klux Klan bombed a Birmingham, Alabama church, killing four African American girls—Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair—and the year of John F. Kennedy’s assassination in Dallas, Texas.26 In his open letter to clergy, King set forth an eloquent plea for support of an antiracist movement in which he had been active since
The anthology juxtaposes with King his peer and symbolic nemesis, Malik El-Shabazz, or Malcolm X. In “The Ballot or the Bullet” (abridged), Malcolm X offers a critique of King’s nonviolent activism. Although Malcolm X was not a “political prisoner” in the restrictive sense in which we use the term in this work, incarcerated as Malcolm Little for social crimes (including the “crimes” of burglary and of consorting with white women), he transformed or “reinvented” himself as a political agent while imprisoned. Politicized through his association (and later confrontation) with the Nation of Islam and his pilgrimage to Mecca, he influenced the growing militancy of the Civil Rights Movement. Through his life, speeches, and writings—most notably, The Autobiography of Malcolm X—he achieved an iconic stature for many, including (political) prisoners. Constant police and FBI surveillance after he served his prison sentence likely increased his radical political and moral presence and inspired activists who would eventually become incarcerated, and in reflecting on his life, spirit, and death struggle to “reinvent” themselves as political agents, formulating a liberation praxis “by any means necessary.” One year after Malcolm X’s assassination, the Black Panther Party (for Self-Defense) was founded in 1966 in Oakland, California, by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale; armed resistance to police brutality became the most noted and “inflammatory” position of their emancipatory “10-Point Platform.”

Angela Y. Davis would work with the Panthers but become better known as a communist and leader in the Soledad Brothers Defense Committee, a prisoners’ rights organization cofounded by imprisoned Black Panther Field Marshall George Jackson. Davis was incarcerated in the early 1970s on charges related to George Jackson’s younger brother Jonathan’s attempt, using weapons registered in Davis’s name, to liberate African American prisoners from the Marin County Courthouse, a failed endeavor that Newton would describe later at the seventeen-year-old’s funeral as “revolutionary suicide.”

One year before her 1972 acquittal of all charges, Davis wrote from her prison cell “Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation”; this essay would appear in the volume she coedited with Bettina Aptheker, If They Come in the Morning. Also in that anthology, which has been out of print for some time, was first published writings by Huey P. Newton and George Jackson. In “Prison, Where Is Thy Victory?” Newton distinguishes between types or classes of
prisoners, reserving his highest consideration for the imprisoned who rebel against rather than acquiesce to domination and (racial) control. In “Towards the United Front,” George Jackson, self-identified militarist for liberation and a key theorist and proponent of armed struggle, argues for a multiracial formation, new relations of unity that transcend common divisions. The Black Panthers became the most confrontational of the antiracist radical groups of the late 1960s and early 1970s (following the disintegration of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee [SNCC]). Among the black militant formations, the Panthers developed some of the strongest allegiances with other racialized peoples, and the strongest ties with white radicals and revolutionaries.

The Panthers would also become the lightning rod for some of the government’s most horrific forms of violent repression used against dissidents in the post–World War II era. Former Panther Dhoruba Bin Wahad describes the deadly counterinsurgency program, Cointelpro, initiated by J. Edgar Hoover and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Decades before the BPP emerged, the FBI had destabilized progressives with violent means; but its violence would operate with virtually no restraint until the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement (AIM) were destroyed. “COINTELPRO and the Destruction of Black Leaders and Organizations” (abridged) presents the scenario in which state violence against the Black Panther Party and its membership had become routine. Bin Wahad argues that any revolutionary movement coincides with a cultural movement, but a cultural movement will not empower its people unless it is politicized. Cointelpro succeeded because it halted the political consciousness of the Black Panther Party that coincided with the cultural awareness of “Black Power.” Through violence, manipulation of the media, and disinformation campaigns, the FBI engaged in a twofold attack on the dissemination of information by black revolutionaries, destabilizing the public support base of the movement and then removing its leaders from public discourse through imprisonment, exile, or death.

State malfeasance and criminality in which the FBI participated included anonymous letters to Martin Luther King Jr. urging that he commit suicide before his marital infidelities were publicized; the extrajudicial killings or assassinations of Chicago Panther leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in December 1969; and the many killings during 1973–1976 of indigenous activists at the Pine Ridge
reservation who aligned themselves with AIM. Such state violence provides a context and background for the excerpted “On the Black Liberation Army” (BLA) by Jalil Muntaqim. Muntaqim offers a brief historical snapshot of an underground military formation in battle with U.S. law enforcement, primarily on the East Coast. Although no theoretical justification for armed struggle appears in this succinct account of BLA activities, the historical trajectory of the Cointelpro era of the early 1970s shapes the reasoning. Muntaqim’s view that of a slave insurrectionist, stems from a different template than most, and so it shapes a unique worldview, one gazed on, interacted with, but not fully experienced by the nonrebel or nonslave.

“July 4th Address,” a statement issued by former Black Panther and Black Liberation Army member Assata Shakur while she was in prison and on trial, evokes slave-turned-fugitive then abolitionist Frederick Douglass’s 1852 “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” address. One of the few women leaders of the Black Panther Party (whose leadership was not tied to an influential male partner), Shakur would also become active in the military underground via the Black Liberation Army. Her memoir, Assata: An Autobiography, functions in a manner similar to the memoirs of King, Malcolm X, Davis, Newton, and Jackson: it highlights turbulent and dangerous times and personalizes the struggles and failings of revolutionaries and revolutionaries-in-waiting. For example, Shakur writes in her memoir:

Some of the groups thought they could just pick up arms and struggle and that, somehow, people would see what they were doing and begin to struggle themselves. They wanted to engage in a do-or-die battle with power structure in amerika, even though they were weak and ill prepared for such a fight. But the most important factor is that armed struggle, by itself, can never bring about a revolution. Revolutionary war is a people’s war.78

Unlike Shakur, Safiya Bukhari-Alston has (to date) not written a full-length memoir; yet, like Shakur, she was one of the few women leaders in the Black Liberation Army. Her autobiographical narrative, “Coming of Age: A Black Revolutionary,” describes conditions unique to women political prisoners. A unit leader while underground, Bukhari-Alston encountered sexism in the party (as did Assata Shakur).
Democracy and Captivity

In “An Updated History of the New Afrikan Prison Struggle” (abridged) former Black Panther Sundiata Acoli provides a continuum of African American resistance to captivity and incarceration (the unabridged text places the enslavement era as foundational in this resistance). Acoli presents the Black Liberation Army as a “New Afrikan guerrilla organization” with mobile strike teams. Guerrilla warfare was seen as an inevitable counterresponse to U.S. “low-intensity warfare” against militants and radicals. Some members of the BLA identify as “prisoners of war” or POWs, viewing themselves as captive liberation fighters. The Republic of New Afrika (RNA) stated its independence from the United States in 1968. BLA combatants subsequently declared that the U.S. courts had no jurisdiction over them. Acoli’s historical discussions of “gang” formations in prisons as part of the prison struggles provide insight into their political nature and functions both in and outside of prison.

The idea of resisting all oppressive constraints—whether racism, sexism, heterosexism, or class/corporate privilege—is not uniformly shared in these essays. Women contributors tend to note sexism and heterosexism more so than the men (white women are more vocal about the rights of gays and lesbians than black women are, perhaps because the former are writing at a later date when gay, lesbian, and bisexual rights are more publicly espoused). Although they fought for a more inclusive democracy, centralized, nondemocratic decision making—steeped in either patriarchal politics or a Leninist model of democratic centralism—was routinely practiced by Martin Luther King Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Malcolm X’s Nation of Islam (from which he was expelled in 1963–1964), Angela Davis’s Communist Party USA (CPUSA) (from which she was expelled in 1991), and Huey P. Newton’s faction of the Black Panther Party. A discussion of forgoing vanguard or elite formations and rigid fixations on a line of leadership is found in “Anarchism and the Black Revolution” (abridged), by Lorenzo Komboa Ervin. Ervin, who organized with the BPP among other groups, is highly critical of what he perceives as its “Marxist-Leninist” rigidity and repressive authoritarianism. It is difficult at times to distinguish which Black Panther Party critics are referencing—East Coast or West Coast? Cleaver or Newton faction? Newton prior to or during drug addiction and criminal intrigues? Nonetheless, the
BPP in general (as did political organizations such as the SCLC and CPUSA) embraced a wealth of contradictions that limited the agency and efficacy of its “rank and file.”

What, then, constitutes leadership that can face and function against repressive state policies? Such issues are explored in an essay by journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal, “Intellectuals and the Gallows.” This essay was written while Abu-Jamal was facing a sentence of death. It is one of the few pieces in this anthology that directly confronts readers as nonincarcerated intellectuals, exploring their confines in a Foucauldian carceral that restricts their own resistance to a state that oversees life and death.

“Genocide against the Black Nation in the U.S. Penal System” (abridged) by Mutulu Shakur, Anthony X. Bradshaw, Malik Dinguswa, Terry Long, Mark Cook, Adolfo Matos, and James Haskins focuses on African American emancipation, yet appeals to the international community; and so, it provides a bridge between the two sections of the anthology, emphasizing historical links between African American activism and the interplay of domestic and foreign policies. This essay’s argument follows in a tradition established by African American radicals in the post–World War II era: William Patterson and the Civil Rights Congress in 1951 presented to the United Nations their antilynching petition “We Charge Genocide,” and Malcolm X in the 1960s appealed to the United Nations for redress from lynching and white supremacist policies in the United States.29 “The Struggle for Status Under International Law” by Marilyn Buck, revisits themes raised by “Genocide Against the Black Nation in the U.S. Penal System” in its reflections on the use of international law to address U.S. domestic human rights violations. Situating Buck within the tradition of radical white antiracism and armed resistance, a tradition that dates back to and precedes John Brown’s antislavery militancy, lesbian activist Rita Bo Brown describes the parameters of white activism in the 1970s and 1980s in “White North American Political Prisoners.” Brown provides a comprehensive view that encompasses a number of political formations. “On Trial” (abridged), by former Vietnam veteran Raymond Luc Levasseur, chronicles the militancy of another white anti-imperialist who invokes international law and human rights conventions in antiracist struggles. Levasseur argued in his opening trial statement for the dismissal of criminal charges under International Law; he was acquitted of charges at the conclusion
of his trial. Rejecting the domestic criminal charges brought by
the government, he asserted a morality based on human rights
and freedom fighters criminalized for their oppositional politics.
Maintaining that the U.S. government/corporations committed
crimes against humanity, Levasseur catalogs the acts that led to his
organizational response through the United Freedom Front (UFF)
and Sam Melville/Jonathan Jackson Unit. The series of bombings
against military targets attributed to these formations occurred
a number of years after the bombings attributed to the Weather
Underground, the militant splinter group from the Students for a
Democratic Society (SDS).

“Letter to the Weathermen” is a response by a Christian pacifist
militant, Catholic priest Daniel Berrigan. Berrigan and his brother
Philip, also a Catholic priest involved in activist resistance during
the 1970s and 1980s and beyond, were heavily influenced by Martin
Luther King Jr., and the “peaceful” confrontation of state repres-
son by the Civil Rights Movement. Philip Berrigan would go on
to cofound the Plowshares community where Michele Naar-Obed
would become radicalized and, as a mother and peace activist, write
the pamphlet “Maternal Convictions: A Mother Beats a Missile into
a Plowshare.” In “Maternal Convictions,” Naar-Obed recounts her
growing spiritual and political awareness for peace activism that
entailed civil disobedience and illegal actions, and her multiple
“short-term” incarcerations.

Women have varied responses in their resistance to U.S. milita-
rism and warfare; not all of course are gendered as pacifist. “Dykes
and Fags Want to Know: Interview with Lesbian Political Prisoners”
was conducted in 1990–1991 by QUISP (Queer Women and Men
United in Support of Political Prisoners). This interview focuses on
Linda Evans, Susan Rosenberg, and Laura Whitehorn, women who
spent years incarcerated because of their political beliefs and acts.
Whitehorn completed her sentence and was released in 1999. Evans
and Rosenberg were granted presidential clemency by President Bill
Clinton in 2001. In 1999, Clinton had granted clemency to eleven
of fifteen Puerto Rican Independientes or nationalists who had been
imprisoned for years (included in those receiving clemency was
Elizam Escobar). Clinton’s release of Independientes did not signal
the end of imprisonment for advocates and agitators for freeing
Puerto Rico from its status as a colonial possession of the United
States. In “This Is Enough!” educator José Solís Jordan, incarcerated
in Florida and later placed under detention in Puerto Rico, writes of the historical struggle for Puerto Rican independence and autonomy and his own connections to this struggle.

The essays speak of the nonmaterial, of the spiritual and transcendent, of autonomy from the political formation and from purely political identification and identity. “Art of Liberation: A Vision of Freedom” by artist Elizam Escobar, offers one of the more creative and imaginative discussions of roles, conflicts, and contradictions of the revolutionary who maintains an independence from the struggle itself via his or her connection through art. In “Violence and the State” (abridged), Standing Deer recounts an attempt on the part of prison authorities to get him to assault AIM activist and political prisoner Leonard Peltier. Standing Deer’s “conversion” is both political and spiritual, both rational and suprarational. It provides an introduction to the essay by Leonard Peltier who offers new meanings for freedom and resistance in “Inipi: Sweat Lodge.” Peltier’s excerpt from his autobiography, *Prison Writings: My Life Is My Sundance*, reminds us of the nonmaterial aspects of struggle and the spiritual dimensions of freedom.

**Conclusion**

So much of what is controversial in this collection will center on the issue of violence: the use of violence by the state to squash dissent and destroy dissenters; the use of violence by dissidents either in immediate self-defense, in military strategies for “nation-building,” or to promote a political stance and commitment. Obviously state violence is not synonymous with the violence of the subaltern or oppressed or imprisoned. Most Americans are more familiar (inured to?) state violence, particularly when it is directed against disenfranchised or racially or politically suspect minorities. Therefore, police or military violence against the “racially suspect,” against the poor and immigrants, against prisoners, is not as unsettling as counterviolence against the police or military by the subaltern and incarcerated. Thus, George Jackson’s militarist stance in *Blood in My Eye* is more terrifying for the conventional reader than the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) torture manual for the School of the Americas. Perhaps this is because the conventional reader assumes (knows) that state violence is never earmarked for the obedient and the law-abiding.
No essay in the volume makes a sustained theoretical argument for armed resistance to state violence—although several essays offer theoretical and religious justifications for nonviolent civil disobedience and dissent. The book that heavily influenced many of the activists whose writings appear here is Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon argues that the “native” (the colonized and racialized, here, the imprisoned) does not have to theorize or articulate the truth; she or he is the truth—the breathing, living embodiment of the contradictions, debasement, rage, and resentment and rebellion that mark the very conditions of oppression. Yet the “truth,” or some approximation of it, can be spoken in critical encounters and dialogues with rebels seeking social justice.

The nonincarcerated’s sense of security and our real and imagined distance from political prisoners shape the expanse between the law-abiding (reader) and the outlaw (writer). Yet, what if the issues of political prisoners are in fact the touchstones to what ails us: structural impoverishment, racial-sexual discrimination and violence, political disenfranchisement, war profiteering? In degrees of (imagined) separation, amnesic fatigue about state violence couples with outrage at extralegal challenges to domination. Despite stolid dichotomies, if liberation struggles for human rights—and against war and captivity—intersect, radical imprisoned rebels may in fact stand at Elegba’s crossroads; if so, then the writings in this work illuminate bridges that span or buckle under the intimacies of death and life struggles.

### Notes

1. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare and Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1985), 5. Gramsci writes: “When one distinguishes between intellectuals and non-intellectuals, one is referring in reality only to the immediate social function of the professional category of the intellectuals . . . although one can speak of intellectuals, one cannot speak of non-intellectuals, because non-intellectuals do not exist” (9).


American Prison Notebooks


4. In its desires for freedoms guarded by institutions, revolutionary politics encompass and surpass insurrectionary politics. Rather than merely revolt against repressive hierarchies, laws, and customs, revolutionary politics seeks to build new structures and norms. Hence, revolutionaries are more feared than are insulationists by governing structures and elites. Just as insurrection is not inherently revolutionary, neither is crime or violence intrinsically protorevolutionary: consider that capitalism in the Americas is rooted in the theft of land and labor and the mass murder of indigenous and African peoples.

5. Page 80. The nephew of President John F. Kennedy and son of Senator Robert Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a senior attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, engaged in civil disobedience at Vieques, Puerto Rico, in 2001. Joined by actor Edward James Olmos and union leader Dennis Rivera, Kennedy protested the Navy having "saturated Vieques with thousands of pounds of ordinance—a total that eventually exceeded the explosive power of the Hiroshima bomb." Arrested after illegally trespassing on the military site, the disobedientes were eventually sentenced to thirty days in Guaynabo prison. After citing the Navy’s civil and criminal violations of federal laws such as the Clean Water Act and the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, Kennedy writes: “Our defense was based on the doctrine of necessity; a defendant cannot be convicted of trespassing if he shows he entered the land to prevent a greater crime from being committed... [W]e had engaged in civil disobedience for a single purpose: to prevent a criminal violation of the Endangered Species Act by the Navy that the federal court had refused to redress” (115). The presiding judge, admonishing that he was not interested in philosophy, dismissed the necessity defense.

As Kennedy’s attorney (and his sister’s father-in-law), former New York Governor Mario Cuomo made the following argument at trial:

We ask the court to recall that this nation was conceived in the civil disobedience that preceded the Revolutionary War, the acts of civil disobedience that were precipitated by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, in the famous Sit-Down Strikes of 1936 and 1937, all through the valiant struggle for civil rights in the 1960s, and the movement against
Democracy and Captivity

the Vietnam War. Always they were treated by the courts one way: not like crimes committed for personal gain or out of pure malice, but as technical violations designed to achieve a good purpose. (115)


Of course, Cuomo and Kennedy would see violations that resulted in the loss of life (and liberty) as tragedies rather than as technicalities. Years prior to Kennedy’s trial, Mutulu Shakur and Marilyn Buck also unsuccessfully argued the “necessity defense,” appealing to international instead of U.S. standards.

6. There is insufficient space to address the ways in which political prisoners are at times burdened with the characteristics of prophets; hence their limitations in efficacy in the “free world” once they are released resonate so much more intensely. Activists, such as the slain leader Chris Hani, attempted to prevent the “marriage of Mandela-ism with liberalism.” With the African National Congress (ANC)’s acceptance of the apartheid government’s debt and its failure to nationalize and redistribute key resources and wealth, the observation by some local South African activists that Mandela had “sold out the bush” resonated with the intense frustrations of an economically subjugated people.


9. Dylan Rodríguez maintains:

“Free” activists (scholars, etc.) often appropriate the iconography of captive radicals/revolutionaries. . . . Yet, it is far more difficult for free people to engage the political work of radical prisoners in a manner that seriously informs their praxis.” (Dylan Rodríguez, September 2002 e-mail correspondence, editor’s papers)


11. For a discussion of the concept “social death” in a global and context, see: Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). For contemporary analyses of “social death” within the context of U.S. racial and incarceration politics, see: Wilderson, “The Prison Slave as Hegemony’s (Silent) Scandal,” and Dylan Rodríguez, “‘Social Truth’ and Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals,” in Social Justice 30 (2003), 18–27.

12. The Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution legalizes slavery for those duly convicted of a crime. In the convict prison lease system following the Civil War, African Americans, criminalized for their “blackness,” were worked to death in mines, fields, and forests in joint ventures between the state and private industries. For an analysis of the history of the convict lease system in the United States, see Matthew Mancini, One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866–1928 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).


16. For details of U.S. foreign and domestic policies that instigated considerable warfare, destabilization, and death in the post–World War II era, see: Noam Chomsky, The Culture of Terrorism (Boston: South End Press, 1988).


to End the Marion Lockdown, 2002). Mondo we Langa was deputy minister of information for the Omaha, Nebraska, chapter of the National Committees to Combat Fascism, an organization affiliated with the Black Panther Party, and is serving a life sentence for the first-degree murder of a policeman. He was active in protesting police brutality against African American residents in Omaha. According to the Center for Constitutional Rights, we Langa was targeted by Cointelpro and his conviction “was based on the testimony of a frightened teenager and on explosives allegedly found in [we Langa’s] house.” A Federal Court of Appeals declared the search illegal yet the Supreme Court “sustained the conviction holding that the Federal Courts should not have reviewed the state court decision.” See Center for Constitutional Rights, “Political Prisoners in the United States,” September 1988.


22. Targets of FBI repression have been fairly varied, including Albert Einstein, because of his socialism and antiracist activism (Einstein worked with W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson; with the latter he cofounded an antilynching organization), and John Lennon, targeted because of his antiwar activism. See, respectively, Frank Jerome, The Einstein F.B.I. File (New York: St. Martin’s, 2002); Jon Wiener, Come Together: John Lennon in His Time (New York: Random House, 1984); and “John Lennon versus the F.B.I.,” the New Republic 188.

On October 10, 2001, Laura W. Murphy, director of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Washington National Office, issued
“Trust Us, We’re the Government”; the statement details government malfeasance and illegal surveillance and harassment tied to Cointelpro, in which “few members of any of the groups targeted by COINTELPRO were ever charged with a crime.” It also makes reference to the 1976 Church Committee Senate report that concluded: “The Government has often undertaken the secret surveillance of citizens on the basis of their political beliefs, even when those beliefs posed no threat of violence or illegal acts on behalf of a hostile foreign power. . . . Groups and individuals have been harassed and disrupted because of their political views and their lifestyles.” In 1986, a federal court determined that Cointelpro was responsible for at least 204 burglaries by FBI agents, the use of 1,300 informants, the theft of 12,600 documents, 20,000 illegal wiretap days, and 12,000 bug days.

Alongside Cointelpro, the ACLU notes the “STOP INDEX,” where FBI computerized databases monitored antiwar activists; “CONUS” (Continental United States), which in the 1950s and 1960s “collected and maintained files on upwards of 100,000 political activists and used undercover operatives recruited from the Army to infiltrate these activist groups and steal confidential information and files for distribution to federal, state, and local governments”; “OPERATION CHAOS” in the 1960s, where the Central Intelligence Agency engaged in domestic spying to destabilize the American peace movement; and “CISPES” harassment, in which the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) was targeted because of its opposition to President Ronald Reagan’s support of paramilitary squads in El Salvador.

23. Writing for clemency for Anthony Jalil Bottom (#77A4283), Herman Bell (#79C0262), Abdul Majid (#83A0483), Bashir Hameed (#82A6313), Robert Seth Hayes (#74A2280), Sekou Odinga (#05228-054), and David Gilbert (#83A6158) in the petition were attorneys Robert Boyle, Robert Bloom, Kathleen Cleaver, Jill Sofiyah Elijah, Elizabeth Fink, Karl Franklin, Daniel Meyers, Charles Ogletree, Michael Tarif Warren, Nkechi Taifa, and Susan Tipograph. New York Task Force for Political Prisoners 2002 Report/Petition, editor’s papers.

24. The brief biographies introducing each chapter of The New Abolitionists contextualize the writings and the references help the reader further explore controversial liberation praxes.

25. The USA Provide Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (Patriot) Act of 2001 permits the U.S. government to detain noncitizens indefinitely with little or no process at the discretion of the Attorney General; permits the government to conduct searches, seizures, and surveillance with lower levels of judicial review; and potentially criminalizes otherwise lawful


33. Ralph Miliband writes in *The State in Capitalist Society* that in the United States people “live in the shadow of the state,” as political actors attempt to influence or represent “the state’s power and purpose” in order to obtain its support. A comprehensive theory of the state requires that we address economic, racial, and sexual as well as political, repression and disenfranchisement. I use “state violence” as a descriptive term that denotes political-economic and police violence based on nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and political ideology. Although Miliband distinguishes the state system from the political system of electoral parties and seemingly nonpolitical organizations such as religious and educational institutions, media, businesses and civic groups, it is not realistic to maintain a sharp division between the state and civil society. In
a racially driven or constructed culture, without formally sharing in state power, dominant social and ethnic groups can validate state violence. See: Ralph Miliband, The State in Capitalist Society (New York: Basic, 1969).

34. Frantz Fanon writes: “[T]he fellah, the unemployed man, the starving native do not lay a claim to the truth; they do not say that they represent the truth, for they are the truth.” See Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 49.
11

Violations
(for Emily)

Mississippi goddam.
—Nina Simone, “Mississippi Goddam”
_Nina Simone in Concert_, 1964

A house is not a home.

As an already- and always-raced writer, I knew from the very beginning that I could not, would not, reproduce the master’s voice and its assumptions of the all-knowing law of the white father. Nor would I substitute his voice with that of his fawning mistress or his worthy opponent, for both of these positions (mistress or opponent) seemed to confine me to his terrain, in his arena, accepting the house rules in the dominance game. If I had to live in a racial house, it was important, at the least, to rebuild it so that it was not a windowless prison.
—Toni Morrison, “Home”

There is something about violence and violations in the “household” that begs for silence.”¹ And disavowal. Academe, one of the most influential gathering places of state and counterstate intellectuals, is one “household” in the American homeland and its expanding archipelago.² It is there that I sit while I write this essay. (Like predatory gentrification, academe has extended itself into my very

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kitchen.) The crafting and shaping of this anthology, by academics, have occurred on a battlefield. In fact, the book was born in a state of war—specifically, the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq (sans Iraqi weapons of mass destruction or connections to al-Qaeda and September 11) and what has really worried some, the effectiveness of Iraqi resistance movements a year after the world was informed that the war was over and the United States had won.3

Ostensibly, this work first raised its head in the expanding military theater of U.S. imperial aspirations and its domestic/foreign policy with their attendant human rights abuses. Yet, in truth, however you wish to define it, the smaller, closeted military theater (the “pit” as opposed to the amphitheater) permitted the ducking and dodging of difficult struggles precisely because academe is not the “streets.” So what it and this academic engagement offer is not a political coalition (although old political ties and shared respect among some contributors indicate that coalitions exist and so manifest here—just not as an editorial process or text). Not a home, this literary intervention, a politics of sorts, challenges while it also reproduces containment.4

Trace the genealogy and map the “penalscape” and one finds that institutional intellectuals are rarely the “guerrilla intellectuals” that some academics emulate or necessarily the “native intellectuals” analyzed by Frantz Fanon. Nor, I believe, should they be: The “academic archipelago,” with its increasing dependence on and enthrallment with corporatist and statist structures and funding, is not the most trustworthy of training camps for peace combatants seeking just distributions of power and wealth. Has the academic genealogist displaced the scientist who replaced the priest? Some see the roles of progressive academic intellectuals as synonymous with those of insurgent intellectuals, a conflation that produces considerable confusions about the function of political coalitions and the cooptation, commodification of “subjugated” forms of political power. This suggests to me that to project or to perform insurgency must be one of the technologies of warfare deployed, and perhaps delighted in, by a goodly, ungodly number of Americans. Ever-present projections of apparitions of cultural characters such as John Wayne and Clint Eastwood—or, now, the white skins, black masks of the fugitive convict “Riddick” (Vin Diesel’s “ambiguously raced” murderous con with a heart of gold) or The Matrix’s “Neo” or anime’s hipster Cowboy Bebop bounty hunter “Spike
Spiegel”—suggest how burdensome certain burdens can be for progressives in an ambitiously pugilistic, hero-addicted society.

When has the archipelago got you by the “cojones”? to quote Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s castigation of the Cuban government’s downing of the Miami-based, anti–Castro Brothers for the Rescue planes as they violated Cuban airspace. The answer: When your jailer dons drag to become you and usurps and reproduces your voice and politics without taking your place in the cell. Mimetic becomes apocalyptic in the penal landscape that is passing for a homeland—and logically so, for this is where death is manufactured.

Michel Foucault was right in (more than) one sense: It is difficult to locate the outside, particularly if the very voices of the physically subjugated become mimed by their surrogate guards who then perform as their liberators. Your own language and stories used against you? What violation, whether misdemeanor or felony. What violence, to be lectured on obedience with your own words, to have your own “bio-stories” reworked and recited back to you—now as spectacle turned captive audience—by anointed bard(s). Listen to the charge of “reverse racism” or “(hetero)sexism” or “class warfare” (in the absence of structural reversals of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism) that supplants articulations of nonelite black, female, queer, or poor people’s rage with the narratives of white victimization and racial or elite outrage, the verbal slippage of “by any means necessary” from the mouths of police and city or state officials in their assaults on and slaughters of black militants and their progeny (e.g., Philadelphia Mayor Wilson Goode’s oration before the 1985 bombing of the MOVE Organization). Or witness the bio-political power of the Pygmalion who projects Medea onto those who refuse to mammy. Finally, consider the academic “expert” and “rearticulation specialist” on the lives and narratives of those imprisoned in the household or its formal detention centers: Immigration Customs Enforcement—the former Immigration and Naturalization Service—holding cells, psychiatric wards, jails, police precincts, maximum security, death row, closets, or basements, hiding places from domestic batterers or the predation of aggressively “affectionate” adult kin. Consider all these “violations.”

Yet the very calling out or detailing or analyzing of violations perhaps at times reproduces new forms of erasure, distortion, and violence. Thus, in the professionalism of prison discourse,
the jailer (multitudinous rather than monolithic) may assume
the position of the jailed in the rhetorical sense and mask his or
her dual role as guard (or guardian of a certain order). There is
a reality of nonduality, one that reveals that penal territory is so
massive, so intricate, and so internalized that it circumscribes
and burdens all. Hence, everyone is “incarcerated” in some sense,
and captivity and violation are shared carceral experiences. Yet in
maneuvers one can as a “theorist” or “performer” siphon off the
political discourse of the imprisoned and hence engage in an elite
form of criminality—identity theft. Such theft dispossesses the
imprisoned of the labor and “wealth” they produce—the meanings
and narratives of their confinement, the meanings and narratives of
their resistance to repression, the meanings and narratives of their
lives. (Curiously, with identity theft, those who have been robbed
must prove that they themselves are not the thieves.)

Everything but the Burden is the title of the cultural critic Greg
Tate’s book on white and multicultural America’s enthralment with
and appropriation of hip-hop and black culture. “Everything but
the burden”—I grimace as I begin to trace and sketch my dialogue
with elite voices chronicling the “gulag.”

Michel Foucault’s and coauthors’ pamphlet The Assassination of
George Jackson offers an important contribution. Foucault will
function as a convenient foil here for his alleged past “erasures”
of antiblack racism (and sexist) violence and terror in his text
Discipline and Punish. Yet, this anthology, the product of collective
endeavors and battles, is a product or construct, a discourse in
which several of us, while attempting to tunnel our way out of a
penal site—structural racism and sexism and the pathologizing of
antiracist rebellion and slave resistance—found that we had merely
dug ourselves into another prison corridor or cell.

It is fairly easy to begin as an ally “liberator” and slide into
role-playing as ally “appropriator.” For instance, “white antiracists”
or “people of color (POC)” are amorphous groupings that mask
the ethnic chauvinism and antiblack racism and that lie within.
Such formations can provide a rainbow prism of hatreds and envy
solidified by a refusal to “bow down” to blacks and their demands
for recognition based on “exceptionalism.” The quandary, though,
for those who never sought genuflection is what is the value of
recognition for the “uniqueness” of black bodies for whom white
supremacist cultures and state policing practices in the United
States have reserved an exceptional place: that of targets for excessive force and the penal site. What does it mean when “people of color” or antiracist whites wear the black body to exercise their grievances and outrage at white supremacy but maintain their distance (and disdain?) for the antithesis of whiteness.

Women, black women, even those intimately aware of trauma, can also violate and appropriate others, particularly if they are housed in the most repressive sites of the archipelago, its domestic (and foreign) prisons. Asha Bandele’s memoir, *The Prisoner’s Wife*, offers an illustration of facile moves that glorify the mundane resistor by mapping over the narrative of the impersonated insurgent. Such moves extinguish the political risk and vulnerability that differentiate the “free” person, albeit one regulated to the household by racial-sexual stigma and practices, and the unfree person, locked in prison. Cloaking the middle-class author in the dress of the prison revolutionary George Jackson, the Readers’ Club Guide for *The Prisoner’s Wife* poses two queries that struck me as masking and violating gestures:

*The Prisoner’s Wife* features allusions to *Soledad Brother*, George Jackson’s seminal portrait of the struggles, politics, and intricacies of prison life. How has Jackson’s book—the work of a brave and embattled man—influenced our culture’s perceptions of political imprisonment, racism, and the United States justice system?

In what ways can we view *The Prisoner’s Wife*—the work of an equally brave and similarly embattled black woman—as a useful, even indispensable, counterpoint (and complement) to the messages in Jackson’s *Soledad Brother*?

It is noted that the Readers’ Club recognizes a black revolutionary. Yet, mimetic performance, even one that must cover Jackson’s ideology as a militarist in order to appropriate and wear his iconic persona, is an equal-opportunity affair. Still, one must note that drag is not worn with equal risk—that is, those already designated part of the privatized realm for subordination, for example, black women such as Bandele, when performing insurrectionist, are likely to pay a heavier price for their theater than those designated part of the public realm of rulers and authoritative
intellectuals and politicians such as white neoliberal or neoradical male intellectuals.

Some valued and mimed for their presentations of radicalism may never pay the price of the ticket (to use James Baldwin here) in the academic landscape, a surrogate for and derivative of the American penalscape. Useful registers—reliable in strategies to survive warfare—rather than globalizing genealogies offer precision. Remember the color codes of Homeland Security, red, orange, yellow flags, as precautions against erasing or glossing over subjigated and insurgent knowledge.

Back to the foil. Consider Foucault’s interview at New York’s Attica prison. Attica was the site of the state’s killing of over thirty men, mostly African American and Latino, who protested the slave-like conditions of subjugation. For Foucault in the Attica interview, crime is a “coup d’état from below.” Yellow. The United States and its economic and political and social structures were and are founded on theft of (Indigenous) land and (African) labor. Hence, the most significant criminals, and the least interested in battling the state, come from “above”—in property theft (white-collar crime), drug trafficking (money laundering is the most profitable; growers and street dealers garner only a fraction of the trade), and organized violence and murder rationalized as warfare—Vietnam, Kissinger’s Cambodia. (Surely, state violence, Reagan’s contras in Latin America and Southern Africa, the School of the America’s training of death squads, the occupation of Iraq, and the theft of national and global resources and lives must register somewhere.) When the coup d’état from below meets the coup d’état from above, the reinforcement of the penalscape follows.

What constitutes critical theory that can analyze this troubled symbiotic relationship?

Within the interview—which here serves as an illustration or contrast for my larger argument that the technologies of containment encompass “radical” academic discourse—coupled with the vanishing of state criminality in his narrative are Foucault’s comments about Attica’s architecture that refer to “Disneyland” (Baudrillard?) and the “cleanliness” of the prison halls (which he equates with nineteenth-century French parochial schools). Orange. Those who fear the physical terror of imprisonment may dissociate Attica from the “Magic Kingdom.” Rather than foster a lack of imagination or theoretical verve, closer proximity to state captivity and violation
violations

shape even the gallows humor of the dead zones of the household and the penalscape. Those policed in virulent, violent fashions may have different cognitive skills that produce different, deeper meanings.

Foucault’s comments about the physical structure of Attica disconcerted some. Foucault is usually vigorously defended against the ignorance of non-Foucauldian scholars (although the “discredited knowledge” of Toni Morrison comes to mind: as the affliction of all blacks must shape perceptions of ignorance and allow many to ignore the query, “Where are the people—my people?” as some form of infraction).

A violation that any chorus member who marks the demise of (black/brown) renegades seeking freedom will remember: In his interview, Foucault does not once mention the men who rebelled in Attica and who were massacred there (to use the terminology of Tom Wicker, the white, liberal New York Times writer). Not one man, not once, does he name. Red. To say nothing of the victims when one enters a mass graveyard is a breach of trust if one enters not as a national guardsman, or as Governor Nelson Rockefeller, or as an idle spectator or consumer, but as an ally.

Erasing a genealogy mapped by the “wretched of the earth” allows the nonwretched to print over their (our?) texts, to use insurgent narratives as recyclables. This is a practice of the police machinery and its technologies of warfare. Professed allies, “radical” theorists, are selective because they have that right and privilege. In one narrative, Foucault disappears all impoverished and imprisoned black/brown bodies, yet in another he presents, in painstaking delineation, the corpse of the revolutionary icon and prison rebel George Jackson; that killing in a California prison thirty years ago sparked the Attica rebellion and additional killings in a prison on the other side of the continent.

As did Jackson, the Attica captives and insurgents fashioned reformist and revolutionary moves and were murdered for those acts. Who witnesses this? Who supplants them? Who performs their guerrilla theater? Who loves what they represented and the families of their origins as they fashion new survival and liberation from war? Who understands that they were both violators and violated? And who comprehends that the most civil and surgical of violations, those that leave no mark on the physical body, would be erasure or dismemberment through mimetic performance that discredits the legacies of the “household”—their resistance.
Hence, the mesh of “revolutionary” desire and anxiety concerning the academic, elite cartographer and genealogist that I bring as editor to this work. A new “progressive radical” order can continue to elide the “household” that I am “forced” to occupy and, in complicity, reproduce. When the “household” of the disappeared—poor communities, prisoners, queers, red/black/brown peoples, women, children—reappears and dictates its own narrative, in its own voice, with its own unmitigated desires, surely that is, this is war.

Many are weary of warfare. Yet there are distinctions to maintain between wars of survival and liberation and wars of conquest and annihilation. Most fear violence and the realization that noncombatants largely are the victims of carnage or the designated targets. In contemporary warfare, since World War II in the foreign theater, the casualties have been in the majority women and children (giving perverse meaning to the chivalric chant, “Women and children first!”). In the domestic theater, women and children have always dominated the landscape of broken and scarred bodies and minds and disoriented souls. Still, exhaustion and terror cannot prevent movement; one must travel or become buried under the penal landscape. Those who don’t resist violation don’t survive. Some who enact survival and liberation possibilities do.

Captives and rebels are not saints merely because they (or we) are exploited or abused. Some relegated to confinements seek rewards and approval for loyalties that “reproduce” the national(ist) “family” and its “coherence.” According to the official, conventional narratives, it is safer to harbor and shelter within a penal democracy, despite its abusive excess. Some measure of safety is promised in exchange for obedience and conformity to and within the household. Is it not better to be a black woman in the Southern United States than a black woman in South Africa or Sudan? In Sudan, Arab Muslim militia men (embraced by the terms “people of color” and “Third World people”), in their ethnic cleansing and genocidal warfare, rape and mutilate African, Muslim, Christian, and animist women, girls, and boys, cursing them with the Sudanese epithets of “black,” branding survivors on their hands to ensure that private trauma enters public record. The archipelago is global, and so not always “American.” There are multiple predations confronted and little adequate shelter—for some prey.

Nevertheless, resistance, in all of its contradictions and imperfections, continues. In the United States, antiviolence activists in the
Violations

"abolitionist" movement embrace violent men rather than jettison them to a "fatherly" state that punishes and destroys. Such activists grapple with what to do with the rapists, torturers, and the killers of children and women (and the lucrative market for sexual violence that dismembers). The antiviolence movement is multifaceted. In his essay, "Killers" in a volume of writings by prisoners, Prince Imari A. Obadele describes and protests against "virtual rape"—male prisoners' "killing" of female guards with their eyes, masturbating in front of them as a form of warfare known as "taking the pussy." The women who do not report these violations are considered "good" women. Obadele relates that he could care less about his female captors, yet he condemns the practice (for its implications for parolees): Predators require prey, don't they?—no matter what gender or on which side of the concertina wire.

A collection that contests the homeland as predacious territory explores both repression and resistance to violations contributors offer "critical thought" and political responsibility to the mapping of strategies based on peace and freedom in this moment of love and war so aptly expressed by Georgia Jackson to the captive after the burial of her seventeen-year-old Jonathan:

My dear only surviving son,

I went to Mount Vernon August 7th, 1971, to visit the grave site of my heart your keepers murdered in cold disregard for life.

His grave was supposed to be behind your grandfather’s and grandmother’s. But I couldn’t find it. There was no marker. Just mowed grass. The story of our past. I sent the keeper a blank check for a headstone—and two extra sites—blood in my eye!!!!

Notes

1. My understanding and critique of the "household" is situated in part in experience and in part in the political theory of Hannah Arendt, discussed in chapter 19 of this volume.

2. In his translation of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918*, Thomas P. Whitney notes Solzhenitsyn’s use of the archipelago as metaphor:

   The image evoked by this title is that of one far-flung "country" with millions of "natives" consisting of an *archipelago* of islands, some as tiny as a detention cell in a railway station and others as vast as a large Western European country, contained within another country—U.S.S.R. This
archipelago is made up of the enormous network of penal institutions and all the rest of the web of machinery for the police oppression and terror imposed throughout the author’s period reference on all Soviet life. Gulag is the acronym for the Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps which supervised the larger part of this system.


4. Bernice Johnson Reagon provides wry, cautionary commentary about coalitions:

Coalition work is not done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets. And it is some of the most dangerous work you can do. And you shouldn’t look for comfort. Some people will come to a coalition and they rate the success of the coalition on whether or not they feel good when they get there. They’re not looking for a coalition, they’re looking for a home!


5. The MOVE Organization, its most prominent member being death-row intellectual and former Black Panther Mumia Abu-Jamal, who joined after the 1985 tragedy, was decimated by an aerial bombing by police using Vietnam War surplus in Philadelphia. Eleven people died in the 1985 conflagration, including four children. See *The Bombing of Osage Avenue*, dir. Louis Massiah (videocassette, 1986).

9. See John K. Simon, “Michel Foucault on Attica: An Interview,” *Telos* 19 (1974): 154–161. In September 1971, prisoners at New York’s Attica rebelled against the prison administration’s failure to address complaints about the poor living conditions. The uprising grew from solidarity among prisoners following the August killing of George Jackson by guards at California’s San Quentin prison. More than 1,500 prisoners, across racial lines, seized the prison and held hostages. Despite the warnings of observers and mediators selected by the prisoners, New York’s Governor Nelson Rockefeller ordered that the prison be retaken by force. State troopers stormed the grounds; they fired some 4,500 rounds of ammunition at prisoners and the hostages. Forty-three people were killed, and 150 were injured, nearly all from the fire of the state troopers. Following the suppression of the rebellion, prisoners were tortured. Sixty prisoners charged with inciting the rebellion were defended by volunteer lawyers and a national movement. By 1976, nearly all of the charges had been dismissed; in 2002, New York State awarded survivors an $8 million settlement. See Freedom Archives, “Thirty Years After the Attica Rebellion” (sound recording, 2001), accessed September 26, 2012, http://www.freedomarchives.org; *Eyes on the Prize II: A Nation of Law? 1968–1971* (Blackside Productions, videocassette, 1987); and Tom Wicker, *A Time to Die* (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Books, 1975).
10. Foucault states: “... committing a crime questions the way society functions in a more fundamental way? So fundamental that we forget that it’s social, that we have the impression that it’s moral, that it involves peoples’ rights. ...” Simon, “Michel Foucault on Attica,” 161.
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13. In Greek mythology, the second labor of Hercules was to slay the Hydra; when one of its heads was cut off, two more grew in its place. The battle against an archipelago as “Hydra” suggests George Jackson’s avowal in Blood in My Eye: “If one were forced for the sake of clarity to define [fascism] in a word simple enough for all to understand, that word would be ‘reform.’”


15. An early printing of Jackson’s Blood in My Eye (Bantam, 1972) attributes this statement to Lester Jackson; a reprint edition (Black Classic Press, 1990) offers no source. Mothers birth and bury. I see the bloodshot eyes of Georgia Jackson, not the father Lester or “anonymous.” The title of an interview with Georgia Jackson, “I Bought the Plot a Year Ago, I Knew They Would Kill Him” (Sun Reporter [San Francisco], August 28, 1971), supports this attribution.
Since September 11, 2001, many Americans discuss or represent war, terror, and death in shorthand. Two numbers separated by a slash speak volumes (maybe Wittgenstein was right about math and language). 9/11 signifies American loss and mourning, American victimization and rage, American retribution, and American triumph over tragedy and victory in violent confrontations. In the wake of a national tragedy, which has expanded into global warfare, 9/11 also evokes for some an amnesiac claim of political innocence, a guise of national blamelessness in regard to state terror and violence, one which philosopher Cornel West, in a speech given in the Bay area months after the attack, describes as our “Peter Pan Complex.”

Although evocative, the term 9/11 (which some Manhattanites shorten to 911) seems mute about U.S. terrorism. Our national refusal to “grow up” does not permit many to become literate in a language that adequately conveys the recent continuing history of the U.S. government in state terror (specifically, in light of 9/11, its support of violent extremists and the drug trade in Afghanistan and elsewhere, in coalitions seeking to destabilize and destroy communist or hostile governments to U.S. military and business interests).

When I reflect on 9/11, I am no longer sure of what (my) language can convey. Writing and speech seem contained or restrained by convention or repetition, which alienate me from what I analyze in print (how best to describe my tax dollars supporting a government that refuses to accept responsibility for extreme levels of violence and armaments in the world and state-
sponsored terrorism?). The immediacy and incisiveness of critical
thought and action often seem muted by numbness, grief, rage, or
political inertia—or locked away in sites I rarely visit.

So, the Radical History Review’s request for “reflections” leaves
me feeling uncomfortable. How to place myself in my words and
on a political landscape marred by crises? For some reason, I feel
compelled to try to answer an insistent query, “What did you do
during the war?” and the sotto voce interrogation, “What are you
doing during the wars?” Responding to interrogation, I place myself
in time and space in relation to an event that radically changed our
nation and culture and me; yet one that seems to evoke the past and
to have altered little of our behavior. We still face the continuing
corporate scandals and predatory abuses ranging from military and
economic profiteering in warfare to Enron’s energy and labor theft
to the Catholic hierarchy’s antichild machinations—all forms of
violence, all more interesting, it seems, to the American consumer
than the consequences and casualties of U.S. wars.

The philosopher of African religions and philosophy, John Mbiti,
writes that some cultures synthesize past, present, and future
time into the immediate now.1 When I think about the current
wars and the loss of thousands of lives—not just those of people
in New York, Washington, DC, and Pennsylvania, but also the loss
of thousands of Afghani lives (since World War II, overwhelmingly
warfare disproportionately kills civilians rather than combatants),
time compresses itself and the images of wars of the recent history
fold into this one. I share an African view of cosmology. In its
selective and amnesiac time line of war and terror, the United
States (ironically, since it cannot muster either an apology for
slavery or negotiate reparations) is also “Africanized,” albeit in
a distorted fashion, in its popular representations: Time (past,
present, and future) is the immediate present. The recognizable
victim and inevitable victor—no matter what the cost—is the
American citizen. The U.S. response, as articulated through White
House spokesmen, to “What were and are you doing during the
war?” is a succinct swagger: “Winning.”

“What was, am, I doing during the wars?” When the planes hit, I
was on our farm in Upstate New York, listening to the news, mostly
the news on National Public Radio (NPR), because I could not
stomach the other media (but later I could not digest NPR either
as inane, patriotic rhetoric became its script). At first, hearing that
one plane had struck the World Trade Center (WTC), I thought it to be a commuter flown by a pilot with the overconfidence of JFK Jr.; hearing of another plane striking the Pentagon, I knew it to be a declaration of war. Before arranging for the installation of the Dish Network to allow me to watch the war(s), which would subsequently become more “real,” I try all day and into the night to phone my godmother in the Bronx. When I finally get through, she tells me that she is missing a loved one, someone who flew out of Boston on the morning of September 11. Secluded, sheltered on a farm, I tune into NPR and listen to their reports. Soon they name the celebrities lost, and I call my godmother to tell her of her loss. The words sorrow and grief do not communicate the wail emitted when the mass or individual deaths of others become your own private, terminal disease. And as I listen to my godmother, I associate and sort the sounds, linking them with ones that I’ve heard in the recent past in response to other manifestations of terrorism: domestic violence and battery, prison beatings, police rapes or executions of black bodies; “contra” or counterrevolutionary maiming instructed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and its torture manuals.

Sorting sounds of grief, I realize that when time folds, space collapses as well, and everything seems to converge in a circle or loop. Although those who responded to 9/11 by quoting Malcolm X’s infamous metaphor for the John F. Kennedy assassination were often castigated, I found that terrorism officially condemned while manufactured at home (through police and military elites) had been exported only to return as a (domestic) import.¹

So American exceptionalism rewrites history and time lines to make immediacy and punitive reflex action normative and to place the wounded and traumatized American body center while denying the terror it has inflicted and does inflict on other bodies. These are our self-inflicted wounds: Escalating wars on terrorism or terrorist wars are transformed from police and military acts into pop cultural aggression and aggrandizement that invite every “loyal American” to participate; these wars will cost everyone dearly in monetary reserves, civil liberties, and political freedom. There is also an ethical and spiritual cost. Exceptionalism that allows a national preoccupation privileging the deaths of American citizens deflects attention from massive losses of non-U.S. citizens. That over 500,000 children were killed during the 1990s largely due to the U.S. embargo of Iraq.
appears to go unnoticed by most Americans, or at least merits no
public expression of outrage on their part.

Confronting American exceptionalism and the denial of state-
inflicted terror and death, Mumia Abu-Jamal observed in the
months following 9/11 how we rank suffering: “People in the
United States, drunk on imperial pride, think of themselves as
quintessential Americans, and think of the rest of the people
of the world as something else; something lesser: the Other.”

(Often the “free” think of the imprisoned as the subhuman Other,
ignoring the wars waged inside the interior—within prisons, jails,
detention centers.) Of the terror and foreign wars waged by the
U.S. government, Abu-Jamal references Latin America and the U.S.
Army School of the Americas, located at Fort Benning, Georgia,
used to train leaders of paramilitary death squads. Abu-Jamal quotes
Chilean novelist Ariel Dorfman: “During the last 28 years, Tuesday,
September 11, has been a date of mourning, for me and millions of
others, ever since that day in 1973 when Chile lost its democracy
in a military coup, that day when death irrevocably entered our
lives and changed us forever.” The U.S.-backed coup bombed the
presidential palace, engineered the death of the democratically
elected president Salvador Allende, and installed the violent
dictator Augusto Pinochet.

Those who would break from American
exceptionalism to protest this and other U.S.-sponsored tragedies
in El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and southern Africa during
the 1970s and 1980s would eventually find themselves imprisoned
for their dissent.

**Political Prisoners, Imprisoned Intellectuals
and the War(s) on Terrorism**

I continuously seek the “exceptional” American who seems to
remember this recent history and how it plays out in the present
to shape our future. In the months preceding and following 9/11,
the exceptional Americans who would most occupy my thoughts
and energy would be imprisoned radicals: thinkers and activists
who attempted to re-create reality, to rewrite the past, present,
and future in line with some vision of social justice. Following the
September 2001 attack and tragedy, I swam in grief and paradoxi-
cally sought and found an anchor and buoy in working with current
and former U.S. political prisoners. This political community’s
proximity to state terror, resistance, and violence offered an alternative to sterile, conventional political language that seeks to pacify rather than explain. Although the United States officially denies having political prisoners or detainees, the international human rights organization, Amnesty International, has noted the scores of political prisoners, which have numbered up to 100, in U.S. prisons. A select few exist as writers; these imprisoned intellectuals began to shape my political life following 9/11.

Depressed yet galvanized by the tragedy and the (cluster) bombings that followed, throughout the winter of 2001 and into the winter and spring and summer of 2002, I increased my interactions and work with political prisoners (and in the process gradually came to better understand myself as an academic constrained by academe, and as a citizen confined by illusory political choices). I began to plan a spring conference at Brown University, “Imprisoned Intellectuals: A Dialogue with Scholars, Activists, and (Former) U.S. Political Prisoners on War, Dissent, and Social Justice.” I also renewed my efforts in gathering and editing material for several anthologies of writings by imprisoned intellectuals. In October, November, and December of 2001, drafts of manuscripts that I sent from the university and personal correspondences mailed from the farm to political prisoners for their review were confiscated by prison authorities.

When a prison administrator wrote, informing me that I was sending material advocating “illegal and unlawful acts,” I read through a 9/11 lens: I was unpatriotic and potentially criminal. That seemed both a politically obscene and logical pronouncement: One anthology opened with Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and Malcolm X’s speech “The Ballot or the Bullet,” both essays advocating respectively nonviolent disobedience and armed self-defense to combat white supremacy and government repression. The manuscripts also included essays by former members of the American Indian Movement, the Puerto Rican Independence Movement, the Black Panther Party, and white anarchists and anti-imperialists. All of the authors question the U.S. state, its monopoly on violence, and the blind or loyal obedience of its citizenry. None are remotely linked to the Taliban, but that did not deter the Department of Justice and the Bureau of Prisons from enacting punitive, “protective” procedures, directed against U.S. political prisoners and their advocates.
I was surprised by the response—censorship and intimidation—from prison authorities. For although I had listened attentively to the public radio reports on the U.S. war on terrorism (having turned off the television in order to protect myself from its visual bombardments), I did not connect these news accounts with my academic and political work with imprisoned writers, creating a language that could grapple with the violent realities we endure and that could lead to new critiques and confrontation with police and state abuses. I had minimized the project as just an educational intervention. After all, a book is just a book. Consequently, I failed to anticipate how the government would wage its domestic war on terrorism by attempting to criminalize and disappear some of its most radical critics. I underestimated the weight of words, even ones that would find limited acceptance. And so, I failed to immediately comprehend that my contributors, although already criminalized, had been designated by the attorney general John Ashcroft as public enemies and national security threats in the new “war on terrorism.”

Since September 11, in a heightened age of security, increasing police and military presence, and eroding civil liberties, the 2001 USA Patriot Act and other legislation or directives (many of them challenged by advocacy groups), permit secret military tribunals and mass detentions for noncitizens; the extension of wiretaps; the monitoring of previously private attorney-client communications; and the “lockdown” of U.S. political prisoners (some of whom have been incarcerated for decades). On October 26, 2001, Ashcroft signed the directive, the “National Security: Prevention of Acts of Violence and Terrorism,” enabling the Department of Justice to select certain prisoners for “special administrative measures,” including isolation and denying correspondence and communication through telephone, visitations, or media interviews. The new regulations allow an intelligence agency to instruct the Bureau of Prisons to detain an inmate incommunicado for up to one year, with additional one-year periods of detention. These regulations were used to remove imprisoned intellectuals from their families, attorneys, and political communities after 9/11.

Criminalizing dissent in the United States, the government placed in lockdown the catholic Ploughshares pacifist Philip Berrigan, the white anti-imperialist Marilyn Buck, the former Black Panther leader Sundiata Acoli, and the Puerto Rican Independence leaders Antonio Comacho Negron and Carlos Torres. (As attorneys
J. Soffiyah Elijah and Robert Boyle note, in barring prisoners from communicating with their lawyers, the government depicts counsel as potential “co-conspirators” in terrorism and hence legitimate targets for harassment and prosecution.

A number of the prisoners mentioned above, Acoli, Berrigan, and Buck, incarcerated for their political acts against the U.S. government, provide individual and collective works and analyses of U.S. society, politics, culture, and social justice rarely referenced in conventional political or historical discourse. Their writings were central to the teaching and research that gave me a response to what I was doing during the war(s). They constitute a body of outlawed public intellectuals, with commentaries on our contemporary state and society and our recent history of radical resistance to violence and war. Prisons are intellectual and political sites unauthorized by the state, where analyses and writings in opposition to repressive policies often go unnoticed on this side of the walls and concertina wire. Writer-activists incarcerated because of their political beliefs and acts or politicized while incarcerated for social crimes, working as educators and activists behind bars, offer controversial and thought-provoking theories of politics and liberation. They therefore provide a body of resistance literature reflecting political dissent for social justice. For some teachers and students, they allow us to explore parameters and possibilities of democratic change that merge intellectualism with community building and activism. Our encounters with imprisoned intellectuals meant to either challenge, buoy, or anchor us, present possibilities for change and commitment.

Conclusion: Shared and Expanding Community

Amid U.S. wars on terrorism, my memory fills with data on U.S. domestic and foreign policies. I remember that prisons constitute one of the most controversial and contested sites in a democratic society and that the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the industrialized world, with over 2 million people in jails, prisons, and detention centers. With over 3,000 on death row, it is also one of the few developed countries that continues to deploy the death penalty. Given the class and racial disparities in sentencing, 70 percent of the incarcerated are people of color. That the Thirteenth Amendment legalizes slavery by codifying slavery,
legalizing it for those duly convicted of a crime, compresses time on my political continuum of reflections on repression and resistance. Some of that resistance led to the formation of communities of imprisoned intellectuals or political prisoners.

Internationally, I recall that the United States has attacked institutions that could sustain a world community. Although the International Court of Justice and the United Nations were created in response to World War II, the United States declares itself bound by neither the court nor by the proclamations of the United Nations, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In theory, human rights protections exist for everyone in the United States under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the international convention’s ban on racial discrimination, abuse, and torture. The United States continues to exempt itself from international human rights obligations and place itself above the law; the government can weaken treaties it ratifies with reservation. The U.S. withdrawal in May 2002 from the International Tribunal on War Crimes, and earlier from the September 2001 United Nations World Conference Against Racism and Xenophobia in South Africa, signaled its aloof stance toward peace and antiracist initiatives. It failed to sign on, as the European Union did, to a statement designating the slave trade as a “crime against humanity.” Yet within days after the tragedy, the United States would condemn the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks as “a crime against humanity,” call on Americans to voluntarily relinquish political rights, and demand global solidarity in a world community united to isolate and destroy—a word of finality and eschatology—terrorism. This in a national military/police campaign initially named Infinite Justice, overseen by the Pentagon, White House, and its new cabinet-level post for the defense of homeland security.

What many of us did and do during the wars is to continue to struggle and work with colleagues and caged intellectuals targeted by the state. Shouldering and sharing democratic responsibilities while rejecting promises of protection and comfort via military supremacy, many seek to extend the Black Panthers’ maxim: “All Power to the People!” Although a liberal castigator of black militancy and civil disobedience and dissent, Hannah Arendt noted that the importance of critiquing and confronting the expansion of government control and domination marks an essential act if democracies are to survive: “It is the obvious short range advantages of tyranny, the advantages
of stability, security, and productivity, that one should beware, if only because they pave the way to an inevitable loss of power, even though the actual disaster may occur in a relatively distant future.”

The very possibility of realizing a world in which terrorism is not common and the Panthers’ refrain not merely a slogan—that is, to create and re-create societies where power resides not with the police or ruling elites who determine domestic and foreign policies and the levels of institutionalized violence, nor with vanguards, but with the multitude resisting institutionalized force and violence from others and themselves—relies on a democracy where we form communities with the imprisoned to confront violence and disappearances. In such communities, we can respond to our own queries and decisions about what to do during the wars, and collectively raise new questions to articulate a vision of transformative struggle better equipped to challenge terror in its varied manifestations.

Notes

4. Ibid.
6. Resisting state violence led many to organize; that progressivism was met with repression through FBI Cointelpro or destabilization of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), which opposed U.S.-funded death squads.
7. Activism, like academia, can also commodify imprisoned intellectuals, appropriate their words, reify them in oppositional stances as either objects for ridicule or romanticism.
8. On December 10, 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with thirty articles asserting that the “inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace. . . .”
Academia, Activism, and Imprisoned Intellectuals

The radical intellectual, struggling for her own place in an academy already under siege by market forces and political interference, may lack the stomach for engaging in external conflicts that are deemed “controversial” by the media projectors of the status quo; for even radical intellectuals must eat; and to eat means to affiliate with aggregates of intellectual organization and power (universities), if one wants to teach. . . . Nothing written in this essay will relieve the tension between one’s fear and one’s conscience, for nothing is more controversial in the American context than the state’s role in determining whether its purported citizens should live or die.

—Mumia Abu-Jamal, “Intellectuals and the Gallows”

Love and Rage

In a recent letter addressing my queries about a trade book by one of his former attorneys, death row author and intellectual Mumia Abu-Jamal succinctly signed his missive. Describing his emotional response to his former activist-attorney’s breach of trust and commodification of Abu-Jamal as a spectacle for the marketplace and the executioner-state, he closed: “Love and Rage—Mumia.”

Love and rage initially seem paradoxical, coupled as oddities. They are assumed by some to appear in exclusive sites, as distinct and unrelated experiences and feelings. But they coexist, with a dynamic ability to metamorphose or shape-shift, one into the other.

Love and rage are the impetus for much reflection, agonizing, action, and risk taking. They also seem to fuel considerable thoughtlessness and inactivity, either in abstract or maudlin sentiment or in pyrotechnic performance, and their respective sterility illuminates their shared characteristics. Love and rage constitute the organizing force behind this gathering coordinated during expanding wars. Love for community, freedom, and justice, for the incarcerated and for the “disappeared”—for those dying or surviving in war zones.

To the extent that love for humanity leads to rage against injustice, we also must ask and answer: Where does rage lead us?

For now, we can remember that in our national context, love and rage led to resistance in antiracist, antiwar, and antigender/sexual violence movements. Resistance was met with further repression, in the context of the United States, aptly administered by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and its Cointelpro or counterintelligence program. These repressive government measures surveilled and destabilized the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), which was seeking to stop death squads funded by our tax dollars. Cointelpro also violently dismantled radical groups and formations such as the Black Panther Party, the American Indian Movement, the Puerto Rican independence movement, as well as various antiwar and anti-intervention militants.

The political prisoners currently contained in U.S. penal sites present us with difficult questions and challenges as critical thinkers and actors: What is our relationship to the “imprisoned intellectual”? Who or what is she or he? Who or what are we in relation to visionary, risk-taking struggle? That is, what is our relation to visionary struggles for justice that are neither consumed by rage nor performance radicalism, struggles not shrugged off as insurmountable, but embraced as worthy of theoretical and organizational commitments? Perhaps such struggles bring into question all vanguard sites and formations, whether academic or activist. Given that communication is likely just another way of speaking about ourselves, we might as well start responding to the queries by scrutinizing the site(s) we currently occupy.

Academic and Activist Markets

Academia often prides itself on being a site in which love, rage, or their symbiotic relationship do not dare to assert themselves,
Violations

to proclaim and set a standard for communication, community, intellectual inquiry, or ethical and political action. Remember Barbara Harlow’s quote above. So, neither love nor rage, just cool professionalism and scholarly competence rule here, although other tendencies or trajectories appear to raise the question (that many progressive political prisoners struggle to answer) of what a democratic community, premised on compassion, liberation, and a truly just sharing of power, consists of.

Most do not answer that question by saying “academia.” The academy is not geared toward immediacy or urgency (or radical democracy), but seems dedicated to a construction of dispassionate objectivity, a discipline to detail, and painstaking rigor of sustained investigation and study. These obviously are not inherently negative traits. In fact, they are sorely needed in much of our social justice work. They are only part of intellectual development, though; activism as a complementary partner to academic productivity can mitigate against depictions of the incarcerated as “aliens,” vulnerable to dissection or dismissal. Here, especially, political prisoners as “imprisoned intellectuals” find themselves in peculiar situations. At the university, they can be encased in window displays—bartered and sold in the academic market as the objects of inquiry for studies in political resistance or pathology. Showcased in the scholarly text, trade book, master’s thesis, doctoral dissertation, a course, conference paper, or anthology, their currency accrues, but often only to be managed by others.

Much as love and rage can balance and converge, so, too, can academia and activism. Although generally disparaged in its radical forms in the academy, activism prides itself on love and rage, immediacy and responsiveness. It embraces these human responses to life and pain as much as academia might distance itself from them. Activism’s pride of place in this gathering, then, would be the claim to ethical and political responses to life and suffering, to confrontation with domination and control (or what Abu-Jamal described as the state’s determination of who lives or dies—on death row, in poverty, wars, and epidemics).

Activism is as multidimensional in its appearances as the academy; as academia’s alter ego, or problematic twin, it also reflects the best and worst tendencies of the marketplace. When structured by the market, activism is not inherently infused with responsible behavior or compassion. In its push for productivity—more rallies, demos,
conferences, meetings—it can lose sight of effective strategies, community, and the importance of young activists exercising decision-making power. To value one’s presence, that is, just showing up for work, class, or demonstrations, over one’s preparedness to fully participate in transformational acts is a feature of the crass market (where volume or quantity of a product registers more than quality or utility). Likewise, expectations for unquestioning obedience to managerial elites—whether radical instructor or organizer—are also features of the market found in activism and academia.

Thus, beyond confronting the social crises and military and ideological wars enacted by the state, we are disturbed, destabilized, and therefore challenged by the commodification of our own educational sites and political movements. The marketplace—as the dominant metaphor and construct— influences our consciousness and regulates our lives to shape both academia and activism. Conformity and compliance, rebellion and resistance, are often channeled through and structured by markets that turn intellect and action into objects for trade and barter in competition for status and acquisition, while making our ideals (freedom and justice) and their representatives (prisoners of resistance) into commodities.

Through books, videos, and CDs, political representations are purchased and circulated with the intent of creating greater demand not only for the “product,” but also for social justice, release campaigns, opposition to expanding police and military powers, and executions and state violence. For the imprisoned, the possibility of release, or at least remembrance, mitigates their social death in prison (or physical death, as in the cases of MOVE’s Merle Africa and former Black Panther Albert Nuh Washington). Academics and activists use the market to highlight the human rights abuses and conditions of the imprisoned, the 2.5 million people locked in U.S. penal institutions, and the perpetuation of torture and slavery through the Thirteenth Amendment.

The irony is that commodification is another form of containment. Although Harlow advocates the “activist counterapproach” to consumption, not all activism provides an alternative. Some of it reinscribes the competition, opportunism, disciplinary mechanisms, and demands for institutional loyalty that characterize the marketplace. Activism or activists, like academia and academics, have their own forms of commerce. At their weakest and most
problematic points, they share, in their respective sites, careerism, appropriation, and the assertion of “authoritative” voices.

For instance, the “political prisoner-as-icon” can be deployed to minimize or silence external and internal critiques. Editors, translators, and advocates can wield iconic power as surrogates (and in surreal fashion use that proxy against the incarcerated themselves). The structural position that the nonincarcerated possess, a quite valuable commodity, permits the appropriation of voice and new forms of dependencies. Perhaps, the imprisoned use self-censorship not only as a shield against their guards (as Marilyn Buck describes in *On Self-Censorship*), but also as armor against their allies. Political prisoners have strategies to counter “free” progressives, given that in the social death of the prisoner rebel, the state is not the only entity that has the ability to capitalize on or cannibalize captive bodies. If indeed the political prisoner or imprisoned intellectual can be either “freed” or frozen in academic and/or activist discourse and productivity, then it is essential that academics-activists and students-scholars directly communicate with political prisoners, as openly as possible given the structural disparities.

**Conclusion: Conference (or Classroom) as Community**

There are many opportunities to break from consumerism, performance, and spectacle to build community. We approached the prison conference as a “mall”—a place to “hang out” and to encounter performance and spectacle through visceral accounts of racism, war, resistance, violence, and loss. Alternatively, we can approach the gathering as “community”—both potential and real. The gathering was organized on our need for each other. We are interdependent as academics and activists, and/or hybrids in effecting peace and social change. We choose to dispense with various forms of academic and activist elitism, diva protocol, and disciplinary claims to either intellectual or revolutionary authenticity. I hope that with grace and humor we can acknowledge our strengths and limitations. In the spirit of inquiry undisciplined by a market-driven academy or commodity activism, we work with love and rage.

As academics and activists, we share a desire for learning, for encounters that lead to greater ethical and political agency,
a passion for freedom (for some, a passion so relentless that it mirrors the risks of imprisoned dissidents). Daily, more political resisters and prisoners emerge in opposition to U.S. wars, mass detentions and deportations, and diminished civil liberties. The conference afforded an opportunity to engage in dialogue on shared leadership and political analyses that confront state violence, as well as to discuss and learn about the contributions and contradictions of political prisoners. We can learn from and build on their calls to intellect, emotion, and efficacy, ranging from Abu-Jamal’s signature on “love and rage” to slain intellectual-warrior George Jackson’s (1972) reflection in *Blood in My Eye*: “As a slave, the social phenomenon that engages my whole consciousness is, of course, revolution.” “Revolution,” Jackson continued, “should be love-inspired.”

**Notes**

Part 3.

SOVEREIGN
POLITICAL SUBJECTS
In the introduction to his 2008 anthology, *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, Charles Hale discusses the prickly issue of “shared political sensibilities” among scholars involved in activist research, claiming (or asserting) “a shared commitment to basic principles of social justice that is attentive to the inequalities of race, gender, class and sexuality and aligned with struggles to confront and eliminate them.” He further posits a strong, necessary connection between the authors’ progressive politics and their chosen activist methodologies. Authors in this volume also reference the contradictions of “institutionalizing” activist research within academic institutions that situate and discipline.

Clearly, *Engaging Contradictions* contributors have a shared desire to translate academic skills and positions into vehicles of passion for transformative social change and human liberation. However, the tentativeness that runs through the collection regarding this desire stems in part from the self-policing (against [nonelite] radicalism) that results from our participation in corporate academe. Such sites are at best liberal-reformist in their institutional politics and at worst complicit with the global military-industrial, and consumer-commercial, complex that enforces and/or regulates the marginalization and impoverishment of the majority of the world.

Reform might be the best that some can realistically hope to accomplish through engaged scholarship (of course, some engaged scholarship is explicitly reformist). Yet most of the authors here would agree that as world citizens and as activist scholars who work as academics, we search for a transformative political agenda.

Shared desire for change is likely to be shaped by some affinity (no matter how tepid) for revolutionary struggle. Seeking collectivities—that is, communities shaped by egalitarian sociality that reject dominance and concentrations of power—a revolutionary is guided by love (as Ché Guevara famously stated). Love and outrage over injustices are motivations and sustaining emotions in revolutionary collectivities. The guerrero del amor becomes a warrior lover who understands struggle and battle as expressions of commitment, loyalty, sharing of self—a selflessness that is not sacrifice but fulfillment through collectivity. The unfolding of self within the collective, just as the self develops in its individuality, is likely to be the foundation for radical subjectivity.

Love functions as a counternarrative and alternate reality to narcissism. By narcissism we mean the self-absorption, competitiveness, and careerism characteristic of the “normal” academic. We are arguing for activist scholarship not as therapeutic but rather as a radical, potentially revolutionary, alternative to the corporate university. Thus, in considering an alternative, we have to examine three issues for struggle raised by Hale and volume contributors. First, is it possible to open up our institutions in order to create “more supportive space for the particular kind of research that we do”? Second, do the rewards and operating principles of these institutions force us into “elitism and hierarchy” expressed as narcissism and conformity? Third, will our mere presence and participation within elitist institutions make us complicit in the subjugation of subaltern communities? Concerning “supportive space” in the academy, higher education depends on the continued support of elites, given that it is a leading sector of the global North whose governing principles include the management and control of disenfranchised communities. Institutions of higher education have a vested interest in keeping scholarship “objective” (mystifying), “nonpolitical” (nonsubversive), and “academic” (elitist) and in continuing to reserve the most advanced technical training for that small portion of the world’s population who will manage the rest, as well as consume or control its resources and political
economies. Unless elite educational institutions are transformed, activist research will never reside within the academic mainstream as an entity that produces a revolutionary, or even radical, counternarrative and practice.

Antonio Gramsci writes that academics are the organic intellectuals of the bourgeoisie. As noted in many of the preceding chapters, incentives offered by the academy reward those whose knowledge production contributes to elite power. This plays into our narcissistic conformity. That same system diminishes the production of potentially transgressive political knowledge by questioning its “objective” status or “scientific” value. (Dis)incentives channel the dissemination of potentially radical knowledge into journals and books where its usefulness to the dominated becomes increasingly marginal and its commodification creates currency for antiradicals. Our continued participation in these institutions strengthens them by allowing them to make hegemonic claims to fostering “academic freedom,” a “marketplace of ideas,” and rational neutrality, but we are not inherently handmaidens to the reproduction of control.

The Academic Arena: Appearance, Discourse, Performance

We insert into the academy at three points: appearance, communication or discourse, and performance on the staged arena of academic life. Progressives maintain the continuity of systems of dominance at the first two points of entry and have the potential for disrupting them at the third point: that is, we can exit the staged arena. We can be organic intellectuals of formations other than the academy—that is, relevant radical subjects—if, and only if, we reject the sites of entry and performance as final destination points for activist politics for social justice.

Let us consider the implications of the three points of our entry (and the possible point for our departure). First, there is physical entry into the academy itself. The notion that mere appearance of progressives in institutionalized learning constitutes a disruption of the normative reproduction or the continuity of repression seems shortsighted. Just to have women, queers, and people of color in academe is insufficient, in and of itself, for social change. Second, there is the entry point of communication and political rhetoric through academic discourse. The view that writing or teaching in
a “radical” vein, or building progressive units within the academy, transforms educational institutions also seems myopic. Neither entry nor communication is sufficient to incite transformation. Radical ideas can easily be commodified to accommodate hegemonic institutions in their claims of impartiality that mask their facility to reproduce or enable dominant social structures.

But the third entry point, of the staged arena, can actually function as an exit point from the academic machinery. Our work with marginalized communities as a destination point for our intellectual and political selves requires that we connect to radical collectives embedded in communities struggling for social justice. They exist identifiably as marginalized minority formations seeking radical change in ways similar and dissimilar to the formations of radical academics. As does the larger society, the academy functions as an identifiable aggregate that harbors collectives that are conservative, liberal, or radical (the last being marginal). Radical-minded groups are not trapped in their respective spheres if they seek like groups in other sites. We are handmaidens to the bourgeoisie until we exit the academic arena in search of these radical collectivities.

All of those who define work as academics by progressive agendas will not necessarily exit. Those who define their teaching and publications of critical thinking (antiracist, feminist, queer, Marxist, anti-imperialist) as inherently radical are likely not to exit. The predictable stressors of the “safe” environment of conservative-liberal academe foster less aversion than radical praxes emanating from sites that elites do not control.

Skepticism regarding the intellectual powers and leadership of radical sectors within nonacademic communities is an equal-opportunity affair among ideologically embattled academics. Progressive academics, while besieged in the institution may also fight against radicals linked to collectivities. Dialogic warfare waged by progressives to control political discourse and meaning suggests that radicals loyal to the academy are not necessarily radical subjects.

Radical academics may point to the hegemony of the institution, and its dominant intellectuals, without challenging their own power and investment in these structures. Their “outsider” status mystifies the power and privileges of progressive activist scholars. Once truly outside the academy, academic-bound radicals may be unmasked as “insiders” aligned with institutional power. Stable identity constructs as “transformative” or “activist” scholars
cramble—except for those who can reconstitute themselves as practitioners outside the academic arena. Those who can do so are no longer merely “outsiders” belonging to or within the academy. In the shell game that is academe, they are able to break a losing streak in a rigged game by locating the mark: the mark only materializes outside. Leaving the academy and embedding ourselves in collectivities, we act beyond conventional society. This is one of the true hallmarks of the radical subject, a sign that distinguishes him or her from the activist scholar.

With the academy as stage or arena, academics politically perform themselves. Even given the power differentials within the academy, we all share some of the spoils of war. Alexander Kojève’s Introduction to the Reading of Hegel posits a master-slave dynamic in which the slave is actually the more powerful, since the master is dependent on his or her labor. Academic-bound radicals, as slaves, despite their marginalization engender new thinking and analyses and through their very criticisms of the prevailing order function to revitalize that order. Some may recognize this “power” and become loath to relinquish the prerogative of a “slave.”

The performative shapes the interdependency of academic radicals, liberals, and conservatives. One performs an ideological subject position. In the academy, conservatives and liberals dominate the contextual arena and the material ability to stage performance, providing structure to both props and script. Radical subjects, to construct and control the presentation of their own politics, need a departure, an exit from the arena. If they refuse to exit, academic-bound radicals reject radical subjectivity and validate the reproduction of hierarchies in which we function as powerful “outsiders.” Consequently, academic-bound radicals more easily share the arena with liberals and conservatives than with radical subjects as activists.

**The Radical Subject**

Perhaps only the academic-bound radical or activist researcher possesses a coherent public persona in the academy. In contradistinction, radical subjects may have little or no coherence in the academic arena, and this encourages their search for an exit. Inside the arena, such subjects operate not from a stance of political or moral superiority but from the position of a fractured self. While academic-bound
radicals posit a coherence that is intelligible (only?) in the academic arena, fractured subjects suggest a coherence shaped by political literacy emanating from communities confronting crisis and conflict. Both the academic-bound radical as “coherent” subject and the radical subject as the fractured self share similar fears and weaknesses: loss of status and respectability, diminishment of social stability and material resources. The fractured self can guard against its potential losses by entering on levels one and two mentioned above, appearance and communication: show up to work, teach class, publish, convene conferences, build programs. But entry will not protect it from other feats: those of irrelevancy and bad faith. Furthermore, the radical subject is not a revolutionary subject given his or her refusal to accept the losses from nonparticipation in repressive institutions.

Despite its political limitations, the fractured self of the radical subject desires what the academy cannot provide: relevancy and accountability to collectivities resisting domination. The radical subject rejects the arena provided by the academy to perform as center-stage spectacle or sideshow attraction. The desire for recognition and legitimization in a context other than that built by the academy is what fractures and pushes the radical subject outside, off stage. Radical subjects seeking activism outside the academy do not try to create a space inside as a final destination point or as an identity marker for radicalism.

We have argued that whereas the academic-bound radical enters the stage of performance and public recognition as another destination (after appearance and labor), the fractured self as radical subject exits. Therefore, we contest the viability of elite structures to reproduce themselves while reproducing repression and claiming our allegiance in performance. We do not contest our obligations (contractual agreements for material and emotional remuneration) to appear and communicate—to show up, teach, write, conference, workshop, build programs. We contest only the performance of the loyal outsider in Kojève’s master-slave dynamic.

Earlier we stated that our mere presence allowed elite institutions to make claims for themselves as encompassing diversity (of gender, color, ideology, sexuality) and therefore as being comprehensive and liberal in scope. We identified three categories in order not to conflate them, so that presence and communication are not inherently synonymous with performance. We have little control over the meanings given to our appearances or our words
within the academy; we have agency only over our departure from the academic staging of our radicalisms.

The institution has the power to fix us in ways that valorize it. Still, to appear is not necessarily the same as to conform. To practice a radical activism, we seek an appropriate staging ground unavailable within the academy. The fractured subject is mobile, not stationary or stagnant.

Exploring political action unauthorized by the institution, we may find a level of “performance” that institutions will be forced to ignore because they cannot interpret activism within a totalizing, assimilating narrative. Imagine transport as mobility, mobility as potentiality. To be able to walk in and walk out, and to return, is a freedom wielded by the radical subject (to be able to act freely is an agency wielded by the revolutionary subject). There is likely to be a price to pay for this exercise of agency and independence. While most enter the staged arena, the radical subject may depart. It is in the departure from managed performance that fractured subjects—and their present and future collaborations with collectives of affinity, shared passions, revolutionary aspirations—can be located.

We seek spaces that constitute their own sites of struggle. So we leave academia to make connections with collectivities within which our very elitism is challenged and devalued. As radical rather than revolutionary subjects, we accept our engagement with academic institutions while asserting our responsibility to be more than mere performers. Hence we offer ourselves, and encourage our students, to labor for justice.

The meaning of our productivity cannot be determined by academia alone. Seeking the exit door, we search for meaning, value, and political relevance given that our institutions are incapable of providing the conditions for radicalism as anything other than performance. Resistance to violent and premature social and biological death requires that we as activist researchers change into radical subjects.

**Note**

Introduction: The New Black Candidate

You are not to be so blind with patriotism that you can't face reality.

—Malcolm X

As U.S. global hegemony falters, and economic debacles and failed military policies multiply, Americans witness the rise of successful black male candidates seeking high office. That the diminishment of U.S. prestige and power transpires with the “blackening” of American electoral leadership suggests difficult challenges in facing critiques of racial division and exclusion. Election campaigns that promise to restore legitimacy to the practice and perception of U.S. imperial dominance illustrate how viable candidates—regardless of their experiential or ideological multiculturalism—avow a monoculturalism that embraces Judeo-Christian individualism and capitalism; unsustainable consumerism; underregulated corporate finance—prior to the global recession; and the validation of what President Dwight D. Eisenhower labeled the “military-industrial complex,” now expanded to include the “prison-industrial complex.”

As electoral competitors invoke “American idealism” to disavow the nuanced realities of U.S. abuses of power, they reinvigorate the disciplinary narratives of antiblack racism. Perhaps this partly explains why, despite unprecedented racial obfuscation in public discourse, within a nation that historically vilified them as the greatest threat to

white racial purity and mastery, black men increasingly are considered worthy of national or state executive office. Despite the prominence of Bush Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and Obama advisers (first lady) Michelle Obama, (cabinet appointee) Valerie Jarrett, and (UN representative) Susan Rice, males continue to dominate the public presence of black politicians. Perhaps only the dismal failure of George W. Bush’s policies—in May 2008, the President had an approval rating of about 28 percent—could have brought the nation to a trajectory so seemingly distant from—yet nonetheless evocative of—its old terrors and traumas shaped by racist fear and desire. Perhaps, the collective memory and resentment of being manipulated by racist stereotypes—such as filicidal Susan Smith’s false accusations about a black man abducting her white infants—have helped to create a more discerning voter. More likely, generations of civil and human rights activism have placed the United States on the path toward inclusive democracy; however, election cycles continue to reinvigorate racial biases for electoral gains.³

Cultural diversity and educational progress do not necessarily lead political campaigns to undervalue the role of racism in swaying the electorate. As their appeal broadens to attract and embrace “all” Americans, some black candidates press the reset button for the collective racial psyche. As the antithesis to and for the “every American,” criminalized blacks remain specters haunting the American dream. In order to “protect and serve,” or at least garner the votes of the valorized mainstream, successful black politicians would have to vanquish such spirits that potentially overshadow their candidacies.

In the unspoken racial contract on the campaign trail, valiant whites receive absolution from charges of racism by voting black. Voting against their historical domination of electoral politics as a racial bloc, they absolve themselves as progressives—and are absolved by their candidates—of the social stigma of the “cracker” (a pejorative affectionately used in 1988 by George W. Bush to introduce his father’s campaign strategist, Lee Atwater, at a Republican event—apparently, racial conservatives feel a lesser need for absolution).⁴

Consequently, and conveniently, a mutually beneficial relationship between the new black political class and the white electorate asserts itself as an antiracist phenomenon. The candidate and his campaign staff, or cabinet-in-waiting, establish themselves as the “good” black people worthy of mainstream America’s trust, partly or particularly because they are not accountable to an impoverished black mass
decimated by white supremacy and capitalism. Supporters valorize themselves as the “good” white people because they will vote for the “good” black people unaccountable to oppressed blacks. Of course, political content and programmatic intent register in the forms of debates, position papers, and proposed and pending legislation focusing on jobs, health care, renewable energy, unpopular wars. However, the unspoken racial transaction remains key in overcoming white racial polarization in the voting booth. Through electoral politics, both the new black political class and the mainstream white voter can shed past racial stigma and elevate their social status as pragmatic politicians and citizens who have moved beyond old antagonisms. In fact, in their electoral opposition to “bad” whites—that is, those, particularly the less well educated, who will not vote for black candidates—affluent whites redefine “racial purity”: the good white is color-blind. In repudiating as divisive blacks who challenge the skewing of material and moral wealth toward whites, black elites redefine racial authenticity: the good black expresses no racial solidarity. In addition, nonvoting among racially stigmatized groups generally is perceived as political immaturity rather than as political choice, as reflective of apathy rather than analysis. Still, amid the emergent affinity/identity politics of the new black candidate and the new white voter, hierarchies persist.

The American franchise stands on shifting standards tethered to racial domination. A black political presence or absence as a power bloc is commonly perceived as destabilizing or debasing American civic culture. For example, voting-while-black elicits racial profiling at the polls. Yet, whites voting black manifests as an antiracist act. Nonblacks who vote for blacks are seen as relinquishing narrow self-interest for the greater good. Yet, blacks who vote for other blacks can be portrayed as pursuing racial solidarity and power based on insecurity, ethnic pride or narcissism, and narrow self-interest. Same candidate preference, distinct racially constructed populations, different attributions of political ethics and civic virtue. From the conventional perspective, voting white is so normative that blacks, Latinos, Asians, Native Americans, and Middle Easterners who do so are not seen as “transcending” racial divisions; whereas whites who do so became the focus of National Public Radio reports during the 2008 presidential campaigns.

Race is wedded to class politics. A product of ivy-league universities, no matter how humble his origins, the new black candidate
reflects new social stratifications in which class privilege and racial etiquette, in the form of an uncompromised civility toward the mainstream, trump demands for “speaking truth to power.” Now, both black conservatives and pragmatic black liberals shoulder the burden of chastising those without institutional power: progressive radicals, the alienated, “too-black” ideologues or culturalists demanding antiracist accountability from the mainstream majority and its chosen political class.

In shifting class and racial identities, blackness remains fixed as negation (of civil society, of prosperity, of law and order, and of patriotism). Thus on the campaign trail, it is to be avoided or disciplined, or in the case of the candidate’s persona, transcended. Under white supremacy, only nonwhites collectively struggle with the “brand” of the criminal or uncivil; hence, only they collectively possess the trait of defective citizenry. Barack Obama’s June 2008 Father’s Day speech provides an illustration. The candidate addressed the black congregation of Chicago’s Apostolic Church of God, focusing on the antifamilial “deadbeat dad,” generally portrayed in society as a black phenomenon. Obama could have broadened the scope of his political sermon to gently reprimand white fathers at a historically white congregation. In addition to alienating white voters, this option would have led to a missed opportunity for the candidate to sharply distinguish himself from other black fathers, including his own Kenyan father. Admonishing white families, he would not have been able to demonstrate that the new black candidate represents the mainstream through its shared disdain for subaltern culture. The vulnerability of the autobiographical narrative of the absent father is real. So too is political gain through the reification of racial caricatures.

Running for Office: Sexism and Racism in Multicultural America

Running for office, black men (stereotyped) and white women as the most disconcerting member of the American political body—bring a new level of spectacle and scrutiny to elections. The 2008 Democratic presidential primary contests between Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, and the 2006 Massachusetts gubernatorial race between Democrat Deval Patrick and Republican Lt. Governor Kerry Healey illustrate not only the resilience of racist constructions embedded in notions of black criminality and
incivility but the unstable political stature of white women in pursuit of executive office.

When black men compete with and defeat white women for access to offices historically reserved for white men, some imagine that white racism is also defeated while others maintain that sexism is reinscribed. A structural feature of U.S. politics, sexism worked against both Clinton and Healey. However, white racism worked for them. In their respective losses to black candidates, Clinton and Healey, as white women, were “disciplined” by the majority of voters—not just by the black voters they were willing and able to alienate in their pursuit of dissipating white votes. Substantial numbers of whites abandoned both racist fears promoted through campaign rhetoric and the “establishment” politics of women “insiders” who were prominent officials.

In the two campaigns discussed here, Clinton and Healey as mainstream standard bearers, or “masculinized” white female candidates, attempted to demonstrate their leadership capabilities by presenting themselves as the “tougher” candidates regarding criminality and the breakdown of security and social order. As the heirs-apparent to their male mentors, respectively President Bill Clinton and 2008 presidential candidate in the GOP primaries, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, Clinton and Healey disparaged their black male opponents for being unqualified interlopers (“affirmative action babies”) possessing limited executive office experience, and as “soft” on threats to U.S. domestic and national security. Race and gender intersect within the candidates’ “security” narratives to target those bodies constructed as political outsiders — low-income blacks, immigrants, and Muslims.

Despite the prevalence of corporate corruption, the candidates in the 2006 and 2008 elections for executive office did not campaign against white-collar crime, criminality or malfeasance by public officials. Political speeches and campaign websites did not present institutional antisocial behavior such as profiteering by private contractors, disseminating false information on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction to start a war, authorizing illegal wiretaps of U.S. citizens, and torturing detainees as pervasive and antidemocratic features of state policies. Linking Republican presidential candidate John McCain to the Bush administration, Democrats portrayed these as aberrations stemming from the incumbent president; not as emanating from ills entrenched in the state bureaucracy.
A descriptor such as pathological is usually reserved to generalize blackness and poverty. None of the campaigns acknowledged racism and economic opportunism and exploitation to be a pervasive antidemocratic tendency in U.S. domestic and foreign policies. The white female candidates did not, because they could benefit from the racial-bias of white voters they did not wish to alienate; the black candidates did not for fear of being perceived as disloyal “whiners”—a pejorative that resonated with the attacks on affirmative action—and alienating white mainstream voters. Marketing themselves as agents for social change, all of the candidates avoided confrontations with the religious, class, and ethnic chauvinism of the American media and electorate. The campaigns located threats in stigmatized dark bodies; bodies that few politicians wished to champion; bodies rarely understood to be citizen and voter.8

Responding to accusations by their female opponents of being “weak,” “feminized” black male candidates worked to demonstrate that they too were “tough on crime” and incivility garbed in some form of blackness, radical politics, or both. The end result was the distancing by both parties from difficult discussions concerning unpopular causes and human rights abuses; and the verbal disciplining of those who attempted to raise the taboo issue of U.S.-fostered injustices at home and abroad.

Historically, whites would never embrace on ballot a black man over a white woman. Yet, in 2006 and 2008, they joined overwhelming numbers of multiracial voters to do so. This sign of democratic progress holds internal contradictions concerning gender and race. The campaigns reflected racial-sexual politics that pitted white men seeking “progressive change” through black male surrogates against white men seeking the continuance of their legacies through their female representatives’ ascent to executive office. In both the Obama and Patrick campaigns, did white male elites supporting the black Harvard alums repudiate their symbolic heroic roles of protectors of white females from black males? Voters likely rejected the symbolic white woman sullied by her fall from pedestal-anchored icon into an ambitious, unscrupulous politician.

Rather than pawns in the 2006 and 2008 elections, black men and women running for office minimized or erased their specificities and desires in order to foster the generic party politician. Despite the text on their campaign websites, each camp understood that to publicly embrace antiracism—if you were black—or feminism—if
you were female—would be to step into an ideological bog that hampers the ability to garner votes. (Discussions of heterosexism were generally reduced to marriage/civil union as a civil rights issue; none of the major party candidates supported the right to marry for gay/lesbian/transgendered citizens.)

Loyalists to party machines, Healey and Clinton were neither damsels in distress nor reformers. The women became hybrid fem-masculines, surrogates for “old school” male dominance that had nurtured their ascent into institutional power. Willing to publicly decry the sexism of their black male opponents, such candidates found it best to keep private any insights into the white patriarchal institutions within which they—and their opposition—operated. Their own ambivalence toward ideological feminism would likely prove a political liability, either confusing women voters who identified with them as feminist role models or alienating men who identified with them as champions of white “rights” (under white supremacy).

The women candidates’ political capital derived from their direct and intimate, in some cases familial, associations with structures dominated by influential white men. As insiders with financial and political connections superior to those of their black male rivals, they derided upstarts who would become usurpers. Elite white women, appended to the policies of elite white men, played hardball politics in “scorched earth” campaigns in which race would be an unacknowledged but key strategy. White female warriors have questionable racial and feminine value when attacking black males whose campaigns are run by elite white males. Racial value is measured by one’s ability and willingness to service the needs of one’s racial group; when that group politically or ideologically splinters, the need and value of that service diminishes. Feminine value is determined by one’s ability to fulfill the desire or need of masculine culture to have a distinct and flattering contrast. That value is difficult to maintain once one begins to perform publicly and combatively as “one of the guys.” As she enters patriarchal political theaters, the white female’s worth as feminine icon to be championed plummets. The catch-22 is that this icon is hardly characterized as competent for executive office. The racial divide further complicates this scenario. Historically, whites never extended the attribution of female vulnerability worthy of male protection to blacks. To do so would legitimize the prosecution of white males, from slave masters to senators, for
their abuse of black females. Today, the caricature of emasculating, aberrational black females (depicted in “The Moynihan Report”) morphs onto white female politicians who as pugilists attempted to discipline and vanquish their black male opponents. In the course of their campaigns, they became increasingly viewed and portrayed with contempt. What became perceived as their excesses in racist rhetoric and their excessive political ambitions fueled public ridicule of their candidacies and character.

Despite the recycling of old alienations and the emergence of novel estrangements, both the Obama/Clinton and Patrick/Healey campaigns represented something new in American politics: the possibility of either the first white woman or the first black man to be elected to executive offices for centuries exclusively held only by white men. Along with these historic “firsts,” both campaigns reconfigured racial and gender politics to echo familiar narratives. (Of course, the inability of black women, such as former presidential contenders Congresswomen Shirley Chisholm and Cynthia McKinney and Senator Carole Moseley Braun, to mount viable campaigns for executive office warrants scrutiny.)

**Obama/Clinton 2008**

Remember who we are as Democrats. We are the party of Jefferson and Jackson, of Roosevelt and Kennedy.

—Barack Obama following his May 2008 North Carolina victory over Hillary Clinton

It should be evident that the above presidents invoked by candidate Barack Obama were either hostile to or indifferent towards blacks. To various degrees, all accommodated white supremacy. Andrew Jackson and Thomas Jefferson were prominent slaveholders; Jefferson—the first president to introduce a black family into the White House—was particularly virulent in his racism. Franklin Delano Roosevelt had to be prodded by his wife Eleanor, and John F. Kennedy by his brother Robert, before each President would authorize legislation to destabilize American apartheid. Responding to candidate Obama’s 2008 exhortation to remember, we might ask: “Exactly who are we as Democrats in this lineage?” On the campaign trail, amid calls for unity, it is tedious, painstaking, and divisive to address racial-economic stratification with specific
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policies to redress past and present injustices. Often candidates in pursuit of executive office, choose the path of least resistance.

The first major stumble on the road to the White House occurred for Barack Obama in April 2008, when the issue of race or racism became, for most whites, a confrontation with an unacceptable and uncivil blackness: Obama’s former pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. The candidate delivered his “A More Perfect Union” address in Philadelphia’s Constitutional Hall in response to media fixation on spliced and decontextualized sound bites of Wright’s sermons from previous years. Captured on tape, Wright’s denunciations of U.S. domestic and foreign policies—most controversial were the accusations of U.S. biological warfare against blacks and statements that 9/11 was a response to U.S. terrorism abroad—looped the national airways. Soon after, sound bites from Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” dominated YouTube (the generational and educational divisions in the electorate shaped preferred informational technologies). “A More Perfect Union” seemed to briefly bury the issue of “racial divisions”—specifically black rage against ongoing racial injustice—and reassure Main Street, or at least its more stable and prosperous property owners, that the candidate was loyal to them.

However, weeks before the April 23 Pennsylvania primary, Obama’s closed-session statements at a California meeting (publicized by a blogger) about “bitter” whites who “cling to guns and religion” and will not vote for “others” diminished the candidate’s populist appeal among whites, particularly lower-middle and working-class voters. Clinton won the Pennsylvania primary by nearly ten points (she had polled a 20-point lead prior to her fabricated accounts of wartime heroism dodging bullets on a tarmac in Bosnia under sniper fire). On May 13 she would win West Virginia—a predominately white and working-class state—by a landslide forty points, with a Kentucky victory later that month. Both states featured higher percentages of undereducated and impoverished white voters than the national norm.

Obama’s supposed gaffe about bitter whites presumably led to Clinton’s rise in the polls (as the media would spin it); yet it is unclear if this demographic of lower-income, less formally educated whites, who aligned with Clinton in Ohio prior to “Bittergate,” would have voted for Obama in any case. Nonetheless, the candidate’s “misspeak” had increased resonance in light of noncandidate Wright’s “incivility.” In sharp contrast to Rev. Martin
Luther King Jr.—for whom all three presidential contenders, Obama, Clinton, and Republican Senator John McCain claimed an affinity—Wright’s political sermonizing suggested the style and substance of Malcolm X. His “chickens coming home to roost” reference to 9/11—without attribution to Malcolm X’s infamous pronouncement following the assassination of President Kennedy—sharply contrasted with King’s rhetorical style as emulated by Obama—at least the March on Washington, “I Have a Dream” King, prior to his reflections on the postmarch bombing of the Birmingham Church that killed four black girls. Obama’s speeches ignored King’s last sermons in opposition to U.S. militarism and imperialism. Understandably so from a politician’s point of view: the New York Times had condemned Rev. King for stating that God would “break” this mighty empire given its militarist and racist transgressions.

Few viewed Wright, a former U.S. Marine and medical attendant to President Lyndon Johnson, as offering a radical analysis about structural repression. Many citizens disparaged Wright’s anger and “paranoia” in citing U.S. state-sponsored violence and suggesting that these policies produced the September 11, 2001 terrorists. Widespread ridicule and condemnation of Wright failed to reference Fort Benning, Georgia’s “School of the Americas” training of Central American death squads, the Iran-Contra scandal, Central Intelligence Agency covert operations supporting terrorist counter-revolutionaries in Southern Africa and Latin America, and violations of the Bolin Amendment. Complicated realities disappear in amnesic campaign discourse and media reporting disappeared from public view realities that would have framed Wright’s castigations.

Wright resurrected “black rage” (widely read as antiwhite incivility) on April 28, at the National Press Club, when he criticized Obama as a “politician who would say anything to get elected.” (Obama’s June speech before Jewish leaders advocating an undivided Jerusalem would provide some legitimacy to this accusation.) Wright’s televised appearance, largely categorized and dismissed as a self-aggrandizing “performance,” seemed to indicate that Clinton would win the nomination. However, after formally denouncing Wright, Obama progressed toward his party’s nomination.

He did not escape the criticisms of independent black journalists though. In its April 30–May 5, 2008 Black Agenda Report (BAR),
Executive Editor Glen Ford observed in “Obama’s Race Neutral Strategy Unravels of Its Own Contradictions” that:

For people like Rev. Jeremiah Wright, mass Black incarceration and slavery are seamlessly linked, part of the continuity of racial oppression in the U.S. Most African Americans see the world the way Rev. Wright does—that’s why he’s among the top five rated preacher-speakers in Black America. This Black American worldview, excruciatingly aware of the nation’s origins in genocide and slavery, is wholly incompatible with the American mythology championed by Barack Obama.¹¹

Race neutrality is the dominant template in American mainstream discourse. As “neutral” and, hence, “objective,” one would not debate how racism or white supremacy shaped federal and state government responses to the Army Corps of Engineers’ faulty levees that allowed posthurricane flooding. One would simply deny the realities as racially fashioned phenomena. Concerning New Orleans, far more than whites, blacks view the abandonment of the impoverished, the “shoot-to-kill” edicts for survivors, the dispersal of populations with no right to return, gentrification speculation accompanied by the demolition of public housing as racist or “racial.” As did Bush cabinet appointees Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell in 2005—Barack Obama denied that state behavior was racist toward black survivors of broken/breached levees. Thus, Obama’s campaign speech mirrored that of rival McCain, who criticized a Bush bureaucracy that could “not get bottled water to babies.” “Race-neutral” language is presidential language. The Obama campaign website under the heading “Katrina” criticizes the Bush administration’s “unconscionable ineptitude.” Generally, antiracist discourse, as political discourse, is perceived as “uncivil” when directed at the government or the mainstream voter. Although the Bush administration had lost credibility following FEMA’s mismanagement of and the administration’s early indifference to the humanitarian crisis, major party campaigns found it imprudent to publicly scrutinize or theorize on the role of race in the government’s lack of accountability to citizens.

Antiracist speech sometimes proves useful in electoral strategies, although narratives are increasingly complex. Consider the Sean Bell tragedy. Following the April 16 Pennsylvania debate, a New
York City judge issued the verdict in the killing of Sean Bell, an African American, by black and white off-duty police officers. In November 2006, police fired fifty shots at Bell, while he was seated behind the wheel of his car and in the company of friends who had attended his bachelor party at an afterhours club. The unarmed black men were allegedly trying to flee armed unidentified police after a verbal dispute in the club. The judge acquitted all NYPD officers of all charges. Campaigning in Indiana weeks before the May 6 primary (he would win North Carolina by a significant margin and lose Indiana to Clinton by less than two percentage points), Obama responded to a reporter’s query about the verdict. The media widely circulated the following statement: “We’re a nation of laws, so we respect the verdict that came down. Resorting to violence to express displeasure over a verdict is something that is completely unacceptable and is counterproductive.” There were few reports that New Yorkers planned to respond to the acquittal with violence; although boycotts and nonviolent demonstrations were anticipated.

The full text of Obama’s comments is more nuanced than the sound bite that sounded purely disciplinary:

Well, look, obviously there was a tragedy in New York. I said at the time, without benefit of all the facts before me, that it looked like a possible case of excessive force. The judge has made his ruling, and we’re a nation of laws, so we respect the verdict that came down. The most important thing for people who are concerned about that shooting is to figure out how do we come together and assure those kinds of tragedies don’t happen again. Resorting to violence to express displeasure over a verdict is something that is completely unacceptable and counterproductive.

The abbreviated text that appeared in the press was strongly criticized by *BAR* and other progressive black publications for both its rhetorical preemptive strike against “rioters” and civil unrest that never materialized, and its absence of a condemnation of violence by state employees. Critics claimed that Obama’s “law and order” statement was addressed to black New Yorkers but delivered to a white audience. The press immediately juxtaposed the Illinois
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senator’s brief comments with the more thoughtful and politically astute written statement released by New York Senator Clinton:

This tragedy has deeply saddened New Yorkers—and all Americans. My thoughts are with Nicole and her children and the rest of Sean’s family during this difficult time. The court has given its verdict, and now we await the conclusion of a Department of Justice civil rights investigation. We must also embrace this opportunity to take steps—in our communities, in our law enforcement agencies, and in our government—to make sure this does not happen again.

Clinton’s language of condolence, enumeration of a legal process—court decrees, further investigation, possible appeals—channel potential frustration and possible civil disobedience into law-abiding behavior without chastising the outraged or grieving. The use of the possessive plural “our,” which also encompasses the perpetrators of police brutality, creates a unifying whole in which dissenting voices portraying the police as “our enemies in blue” are neutralized. Clinton more skillfully met the same phenomenon of antiblack state violence by articulating it as reprehensible while solidifying (black) obedience to state power as “law and order.”

The issue of political violence within the nation would become central in the debates. During the 2008 presidential campaigns, incivility and criminality migrated from the black to the white body during the CBS-sponsored April 16 Democratic primary debate between Obama and Clinton. ABC news anchor and former Clinton White House staffer George Stephanopoulos, after raising the issue of Obama’s ties to Jeremiah Wright, questioned the candidate about domestic terrorism via his association with Bill Ayers. Hailing from one of the most privileged sectors of white America, Ayers had been active in the Students for a Democratic Society before joining the Weather Underground in the early 1970s. While running for the Illinois State Assembly, Obama had attended a fund-raiser at the Ayers home; he had also in the past served on an educational board with Ayers, a professor at the University of Illinois–Chicago; his wife Bernadine Dohrn, another former Weather Underground leader, is a law professor at Northwestern University. Political and racial strife and controversy are familiar to Chicago. Massive antiwar demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic National Convention (DNC), led by
uncivil whites such as Abbie Hoffman, were violently suppressed by Mayor Richard Daley’s police. The following year, Black Panther Party leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were assassinated by a multiracial FBI–Chicago Police Department detail in a predawn December raid.

Taking a cue from debate moderators, Hilary Clinton stressed the connection between Obama and terrorists. Obama responded that President Clinton had given clemency to several members of the Weathermen who, unlike Ayers, were convicted and imprisoned for crimes. In fact, in January 2001, on his last day in office, Bill Clinton granted a pardon to his younger brother (a convicted drug dealer) and clemency to Puerto Rican independence militarists as well as Linda Evans and Susan Rosenberg, two white women incarcerated for their support of antiracist, anti-imperialist organizations. Clinton’s leniency encompassed white and Latino political prisoners, as well as wealthy white criminals such as Marc Rich whose family funded millions into Bill Clinton’s foundation initiatives; yet the former “black” president offered no forgiveness to black political prisoners.

The primary debate and ensuing media sound bites offered little context for the era of social unrest represented by Ayers. Few commentaries, with the exception of independent journalist Amy Goodman’s Democracy Now! investigated the reasons for radical resistance to state violence or the government’s continued warfare against political dissidents. The focus on the disaffected, affluent white rebel Bill Ayers obscured activism and state repression against nonelite political actors. The attention given to Ayers ignored the murderous aspects of the FBI’s counterintelligence program and CIA-engineered warfare, and resistance to that terror. As Obama distanced from Ayers, the opportunities for national discussions and debates to place state violence and terrorism into a historical context and analytical framework receded.

Later during the general election, McCain would echo Hillary Clinton. As had Clinton with Democrats, McCain resonated with most voters as the stronger “law and order” candidate when compared to Barack Obama. Recycling Clinton’s rhetoric during the primaries, McCain entered into the controversy: “He [Obama] became friends with Ayers and spent time with him while the guy was unrepentant over his activities as a member of a terrorist organization, the Weathermen. Does he condemn them? Would he condemn someone who says they’re unrepentant and wished that they had bombed more?” In
fact, Barack Obama did condemn Ayers and Weather Underground actions as reprehensible; he did so while remaining silent about human rights violations embedded in U.S. policies. His campaign reminded voters that the candidate was eight-years-old when the Weathermen engaged in violent acts to end the U.S. war in Vietnam. The Obama campaign did not counter its critics with the information that Ayers’s comments expressing a lack of remorse were taped months prior to promote his memoir but the book review was published on September 11, 2001. Nor did the campaign attempt to contextualize Ayers’s statements about violent dissent.

Ayers had provided a context that could have been evaluated and debated before being condemned. He had stated that some 2,000 Vietnamese were dying a day—the war would leave more than 55,000 Americans and 2,000,000 Vietnamese dead—and that he wished he could have done more to stop the killings and bombings (concerning Laos and Cambodia, some sources attribute one U.S. bomb every 8 minutes, 24 hours a day, for 9 years). Weathermen were quick to cite that only their members had died from their bombs. A botched bomb-making attempt in New York City’s West Village demolished a brownstone and killed three members of the organization, which may suggest that careful planning might not have been the only reason for the low number of Weather casualties.

Understandably, Obama effectively distanced himself from Bill Ayers and Jeremiah Wright in order to win the Democratic primary and later the national election. Both men, in very different ways and within radically different structures, denounced racist militarism as terrorism. The Weather Underground and the prophetic wing of the black church, respectively, condemned state violence abroad and at home. Mainstream citizenry would, of course, choose the nation over its radical, activist critics. Obama would, of course, side with mainstream voters.

In election cycles, a narrative that develops context in order to highlight deadly and illegal U.S. policies is often viewed as a distraction and a liability. The dominant topics in conventional campaigns are the economy, “bread-and-butter” issues, and national security. Playing “catch up,” Obama spokesmen’s pointed rebuttals to critics recognized no political logic for progressive or radical or revolutionary acts against state violence; only legislative acts, the agency of the political class, had currency. Without the appearance of state violence in our discourse, the presence of resistance becomes viewed as irrational.
Political agency disciplined by revolutionary struggle is perceived as criminality, or political and social insanity. Thus, only the politician is understood as the rational harbinger of “change”; and the conventional wisdom remains that she or he need only say what they will do for us—once we have elected them into executive office.

**Patrick/Healey 2006**

Sometimes I wonder if we get so discouraged that we cannot even imagine what a whole, functioning, peaceful national community could be like. But just imagine:

Imagine a nation where young people find love and companionship in a neighborhood instead of a gang . . . Imagine a nation that addresses the causes of crime and violence, instead of just warehousing offenders so they come out more dangerous than they were when they went in . . . .

Imagine a nation at peace, vigilant but without fear, whose position as a force for good in the world is restored. . . . This election is not just about who we want but about who we are. I want a president who understands that. That’s why I am with Barack Obama.

—Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick

“Superdelegate” Deval Patrick proved a key Obama adviser during the primaries. Patrick’s hard-fought 2006 electoral ordeal provides insightful instruction into campaign racial mandates. Both Harvard Law graduates mirror each other in political trajectories, language, and reform agendas. Likely Governor Patrick’s experiences of racial and sexual dynamics in his 2006 race proved useful to his presidential counterpart. In the 2006 Massachusetts gubernatorial campaign, the Republican candidate, Lt. Governor Kerry Healey made convicted rapist Ben LaGuer’s name notorious in Massachusetts, linking it to that of Democrat Deval Patrick. Patrick’s past support for fair-trial advocacy for the prisoner seemed a perfect opportunity for his opponents to recycle the Republicans’ 1988 Willie Horton strategy to secure the presidency for George H. W. Bush. Devised by Republican National Committee leader Lee Atwater to portray Democratic Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis as “soft on crime” and indifferent to (interracial) rape of (white) women, the Horton strategy centered on the case of a black
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convicted murderer who brutally assaulted a white couple, raping
the woman while on a prison work furlough in Massachusetts.

Racially driven negative campaigning, which some attributed to
Karl Rove, a Lee Atwater mentee, invigorated the incumbent Lt.
Governor’s campaign. Even when competing candidates are white,
public fears remain filtered through a racial lens. For example,
Bush’s 1988 use of black convicted rapist Willie Horton in campaign
commercials against Dukakis—Atwater infamously stated that he
would make Willie Horton Dukakis’s running mate—was followed
in 1992 by Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton’s use of black convicts
as photographic/visual opportunities to demonstrate his antiterror
credentials qualifying him to displace a sitting president—one who
had famously broken his campaign promise to not raise taxes.¹⁶

The resurrection of Willie Horton in the form of Ben LaGuer
became a fatal, strategic error for Republicans in Massachusetts in
2006, though. Perhaps having witnessed firsthand their governor’s
defeat by the Bush campaign’s smear tactics (which included
circulating false rumors that the governor’s wife, Kitty Dukakis,
had burned the American flag while participating in radical student
protests in the 1960s), Massachusetts voters were too jaded for
similar racist strategies nearly two decades later. Consequently, when
Healey attempted to depict Patrick as a sympathizer of rapists—in
fact, as coming himself from a family of rapists—she derailed her
campaign.

Journalist Eric Goldscheider notes the complexities and
contradictions surrounding Ben LaGuer’s 1983 arrest, trial, and
conviction, focusing on inconsistencies in the prosecution’s case that
rarely circulated in the media.¹⁷ The fifty-nine-year-old working-
class white survivor (she died in 1999 from causes unrelated to
the assault) had been institutionalized over an extended period
for mental illness. No witnesses, confession, or credible material
evidence were introduced in the 1983 trial that convicted LaGuer;
nor was the survivor’s mental and emotional health brought to
the attention of jurors, some of whom used racial slurs to discuss
the defendant. Only police and the victim’s coached testimony
linked LaGuer to the assault for nearly twenty years. In 2002,
disputed DNA results, which Patrick helped to pay for, would
provide the only physical evidence indicating LaGuer’s guilt. Those
results would later be put into controversy given the charges of
contaminated and tampered with evidence.
Sovereign Political Subjects

Incarcerated for decades, as a young black Latino rapist of a middle-aged white woman, LaGuer nonetheless managed to mobilize an array of influential male supporters. James C. Rehnquist, the son of the late chief justice, is his current attorney. Elie Wiesel, William Styron, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Noam Chomsky, and John Silber have all supported LaGuer at some time over the years. While imprisoned, he earned a bachelor’s degree with honors from Boston University and a prestigious Pen Award. Understandably, civil rights attorney Deval Patrick would find LaGuer’s case compelling and join such a distinguished group of fair-trial supporters. Under political pressure to win an election, gubernatorial candidate Patrick though would pronounce LaGuer “guilty as charged.” Yet the chronicle of events researched by Goldscheider and others suggests that Patrick’s pronouncement was opportunistic. A brief summation of the politicization of the case during the 2006 election follows.

In 1983, a young police officer, Dean Mazzarella, arrived at the scene of the crime in Leominster, Massachusetts, and later accompanied the victim in the ambulance to the hospital. On September 28, 2006, Leominster Mayor Dean Mazzarella informed the media that he believed that if elected governor Deval Patrick would grant Ben LaGuer preferential treatment. Repeatedly through the media and talk radio, Mayor Mazzarella attacked LaGuer and Deval Patrick’s past support for a review of the LaGuer case. Talk radio descriptions of the victim’s brutalization steadily fed the animus against candidate Patrick, who had initially and erroneously informed the media that he had offered no tangible support to LaGuer.

When Mazzarella demanded a meeting with Patrick, the candidate complied. (Later as governor, Patrick appointed Mazzarella to a special commission on Massachusetts towns and cities.) When the victim’s daughter, Elizabeth, and her husband Robert Barry demanded an official apology, Patrick called to offer his sympathy for the pain caused by the recent publicity. Robert Barry publicly rebuked him for not having a stronger disavowal of LaGuer. Afterward, Barry invited television crews into their home to continue his denunciations of Patrick. Later, at a press conference with Elizabeth Barry suffering from Lou Gehrig’s disease and confined in a wheelchair, the Barrys endorsed Kerry Healey. Although Patrick responded to the negative publicity by stating that “justice has been served” in the LaGuer case, that was not enough to quiet the opposition’s and the media or public fixation on the prisoner and his former fair-trial advocate.
While Patrick was attacked for his past support for LaGuer, Healey was heralded as the champion of the rights of victims—visually rendered as lower-middle or working-class whites afflicted by black predators. Neither campaign addressed the reality of blacks victimized by racial bias in the criminal justice system. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) attorney and Clinton appointee for civil rights was very familiar with racial and class bias in the judicial system; yet Patrick did not challenge assertions that discussions or critiques of racial bias in sentencing and prosecution were either irrelevant or an apologia for black criminality.

When the *Boston Globe* published Deval Patrick’s 1998 letter, written on behalf of LaGuer’s petition for parole and resubmitted at a 2000 hearing, media revealed that the Democratic candidate had written a $5,000 check in support of LaGuer’s quest for DNA testing. Patrick had earlier denied providing funds. For most, that DNA testing, with allegedly contaminated samples, confirmed LaGuer’s role in the assault. The Patrick gubernatorial campaign appeared to unravel under the weight of condemnation surrounding this case.

Other infomercials decrying Patrick’s affinity for criminals were aired. The Healey campaign unveiled a television advertisement chastising Patrick, who while working as a NAACP attorney, had successfully represented a white Floridian on death row for killing a police officer, reducing his sentence to life in prison. That ad misfired though as Massachusetts attorneys and the Massachusetts Bar roundly condemned Healey—who is not an attorney—for the “guilt by association” attack.

Unlike Hillary Clinton, Healey had not polled well among white women. Perceiving the political vulnerability of her opponent, she devised a new attack ad. In it, she revived the black rapist trope that Ida B. Wells had campaigned against in 1892, and that the Bush campaign had refurbished in 1988. Through radio and television outlets augmented by talk radio, Patrick was portrayed as indifferent to rape. Unlike the smear campaigns against Democratic contenders in 1988, Patrick’s race forced him into a close proximity with the stereotyped sexual predator that Dukakis would never have. The white governor-presidential candidate wields a representational distance from the black convict that eludes a black candidate. Just in case the voters were not clear about Patrick’s vulnerability by
association, Healey campaign volunteers organized a pseudo-vigilante group, the self-proclaimed “Inmates for Deval.”

After running the ad that focused on Patrick’s misleading statements about his relationship with LaGuer, the Healey campaign pulled ahead of Patrick among white male voters. Yet she continued to trail among white women. Seeking to close that gender gap, the Republicans released an advertisement that inadvertently destroyed her campaign. The advertisement used Patrick’s statement made before 2006 that LaGuer “is eloquent and he is thoughtful” in a television commercial in which a nervous woman walks through a dimly lit parking garage with the voice over, “Have you ever heard a woman compliment a rapist? Deval Patrick—he should be ashamed, not governor.”

The ad was released simultaneously with a *Boston Herald* article that Patrick had helped shield his brother-in-law from registering as a sex offender when he moved to Massachusetts. The marital rape of Patrick’s sister took place twenty years earlier; the couple had sought counseling and reunited; the case was allegedly sealed. Until the *Boston Herald* report, their children were unaware that their father had been briefly incarcerated for raping their mother. Patrick immediately held a press conference to passionately denounce the Healey campaign tactics as “pathetic”: “This is the politics of Kerry Healey and it disgusts me and it has to stop.”

During the following weeks, the majority of polled voters expressed a negative view of the lieutenant governor. On election day in 2006, Deval Patrick became the first black governor of the State of Massachusetts and the second in the nation. Later the senior campaign adviser to Barack Obama, Governor Deval Patrick would state: “Senator Obama and I are longtime friends and allies. We often share ideas about politics, policy and language.”

Those shared ideas, language, and alliances would entail how to differentiate the new black candidate from criminalized blackness and how to distance from critiques of antiblack racism that could produce a white backlash.

**Conclusion: Election Cycles and Racial Mandates**

Election cycles are continuous. Somewhere, someplace, some district attorney, city council member, mayor, private citizen, or public official is seeking office. Those candidates who position
themselves as “law and order” advocates may also find that they have signed onto campaigns against racially fashioned criminality and incivility. The majority of the over 2,000,000 incarcerated Americans (1 in 100 adults—the highest incarceration rate in the world) are black or brown; most are imprisoned for nonviolent drug offenses, although whites commit the majority of economic and drug offenses. The most economically and politically disenfranchised sectors are those most in need of—and the least likely to receive—protection and assistance. The socially, economically, and politically dispossessed are stigmatized by race. Driving or flying, shopping or voting while black or brown reflect the heightened surveillance and policing of bodies within the discriminatory practices of U.S. democracy. Our political campaigns for executive office do not depart from this template of antiblack animus.

Americans have the opportunity to demand that political campaigns confront criminality and incivility as they factually appear, not within racial stereotypes but in society without prosecutions biased by race and class, and within government abuses of civil and human rights and corporate finance betrayals of public trust. American citizens may also choose to confront black candidates that exploit racial phobias. Seeking a “more perfect union” as informed and enlightened citizenry requires challenges to racial repression coded as “law and order” mandates. Voters may yet demand a greater democracy. That they would do so independent of campaigns to resist racist and genocidal logic seems an unlikely American prospect.

Notes

1. Quoted in the May 2008 Warfield CAAAS, Jester Hall display tribute to Sean Bell, killed by New York police.

2. For discussions of “multicultural white supremacy,” see Jared Sexton, Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Dylan Rodríguez, Forced Passages (Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

3. Repudiations of white supremacy in popular culture and academia also increased the new black candidates’ appeal. With its largely affluent, white female viewers, The Oprah Winfrey Show commanded such clout that 2000 presidential rivals George W. Bush and Al Gore appeared on the show to solicit votes. Winfrey was an early and active supporter of Barack Obama who strengthened his presidential candidacy with
appearances on Jon Stewart’s The Daily Show, Stephen Colbert’s The Colbert Report, and Saturday Night Live. These comedy shows playfully satirized him while ridiculing conservative racial bias, magnetizing youth toward the Democratic nominee. For decades, critical studies and Africana studies have influenced campus and popular culture as the college-educated became less comfortable with blatant racism and race-based voting, biases apparently or allegedly more firmly rooted among poorer, undereducated “Hillary Democrats” and conservative Republicans.


6. In a May 7, 2008 Lehrer Newshour segment on “race and the media,” Keith Woods, Dean of the Faculty of the Pointer Institute School of Journalism in Florida, and Kathleen Hall Jamerson, University of Pennsylvania’s Anaheim School of Journalism, analyzed the primary campaigns. Woods argued that in most reporting of the 2008 Democratic primaries the labels themselves corrupted analysis as phrases such as “lunch bucket Democrats, soccer moms and Nascar dads” became euphemisms for whites, and the discourse about “Latinos, Asians, native Americans virtually disappeared.” According to Woods, racial reductionism assumed an unsophisticated electorate where white working-class voters who do not vote for Obama are “bigots” and blacks who do are “mindless sheep.”

Stating that Obama and Clinton were running to be president, not respectively the “first” African American or woman president, Jamerson noted voting divisions by race, geography (rural vs. urban), age, and gender. Dismissing media jargon, she maintained that campaign coverage use of terms such as postracial or media claims that the Wright controversy burst the “post-racial moment” enabled people to talk freely about race and class, “something we know nothing about.” See the online Lehrer Newshour, accessed December 15, 2008, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/jan-june08/race_05–07.html.

7. In both elections, the media extensively explored the issues of “race” and “gender.” It did not, however, extensively address the construction of criminality and incivility as forms of “blackness” designated for discipline, and how such punitive constructions might affect the gendered conflicts between the candidates. That the male candidates were able to sufficiently shake off racist stereotypes surrounding their personal character in order to defeat their white female opponents
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does not necessarily indicate the demise of narratives marrying blackness to criminality, sexual deviancy, and social incivility. Gender struggles also take place within racially charged arenas regardless of which sex seeks high office (an exception to this would be transgendered candidates).

8. One notable exception is Bush Secretary of State Colin Powell’s postprimary endorsement of Barack Obama. Powell criticized the Republican Party for inaccurately portraying the candidate as Muslim, stating that GOP attacks were insulting to Muslim Americans. Powell maintained that any Muslim American boy should be able to grow up dreaming of becoming president of the United States. This condemnation of bigotry, from a conservative military careerist, would logically also apply to Hillary Clinton’s rhetoric questioning Obama’s Christianity, and Obama’s distancing from Muslim Americans and Palestinian human rights. See Meet the Press, “Powell Endorses Obama for President: Republican Ex-secretary of State Calls Democrat ‘Transformational Figure,’” updated October 19, 2008, accessed December 16, 2008, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/27265369/ns/meet_the_press/t/powell-endorse-obama-president.

9. With the admonishment that “those people loved their President,” Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad, in part to remove a powerful rival, censored Malcolm X, and within a year expelled him from the Nation of Islam. Kennedy Administration foreign policy forays included: the Bay of Pigs, assassination attempts against Fidel Castro, the destabilization of elected democracies in Latin America, the expansion of the U.S. military in Vietnam, and CIA involvement in the assassination of freedom fighter and the first elected leader of the Republic of the Congo, Patrice Lumumba.


11. The following more complete excerpt from Wright was rarely disseminated to the general public: “Based on this Tuskegee experiment and based on what has happened to Africans in this country, I believe our government is capable of doing anything. In fact . . . what Saddam Hussein had in terms of biological warfare was a non-question, because all we had to do was check the sales records. We sold him those biological weapons that he was using against his own people. So any time a government can put together biological warfare to kill people, and then get angry when those people use what we sold them, yes, I believe we are capable [of engineering AIDS].” Wright also denounced the war and occupation in Nicaragua as illegal
and immoral, and past U.S. support for the apartheid government in South Africa. Without the assertion of a connection between U.S. policies and AIDS, prominent academics and intellectuals such as MIT professor emeritus Noam Chomsky have documented U.S. support for state terrorism. When Obama denounced Wright—who declared that the media attacks on him were actually directed at the black church’s prophetic role—he rejected a black radical tradition. The candidate astutely argued that this “racial” “nonissue” was framed and fanned by the media to the disadvantage of discussions of the economy and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

12. In “Obama clarifies united J’lem comment,” Jerusalem Post Washington correspondent Hilary Leila Krieger writes: “Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel, and it must remain undivided,’ Obama declared Wednesday, to rousing applause from the 7000-plus attendees at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee policy conference. But a campaign adviser clarified Thursday that Obama believes ‘Jerusalem is a final status issue, which means it has to be negotiated between the two parties’ as part of ‘an agreement that they both can live with.’” Krieger quotes Jewish conservatives’ disappointment in the candidate’s shifting position. the Jerusalem Post, June 6, 2008, accessed September 3, 2009, http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1212659672984&pagename=JPost.


14. BAR editor Ford dismissively described Iowa, which launched Obama’s presidential career, as a state that is 98 percent white yet incarcerates blacks at thirteen times the rate of whites. According to “Blacks in Iowa Prison: Disproportionate Numbers, but Possible Solutions Questionable,” which used statistics from the Sentencing Project, the 2007 rate of incarceration for Blacks was “13.6 times that of whites”; blacks constitute “2.3% of Iowa’s population but 25% of its prison population.” D. Boone, “Blacks in Iowa Prison: Disproportionate Numbers, but Possible Solutions Questionable,” Iowa Independent, October 4, 2007, accessed May 13, 2008, http://www.iowaindependent.com/showDiary.do?diaryId=1224.

15. In January 2007, the U.S. government arrested former Black Panther Party members on charges related to the 1971 killing of San Francisco police officer Sgt. John Young, and conspiracy for illegal acts
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17. Eric Goldscheider’s “LaGuer Reconsidered,” provides the following detailed account of the case. Early state malfeasance seems to stem from the now deceased lead detective, Ronald Carignan, whose unorthodox procedures were later supported by the district attorney. Ben LaGuer was arrested on July 15, 1983. Without physical evidence or a confession, police decided the guilt of LaGuer, who shares the same race and ethnicity but not physical description of a man who may have been the perpetrator. LaGuer lived next door to the victim when the crime occurred; yet, another black Puerto Rican had also lived in the building and associated with the survivor; he had a history of mental illness and sexual assault but has to this date never been interviewed by detectives. The grand jury indictment was based on disinformation provided by Carignan who informed the grand jury that the crime had occurred in LaGuer’s apartment; it in fact had occurred in the victim’s apartment. The detective claimed that the victim was unable to appear at the hearing although she had already been released from the hospital. So, the detective became the sole spokesman for narrating the events of the crime. He stated that the victim identified LaGuer as her assailant to the police; although she later denied this, she did identify LaGuer as her attacker during the trial. Carignan testified that he recovered only one partial fingerprint from the scene of a crime that took place over eight hours; yet, in November 2001, a report emerged showing that four full fingerprints were retrieved from the base of a telephone whose cord had been used to bind the victim’s wrists. The prints did not belong to LaGuer and were subsequently lost (or destroyed) by the District Attorney’s office. The detective, who kept the rape kit and
items confiscated from LaGuer’s apartment in his car trunk during his summer vacation, allegedly mixed underclothes he had taken from LaGuer’s apartment with evidence collected at the crime scene. This compromised evidence would later be introduced at the 1989 trial to convict LaGuer. The same evidence was used in 2002 as “reliable” samples for DNA testing which claimed to prove “conclusively” LaGuer’s guilt. Eric Goldscheider, “LaGuer Reconsidered,” Valley Advocate, August 17, 2006, accessed September 3, 2009, http://www.eric-goldscheider.com/id128.html.


18. Although Governor Deval Patrick would tell the public that Kerry Healey was better than the campaign she ran, members of the Harvard Theatre Review Board, for the first time in the organization’s history, denied a solicited nominee and past supporter a place at their prestigious table, allegedly because of Healey’s race-baiting gubernatorial campaign.

19. Currently Deval Patrick is one of three black male governors since Reconstruction: the first was Virginia Governor Douglas Wilder, elected in 1990; the third is New York Governor David Patterson, appointed in 2008.

20. This quote appears in Jon Keller, “President Obama: The Preview?” Wall Street Journal, May 3–4, 2008, A9. The “language” refers to borrowed lines that led to Hillary Clinton’s “change by Xerox” quip at the March 2008 primary debate with Barack Obama at the University of Texas, Austin. Critiquing both Governor Patrick and Senator Obama, Keller notes that 56 percent of the state’s voters disapproved of the governor’s performance. Keller makes no mention of the historic context: a black governor elected through his ability to distance from a radical (progressive or liberal) black base, and so appeal to the majority of voters; the defeat of racist manipulations as the electorate chose a liberal black male politician over a conservative white female politician; and the new black candidate’s victory cemented by an imperturbable civility in the face of antiblack racism.

21. Third Party candidate Ralph Nader and former Democratic presidential candidate Congressman Dennis Kucinich argued for state malfeasance as a punishable offense. In their marginalized campaigns, both called for the impeachments of President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney given their deception and lies concerning Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, and the mass deaths following the 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation. In April 2008, the Supreme Court upheld Indiana’s restrictive voter ID law—the most stringent in the
nation—despite the absence of noticeable voter fraud in that state. These preemptive strikes against electoral crime adversely impact minorities and lower-income communities, those least likely to have state-issued photo identification cards, driver’s licenses, passports. Potential criminality preemptively punished reflects racial campaigns. The Democratic National Committee’s 2000 failure to vigorously contest voting irregularities in Florida—in which faulty felon lists and felon disenfranchisement helped guarantee a Republican victory (via the Supreme Court)—was followed in 2004 by its refusal to confront racially driven voter intimidation in Ohio. See Minority Staff, Special Investigations Division, U.S. House of Representatives, “Income and Racial Disparities in the Undercount in the 2000 Presidential Election” (Washington, DC: U.S. Government, July 9, 2001); Greg Palast, “Vanishing Votes,” the Nation, April 29, 2004.

22. For a comparative study of antiblack racism/genocide within Brazilian and U.S. democracy, see João Costa Vargas, Never Meant to Survive: Genocide and Utopias in Black Diaspora Communities (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).
This election had many firsts and many stories that will be told for generations. But one that’s on my mind tonight’s about a woman who cast her ballot in Atlanta. She’s a lot like the millions of others who stood in line to make their voice heard in this election except for one thing: Ann Nixon Cooper is 106 years old.

She was born just a generation past slavery; a time when . . . someone like her couldn’t vote for two reasons—because she was a woman and because of the color of her skin . . .

In this election, she touched her finger to a screen, and cast her vote, because after 106 years in America, through the best of times and the darkest of hours, she knows how America can change.

—Barack Obama, November 4, 2008

A centenarian black woman as representative of America’s new multiracial consciousness is a powerfully poignant depiction of democracy born in a former slave state. Barack Obama’s narrative in his “This Is Your Victory” speech displays popular sovereignty emerging from the biography of a subordinated citizen-in-waiting (albeit an elite one, given that Mrs. Cooper came from a privileged black family). Political elites and politicians, however, wield a sovereign kinship that does not easily share power with the populace.

There is evolving multiracial and gender-inclusive popular sovereignty, as represented by Ann Nixon Cooper; and there is emergent multiracial sovereign kinship, as represented by the president-elect. The story woven around Ann Nixon Cooper filtered one hundred years of U.S. American history, culminating in the election of its first black president. Its symbolism sweeps past distinct differences between voters and the political class they install in a representative (rather than a direct) democracy. This symbolism deflects attention from the contradictions of inequalities and dominance in a democratic nation.

Sovereignty is the ability to determine political destinies, one’s own and those of others. Popular sovereignty is the myth and matter of modern democracy. In a representative democracy dominated by a two-party system, wealth and remoteness infuse the national political class. The sovereignty of the poor, the colored, the female, the queer,¹ the ideologically independent—as nonelites and non-“mainstream”—is rooted in their agency and autonomy, their ability to lead politicians rather than follow them. Although their more talented and ambitious members may join the ruling elites, historically disenfranchised outsiders to the political realm have had no inherent kinship with the dominant political class. Possessing no sovereign powers stemming from an autonomous political base, they control no governmental, police, military, or economic institutions; through such structures, traditional sovereign kinship exercises its aspirations and will.

Politically marginalized groups might fare less well in a direct democracy; but in such a system, recognizing themselves as the true agents for change, they may more often seek sovereignty to resist both repression and the political class that represents them. Historically excluded from voting, blacks organized economic boycotts to end lynching and segregation. Their contributions to democracy worked beyond electoral politics from which they were often barred. The end result is that U.S. representative democracy has become more “participatory,” as defined by a more diverse electorate and its desire to elect representatives who reflect that diversity. Out-groups remain hopeful that elected officials will function as their advocates rather than pursue conventional power shaped by a two-party system and sovereign elites.

Yet, in 2000, the U.S. Supreme Court demonstrated its sovereign kinship against the majority vote. The political class designed
the Electoral College to override the popular vote. However, by installing George W. Bush as president, the Supreme Court intervened in the Florida recount to determine the electoral vote. The failure of the defeated party to contest this suggests that these battles for high office are intrasovereign affairs. Even if the “improbable journey” of the president-elect seems at odds with that interpretation, one should note how singular and symbolic representation of blackness remains within federal government. Among its three branches, only the Supreme Court and executive branch have surpassed the Senate in racial segregation.

Polymorphous politicians seek to represent all things good to all people voting. Their purpose is to consolidate and exercise power. As “centrists” synthesizing two powerfully entrenched parties, they can ignore critical third parties while skillfully transferring agency to a kinship of political insiders. Electoral politics is a marvelous route by which sovereign kin pose as “outsiders.” On the campaign trail, they become “regular” folks—intimates with Joe six-packs and plumbers, churchgoers, hockey moms, beer guzzlers, and misguided bowlers. The difference between grassroots activism and Astroturf organizing is that the primary role of activists is to determine policy—not to elect politicians. Activists seek sovereignty, not representatives of it. The mobilization of the “grass roots” or “Astroturf”—Internet-based communication that simulates or stands in for a mass movement—permits voters to relinquish or transfer agency to elected officials. A less controlled democracy ensues from mass participation that is not reduced to mass rallies, technological social networking, national days of service, or mobilizations to buttress state policies. The seductive appeal of U.S. democracy lies in its ability to make the electoral changing of the guard synonymous with political power in the mind of the citizen. The power of seduction depends on the desire to surrender; in the absence of that, it is just political rape.

Voters can select from among the political class to replace sovereign kin. The tyranny of the majority—portrayed by a homogenized mainstream that provided the “darkest hours” for Ann Nixon Cooper’s kin—has often been directed or manipulated by its representative political class. With social and ethnic minorities within its ranks, the multicultural majority in making history on November 4, 2008, appears to have vanquished racial tyranny. America can and does change. Its dependence on political elites and restrictive right
to rule may not. Rather than enable independent political parties and populist self-rule, sovereign kin promote a more diverse or multiracial political class.

As a member of this political class, the president-elect becomes progenitor and founding father of a millennial multiracial democracy. That impressive feat is not necessarily synonymous with “power to the people.” Of the varied independent or outsider spaces to be corralled under one flag, the president-elect represents the one that, more than class, gender, sexuality, or political ideology, became the defining mark for the failure and promise of American democracy—race. The phenomenon of the 2008 election may not be the electoral victory understood as a triumph over racism, but the sovereign kinship and the sovereign whiteness that permitted this achievement. Lacking poverty, queerness, femaleness, and ideological independence, Barack Obama’s form of blackness became an asset, an embraceable opportunity traceable through improbable political bloodlines.

A Genealogy of the Political Class:
A Forty-Five-Year March on and to Washington

Barack Obama debated Hillary Clinton at the flagship university. But he did not campaign in the home place of the men who contributed most significantly to his becoming America’s first black president-elect. (Refusing to credit them, he instead invoked Kennedy and Reagan.) Perhaps in 2008 Obama knew he could lose a red state not quite ready for purple, yet sweep the Electoral College. Texas had not gone for a Democratic presidential candidate since Lyndon Baines Johnson’s election in 1964. The conservative state prides itself on having been the residence of three presidents: Johnson (1963–1968), George H. W. Bush (1988–1992), and George W. Bush (2000–2008). The first president led the nation deeper into an unpopular war with genocidal results: 58,226 Americans died while contributing to the deaths of more than two million Vietnamese. The United States escalated the war in Vietnam based on Johnson’s deception about a fabricated August 4, 1964, attack on U.S. naval destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin. President Johnson built up John F. Kennedy’s war and, in turn, was surpassed in mass casualties by President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who expanded the war with secret bombings of Cambodia. Although
Johnson’s interventionism squandered American wealth and lives, that did not stop two other Texans from emulating him.

Unlike his foreign policy violations of the human rights and national sovereignty of nations resisting colonizers, Johnson’s domestic policies promoted democracy and economic opportunities for the formerly enslaved. His presidential alter ego propelled the 1960s civil rights agenda and antipoverty programs. He witnessed the assassinations of John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr.: two sovereigns and one agitator who disturbed his equilibrium. Nonetheless, while King built the moral pillars, Johnson installed the legal foundation—as he strong-armed the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act through Congress—for a foreseeable Obama victory. Liberal sovereigns and progressive activists created new expressions of democratic rule, incorporating fictive kin to create a future multiracial political elite. This elite though would emerge at the expense of a broad-based pacifist insurgency against repression.

Rev. King would stand beside President Johnson as he signed key legislation that transformed the political and electoral landscape. He had also stood behind this sovereign leader as he deflected television cameras from Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activist Fannie Lou Hamer at the 1964 Democratic National Convention (DNC). As a member of the multiracial Mississippi Freedom Party (MFDP) delegation, attempting to unseat Mississippi’s official white supremacist delegates, Hamer’s impassioned demand, “Is this America?” seared the airwaves, leaving little room for centrists and accommodating political operatives such as the president’s media spokesman, a young Bill Moyers; his vice presidential running mate, the seasoned Hubert Humphrey; and the venerated Christian leader, King. The three would work to force Hamer and the MFDP delegation into a compromise, with full recognition that the alternative progressives demanding a full franchise lacked the sovereign power to win a presidential election but possessed enough transformative power to destabilize a major party at the polls.

Johnson was so consumed by a devastating and unpopular war that he declined to run for a second term. He would not be the last Texan to leave the Oval Office disgraced in wartime by low approval ratings. Johnson had sold Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac to private interests in order to pay for the war in Vietnam. Bush-the-son would theoretically buy the mortgage lenders back in a $750 billion bailout, ballooning
the national debt, after squandering a trillion-dollar surplus inherited from President Bill Clinton. Invading a country his father had stormed a decade earlier to vanquish a foreign enemy that the elder Bush as director of the Central Intelligence Agency had helped to install, Bush-the-son pronounced “mission accomplished” in 2003. That defeated country held no weapons of mass destruction and no ties to al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, or the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States. The invasion of Iraq would help make the United States an internationally recognized human rights violator and debtor nation, as war costs spiraled to more than a $1 billion a month. It would also give in 2007 a novice public servant but shrewd politician a major peace platform by which to differentiate himself from his fellow senators and presidential rivals. Senators Hillary Clinton and John McCain had voted for what would become an unpopular war leading to mass death and genocide.

Between the 1960s retirement and political murders of national leaders and the 2009 retreat by Bush-the-son to Dallas—a city that gained notoriety when Kennedy was shot in his motorcade—Bush-the-father defeated a Democratic rival by running one of the most racist campaigns in the post–Civil Rights Movement era. George H. W. Bush allowed Republican National Committee chair Lee Atwater to make good on his 1988 campaign promise to position convicted black rapist Willie Horton as the running mate of presidential candidate Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis. Although Bush deployed the “southern strategy”—where whites vote against their economic interests based on their social fears and antiblack animus, he was routed in 1996 by a husband whose wife’s future presidential campaign would be supported by xenophobes and racists among “hard-working whites” and “Hillary Democrats.”

Racism’s psychosexual politics was increasingly becoming an inside joke for sovereign whiteness. The most incendiary racial baggage tied to the candidate who would be president were (1) President Johnson’s former medical attendant, a black marine and Vietnam veteran turned pastor who castigated U.S. racism and imperialism; and (2) false allegations of the politician being both the national and international bête noire. With the economic downturn, the public became disinterested in racial and political outcasts, including an affluent white radical who used mass casualties in Vietnam to justify Weather Underground domestic bombings against government targets. The southern strategy had become an
unpredictable regional phenomenon. An electorate going bankrupt can distinguish between Willie Horton and Jeremiah Wright and find both increasingly irrelevant to their pressing economic crises. The violent criminality attributed to the domestic bête noire, now extended to the Muslims, and the political incivility of the preacher were less pressing concerns for mainstream America. Neither the Clinton nor McCain campaigns could foist a faux running mate onto a black candidate who had already established kinship ties with DNC leadership.

DNC Conventions and the Familial Party

After he won the Iowa caucus, America began to take Barack Obama seriously as he continued to campaign against an unpopular war that led the nation toward moral and economic bankruptcy. When he won the North Carolina primary, despite the Clinton surge, it became evident that the notion of race-based sovereignty and familial ties were forever splintered by the autobiography of the candidate: white mother, black African father, devoted maternal white grandmother, loyal Ivy League—educated, Southside Chicago girl-turned-political wife. Read by millions, Barack Obama’s The Audacity of Hope and Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance made consistent claims, echoed insistently on the campaign trail: “nowhere but in America” and “my life is an American story.” In gratitude to the nation, the candidate increasingly dismissed charges of antiblack racism against its racial majority and its institutions. Thus, he revealed himself as self-made, aligned with traditional political power rather than sovereign blackness (the existence of the latter is generally doubted). Mixed-race black, unwed mother, abandoned by father—pariah became parvenu through sovereign kinship. Winning more primaries and the delegate count, Obama traveled to Denver to accept the nomination at a skillfully organized DNC.

In Denver, DNC sovereign kin staged a party that surpassed all previous conventions. Before cameras, the Democrats posed as a functional and disciplined family, generations beyond the 1968 Chicago riots and 1972 hawk-and-dove infighting over the war that contributed to their defeat and the election, twice, of Richard Nixon. In 2008, unity and goodwill were such that no discernible fractures shaped by ideology, gender, race, or sexuality
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(class seemed to have disappeared) showed. On the convention platform, the future first lady, Michelle Obama, who had earlier stated her uncertainty about voting for the former first lady as nominee given the attacks against her partner, thanked Clinton for the eighteen million cracks in the glass ceiling. One-third of those eighteen million voters were male and perhaps not all were pro–women’s rights; some were against gay and lesbian rights; a small number publicly indicated that they could never vote for “a black.” That all became irrelevant as Michelle Obama’s speech displayed a humility and gratitude—as well as a pride in being American—absent from Hillary Clinton’s cautious concession. Having sovereign whiteness, Clinton did not need to demonstrate patriotism or belonging when she emphatically stated that she would vote for Obama while releasing her delegates to vote their conscience. The following evening, with extemporaneous remarks fired by the rousing ovation for the former president, Bill Clinton’s eloquence overshadowed her reticence to instruct everyone to vote for the president-elect.

A predecessor of Ann Cooper Nixon appeared in Hillary Clinton’s concession. Calling out Harriet Tubman as an expression of populist belonging, Senator Clinton, though, did not mention Tubman’s specific history in radical politics. Illiterate in antiracist history, most Americans could perceive Tubman as a symbol yet remain unfamiliar with her improbable journey. Just as with Ann Nixon Cooper, there was the burden of slavery (although with closer proximity to violent trauma). While Cooper survived discrimination and hardships long enough to vote for the first black president, Tubman stole and liberated herself. Electing sovereign kin and opposing sovereign powers are both political acts. Yet only the latter is an expression of defiance against injustice through independence from institutional power. Tubman’s national political life began as an outlaw freeing slaves, what her detractors and the law defined as looting property. A conductor on the “underground railroad” and supporter of the insurrectionist John Brown (with his sons, the white abolitionist was executed at Harper’s Ferry for violent opposition to slavery), Tubman saw her reputation augmented as a distinguished militarist and spy who fought with the Union Army with 200,000 other African Americans to defeat the Confederacy.

Thus, Clinton could name her, a black woman who also organized in the suffrage movement, but not cite Tubman’s political lineage,
as would be done for the white suffragette Susan B. Anthony. To present her with specificity, as more than a symbol, would enable the rebel to appear as a sovereign, in control of her own life and those lives entrusted in her care—even as they wandered, hunted in the wilderness. At the 2008 DNC convention, Tubman would be the first but not last black (female) political figure stripped of agency in opposition to a repressive American democracy.

The democratic presidential nominee chose the forty-fifth anniversary of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech and March on Washington as the backdrop to showcase the new multicultural Democratic Party. The final night of the Democratic convention was held on August 28, the anniversary of the 1963 march and the great, hopeful sermon of Reverend King, whose oratory had helped Johnson in his presidential bid. Perhaps seeking inspiration and electoral uplift without the weight of antiracist activism, Obama invoked “the preacher” in his 2008 acceptance speech. Rendering King nameless, he embraced him as an abstraction. The label “the preacher” is conveniently worn by white evangelical conservatives and black liberationist pastors alike. With black liberationists as one-dimensional illustrations, with no acknowledgment of their opposition to state violence, King joined Tubman as symbolic representation of a multiracial democracy embodied in the Democratic Party. Denver’s football stadium hosted a political pageant that appropriated political activists who had enabled that historic moment to unfold in time.

During the 2008 democratic primaries, Martin Luther King Jr. had become a touchstone; he was portrayed as a key relation for Obama and Clinton. April of that year marked the fortieth anniversary of his assassination in Memphis, Tennessee, where he had gone to support striking sanitation workers. The presidential inauguration would take place the day after the national holiday commemorating King’s birth. During the primary debates, Obama insisted that activism abolished American apartheid. Clinton maintained that the government, through the Johnson administration, was the enabler of King’s legacy and the demise of segregation. When asked which of the two Democratic candidates King would have endorsed, Obama replied, “Neither.” Yet, that did not prevent the candidates from appending “the preacher” to their campaigns.

Whereas King failed to lead a dominant political class to which he did not belong, Obama forty years later successfully morphed into it as fictive kin. King’s diminishing popularity stemmed from
his resistance to the Vietnam War, which he described as imperialist, and his critiques of racism and capitalism. His prophetic voice became an anathema to those pursuing imperial powers, and the *New York Times* castigated King for his opposition. Obama’s growing popularity and endorsements stemmed from his advocacy of a unified state and the restoration of its imperial might (to be used only for good). Both men understood and acquiesced to America’s selective notion of elite leadership and sovereign kinship. Only King would later repudiate the sovereign elite in favor of another form of kinship. That kinship was partly forged in antiblack repression and terror and partly forged in a spirit or spirituality for liberation.

It is unclear if the president-elect, in choosing the anniversary of the March on Washington for his acceptance speech, was aware that the march, largely organized by labor activists such as A. Phillip Randolph, took place on the anniversary of the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till, a black teen from Chicago visiting Mississippi, who allegedly whistled at a white woman on a dare. A fourteen-year-old boy from Obama’s adoptive hometown, Till’s torture, murder, and open-casket funeral would galvanize the Civil Rights Movement that produced Martin Luther King Jr., as an international human rights icon. From the floor of the Denver stadium, only Jesse Jackson Sr., also a Chicago adoptee, publicly recalled the Till tragedy in his August 28 interview with *PBS NewsHour* correspondent and anchor Gwen Ifill. Few may have heard or remember Jackson’s reflections as they uncovered Emmett from anonymity and Americans from amnesia.

While Emmett’s lynching was given limited recognition at the DNC, the “four little black girls,” immortalized as a nameless collective, received none. In 1963, bombings followed the historic march. The one placed in Birmingham’s Sixteenth Street Baptist church killed children activists. Lacking sovereign kinship, these black girls’ names, like Emmett’s, would not be spoken from a stage in which the contemporaneously slain, sovereigns such as President John F. Kennedy and Senator Robert Kennedy would be honored. Yet, Denise McNair (11), Addie Mae Collins (14), Carole Robertson (14), and Cynthia Wesley (14), and the other teens who would die in the Birmingham riots following the bombing, contributed dearly to this multiracial democracy. Few Americans would have any idea of the price paid so that two little black girls could join their parents on the Denver platform to present themselves to an approving American electorate.
Conclusion: Hagar’s Kin and Black Sovereign Relations

[In the Hebrew Testament, as the African owned by Abraham and the barren Sarah,] Hagar’s predicament involved slavery, poverty, ethnicity, sexual and economic exploitation, surrogacy, rape, domestic violence, homelessness, motherhood, single-parenting and radical encounters with God. . . . Paul [in Galatians 4:21–5:1] relegated her and her progeny to a position outside of and antagonistic to the great promise Paul says Christ brought. . . . Hagar and her descendents represent the outsider position par excellence.

—Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*

At the 1964 Democratic convention, dispossessed activists risked their lives to dispute the claims and qualifications of political elites. Former sharecropper, forcibly sterilized, Fannie Lou Hamer was crippled by a savage beating when jailed for trying to vote. She was fired from her job, and kicked out of her home because of her organizing for a greater democracy. Without radical activists such as Hamer, there would be no franchise for Ann Nixon Cooper and millions of others, and no black president-elect. Positioned by the political class, along with SNCC, as divisive and antagonistic to the promise of an American democracy manifested through Democratic Party victories, Hamer would not be validated by any president. Ideological arborists severed Tubman, King, and Hamer from the political tree, only to selectively graft branches for politicians seeking symbols to stir a populace.

In 1964, President Johnson was so unsettled by a crippled but not yet beaten black woman exercising political power through antiracist and black sovereign relations that he called a press conference to draw away cameras, hoping that Hamer would not touch the screens of American households. At the 1964 Democratic Convention, Hamer demanded that America oust, not forgive, an unrepentant white supremacy and its official delegation. Her ability to galvanize America—not reassure it of its moral standing—by exposing violent repression through personal and collective narratives threatened the power of politicians. Forty-four years after Hamer disturbed America, Ann Nixon Cooper, in a mesmerizing presidential victory speech, comforted us.
Repudiating in part the compromise that left the MFDP unable to unseat white racism, in 1972, Democratic presidential nominee Senator George McGovern and other party reformers ensured that the DNC would never repeat 1964 or mirror the Republican Party. (Current demographics and diminishing numbers have led some to mock the GOP as “the party of [old] white men.”) However, disciplining intraparty independence before his stunning defeat to Richard Nixon, McGovern with other liberals worked to destabilize Brooklyn Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm and her supporters. The Chisholm campaign sought political power without loyalty to sovereign elites. Again, the independent leadership and free politics of another black woman “maverick” proved problematic to party regulars.

In order to defeat Hubert Humphrey, his real rival, McGovern needed Chisholm’s delegates, whom she refused to release. Although they had initially supported Chisholm’s candidacy as empowering all women, white feminists insisted that the black woman defer to the white male standard bearer. (In 2008, white feminists would not insist that the white woman candidate relinquish her delegates to the black male standard bearer.) As the first black woman elected to Congress and one of its most progressive members, Chisholm recognized that she would be outside of sovereign kinship. Yet, when fellow black Congressman Ron Dellums defected from her camp to endorse McGovern at the convention and urge that her delegates do likewise, the betrayal stunned Chisholm. She had assumed that Dellums shared her desire for independent black sovereignty. Documentary footage shows the congresswoman in tears saying, “tell Ron to come home” and that she is not angry.

Years later, Chisholm’s bid for redistributive economic and political power would be rendered into a symbolic tale serving simultaneously multiculturalism and white supremacy. In Chisholm’s 2005 New York Times obituary, Gloria Steinem selectively quoted the congresswoman to write that Chisholm had run for president to prove that any girl could attain the highest elected office. In fact, Chisholm had stated, decades earlier, that she ran so that any black or Puerto Rican girl would have presidential aspirations. Perhaps Chisholm would not have endorsed either Clinton or Obama. No matter. Few seemed to remember her candidacy during the 2008 Democratic primaries, in which pundits heralded the “first black” and the “first woman” as presidential contenders in the Democratic
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Party who inspired American voters, failing to note the first black woman to run for president on a major ticket. Unlike Clinton and Obama, Chisholm was an outspoken supporter of feminism. Unlike Clinton and the president-elect, she lacked ties to the Democratic machine and sovereign whiteness. Although offering limitless opportunities for political agency and moral and social transformation, there is little political wealth and personal gain in belonging to outcast struggles. Hence, belief in the value of black sovereign relations is difficult to sustain.

Still, certain facts remain. Activism and creativity, not elected or appointed officials, establish the conditions for political cultures that expanded democracy and civil and human rights. Historically, compromises with sovereign whiteness and sovereign kinship have denied impoverished children and families a viable future. For centuries, popular and political cultures recycled antiblack stereotypes to create an apartheid-based democracy. Today, public and private agencies continue to disproportionately discipline and disenfranchise black life. Black women are selectively monitored for drug use in prenatal and delivery care; black families receive minimal public assistance in housing, health care, food subsidies, and counseling; black children are disproportionately held in foster homes and detention centers under the most substandard conditions. Yet, mainstream democracy, like mainstream Christianity, asks much from subordinated social sectors, providing few guarantees of restorative justice.

December 2008 news featured poverty and genocide: the 40 percent rise in murder rates by and of young black males in the United States; hundreds of Palestinian civilian deaths as Israel bombed Gaza (with weapons financed by the United States) as a way to “signify” to Hamas. Simultaneous news focused on the millions planning to converge on Washington, DC, for the historic January 2009 inauguration, and the hundreds of parties and balls to follow. The spectacle of American democracy’s unique beauty and might overshadows mundane and traumatic suffering. Any popular sovereignty that emerges to keep faith with our highest aspirations for sustainable life will have to create its own compelling expressions of transformative agency.

Having created the conditions for a centrist-liberal black president-elect, progressive activists will have to determine how best to influence a multiracial democracy. Popular sovereignty may yet
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offer a popular narrative of a great, independent democracy, one in which even the most dispossessed see themselves as directly participating in citizenship and social justice. Such possibilities rest in the wisdom of slave-turned-liberator Frederick Douglass: power concedes nothing without demand and struggle.

Notes

1. American progress remains framed by the compassion or cruelty of Judeo-Christianity as symbolic template. With California’s electoral votes, Barack Obama surpassed John McCain just as California voters passed Proposition 8, which banned gay and lesbian marriage. The same white voters who touched their screens for a black president—one who simultaneously opposed both the proposition and nontraditional marriage—later used racial epithets to denounce blacks who, alongside the majority of Californian voters, supported the ban. Such voters refrained from racist language in public rallies against the president-elect after he selected white evangelical pastor Rick Warren, a key opponent to gay, lesbian, and transgendered rights and women’s reproductive choices, to give the invocation at the inauguration; yet used such language against nonelite blacks who opposed gay/lesbian marriage. (Days after the announcement of Warren’s selection, Pope Benedict XVI pronounced that gender theory and gay marriage threatened “human ecology,” asserting that feminism and homosexuality would bring death to the species.)

2. A black presence in the sovereign American body is not new. Public knowledge of Lynne Cheney’s family tree, which includes the president-elect’s family, led to campaign quips about Obama declining to hunt with her husband Vice President Dick Cheney. Madeleine Albright’s adoptive parent was Bush Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s professor and mentor in Eastern European Studies at the University of Denver. The former Clinton secretary of state has publicly joked about her admonition to Rice in the 1980s, on learning that she was a Republican: “Condi, how could you? We have the same father!” As the political class increasingly recognizes blacks as kinsmen and kinswomen, the independent black sovereign increasingly appears antiquated.

3. On the campaign trail, paternity manifests in religion (God the Father), and dead or ancestral presidents (political sires). Unsurprisingly the American archetype for both remains symbolized by white male authority. Invoking both establishes belonging to a ruling elite. Emulating Abraham Lincoln, Barack Obama announced his presidential candidacy in Springfield, Illinois, missing a televised “state of the black union forum” sponsored by Tavis Smiley, which
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included Michael Eric Dyson, Cornel West, and James Cone, who discussed Obama’s candidacy and absence. Smiley read Obama’s note of regret citing scheduling conflicts, yet panelists and some audience members seemed dissatisfied.

There is an analogy with the value of texts. In December 2008, Americans were told that the copy of the Bible last used in Lincoln’s 1861 swearing-in, would be used for the president-elect at his January 2009 inauguration. In 1864, African Americans presented Lincoln a Bible following his signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Despite Lincoln’s uncertainty about the presence of free blacks in the United States, and the 1864 Bible being cherished by those most intimate with the burdens of fighting for freedom, Obama chose to appear with the 1861 Bible, the only Lincoln Bible that possessed gravitas of state power.

4. The connections between the black president-elect and a southern president were noted during the campaign. In an October e-mail encouraging Texas democrats to vote and provide assistance to the Travis County Democratic Party, Luci Baines Johnson wrote,

Dear Fellow Democrat: 2008 marks the centennial celebration of my father’s birthday. If Lyndon Johnson were still with us today, I know that he would be proud to cast his vote this year for Barack Obama for President, Rick Noriega for U.S. Senate, Lloyd Doggett for Congress, and every Democrat all the way down the ballot. Among his many accomplishments in office, President Johnson fought alongside Rev. Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders of the 1960s to pass landmark legislation that helped extend the American dream to everyone in our country. At the time, it was a historic struggle against the status quo. Today, Senator Barack Obama gives us all hope that America is once again ready to turn the page on the status quo and tackle the challenges of the 21st century. In 2008 we are closer than ever to achieving my father’s vision—and ours—of a better tomorrow for our children and for our nation. But none of this can happen without you.

E-mail, author’s papers.

5. See “Powell Endorses Obama for President: Republican ex-Secretary of State Calls Democrat ’Transformational Figure,’” accessed December 16, 2008, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/27265369. Both Clinton Democrats and Sarah Palin Republicans challenged Obama’s Christian authenticity. In response, the candidate distanced himself from Muslim Americans and Palestinian human rights. The point of asserting that Barack Hussein Obama was not Muslim was to reassure the sovereign whiteness as electorate that any Muslim American boy could not grow up to be president of the United States.

6. The perceived complicated relationship of blacks to property bears serious scrutiny. The historical legacy of criminalizing blackness...
and equating it with a strong threat to property endures to this day. For example, in 2005, following the breaking of substandard New Orleans levees in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, President Bush and Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco issued “shoot-to-kill” edicts for mostly impoverished black survivors; the government mandated “zero tolerance,” even for those who were, in the words of 2008 presidential contender John McCain, trying to “get bottled water to babies.”


8. Mamie Till-Mobley insisted on an open coffin in a public funeral for her son’s decomposing body. White Mississippi officials had packed the casket with lye to accelerate its deterioration as it traveled back to Chicago. The mother demanded that the funeral home defy Southern officials’ orders for a closed-casket funeral. The tens of thousands of mourners that passed before it and the millions more that saw the image in the black press (such as Jet magazine) sparked the southern Civil Rights Movement. Months later in Montgomery, Alabama, when Rosa Parks, Joanne Robinson, and E. D. Nixon asked a twenty-six-year-old reverend with a doctorate in theology from Boston University to be spokesman for the bus boycott they were organizing, Martin Luther King Jr., agreed.


10. This had its own sad irony, given that weeks earlier, not realizing that his microphone for a televised interview was still on, Jackson remarked, in cruder language, that he wanted to castrate Obama for dismissive treatment of the concerns of nonelite blacks.

11. During the 2008 campaign, to the consternation of Democratic Party loyalists and the confusion of many progressives, Barack Obama repeatedly cited Ronald Reagan—whose administration exploited racist stereotypes for political gains—as a presidential role model. The original southern strategy was crafted by Lee Atwater for Reagan, whose campaign used Philadelphia, Mississippi, the site of murdered civil rights activists Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney, as a rallying cry for the restoration of white rights.

On the September 28, 2005, broadcast of Bill Bennett’s Morning in America, Reagan’s secretary of education, responding to a caller’s concerns about law and order, observed, “If you wanted to reduce
crime, you could—if that were your sole purpose, you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down. That would be an impossible, ridiculous, and morally reprehensible thing to do, but your crime rate would go down.” Logically, the crime rate would diminish if all babies were aborted, particularly white ones given that most crime is committed by whites; yet, Bennett criminalizes only black kinship with a death sentence for families; his genocidal mandate received little national condemnation.
17

The Dead Zone

In traditional African thought, there is no concept of history moving forward towards a future climax . . . the future does not exist beyond a few months, the future cannot be expected to usher in a golden age, or a radically different state of affairs.

—John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophies*

The further the Negro gets from his historical antecedents in time, the more tenuous become his conceptual ties, the emptier his social connections, the more superficial his visions. His one great and present hope is to know and understand his African-American realities in the United States more profoundly. Failing that, and failing to create a new synthesis in history and the humanities, and a new social theory, he will suffer the historical fate of intellectual subterfuge.

—Harold Cruise, quoted in James Turner, “Africana Studies and Epistemology”

All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave.

—Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*


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Introduction: At the Crossroads, Charging Genocide

The genocide of Darfur shames the conscience of us all.
—Barack Obama, Berlin, July 24, 2008

A critique of political thinking in Africana thought sits at the crossroads. At this intersection, passing trajectories meet. Moving in opposite directions, they send contradictory messages concerning democracy, racism, and political violence.

One trajectory pursues the accomplishments of Africana intellectual, artistic, economic, and political elites. That trajectory culminates in the campaign of Barack Obama—the first black presidential candidate in a major U.S. party and the first black president-elect since the founding of this slave nation turned faltering empire. The other trajectory tracks the misery of the local and global black masses. It also traces minority group repression by global capitalism, as well as the potential and real possibilities of racial genocide in democracies through state violence and neglect. The intersection of these two diverging lines produces a conceptual dead zone,¹ one that is marked by the absence of analysis engaging antiblack racism and genocide in Western democracies and the resilience of elite thinkers to disavow such analyses. Even though it holds the challenges of transformative thought and action, this arena is dead to conventional thought because the nexus at which black achievement meets black genocide appears as a conceptual void. Thus it is avoided. In Western democracies, rarely are “black achievement” (e.g., the Obama campaign and election) and “black genocide” (e.g., the racially fashioned prison industry and foster care system) discussed in the same breath. This essay explores issues at the edge of conventional thought in order to expand critical thinking.

William Patterson and the Civil Rights Congress’s 1951 petition to the United Nations, *We Charge Genocide*, is notable for drawing international attention to crimes against African Americans such as mob lynchings and police brutality, economic exploitation and electoral theft, and substandard schooling, housing, and medical care.² Yet *We Charge Genocide* offers neither a discussion of the political and economic achievements of black Americans, nor a discussion of how black elites, like their white counterparts and mainstream America, may either oppose or ignore (and thereby
be complicit in) antiblack genocide. Nor does the document mention “autogenocide” or violence internal to black communities (in fact, its sexism and misogyny prevent it from doing so). From its progressive, radical standpoint, it is incapable of theorizing the nexus, the convergence, and then the separation of black elites and the disposable dispossessed.

National and international Africana elites occupy influential posts in prestigious universities and colleges (whose billion-dollar endowments rival the gross national product of some nations). Yet even within these halls of security, or perhaps because of them, our critiques of state violence are rare. Often we criticize the policies of political parties or leaders. Also criticized are sectors ostracized in civil society such as the poor, unwed mothers, absentee fathers, prisoners, and criminals. Clearly, black achievement and pathology or victimization routinely commingle in political thought. For instance, black liberals or radicals note the role of legislation and punitive policies in the disruption or amelioration of collective black life and well-being. Black conservatives and neconservatives highlight moral failings on the part of individual blacks and generalize a collective social pathology; they view these as the consequences of a black proclivity toward entitlement, immorality, and (sexual) predation. (Supposedly, these are traits that only black conservatives or neoliberals have managed to escape; black conservatives offer few opportunities to dissect and depart from white conservatives, as their unoriginal parallel racial views dictate that blacks mirror neconservative whites.)

Since the postbellum origins of the “talented tenth,” elites have disproportionately shaped Africana thought and have offered themselves as role models dispensing cautionary, constructive, or caustic advice and guidance to impoverished, “dysfunctional,” or criminal(ized) blacks. Historically in Africana thought, black achievers disseminate commentary critical or supportive of black underachievers, citing reasons for their and our failings. Rarely do the criticisms by nonelites of the affluent influence a nation. Equally rare are radical or structural critiques that enter conventional thought and speech. More often, state performance of racial neutrality is scrutinized, and claims for racial diversity that overshadow calls for racial equality are rejected as coherent radical critique that leads to sustained resistance. The dead zone has a gravitational pull that slows down radical critiques just as it
slows down time. Thus, “change that we can believe in” is presumed to come disproportionately from elites who have no structural critiques of capitalism, white supremacy, or heteronormative patriarchy, nor any time line on which to chart struggles against the predatory structures.

Consider that few traditional media outlets have labeled the invasion and occupation of Iraq as “racist.” That discussion of racial predation in foreign policy was virtually dead in the fall 2008 U.S. presidential debates between Republican contender John McCain and his Democratic rival. Theoretically, McCain could still garner white votes if he were to introduce the American citizenry to general racism and the specific anti-Arab and anti-Muslim animus embedded in U.S. foreign policy—a surreal scenario, given this particular candidate and the attack campaign he chose to run with Sarah Palin. Candidate Obama could give a stirring speech on the topic and, likely, subsequently slide down and out of the polls into political retirement. How he deploys his moral authority as president remains to be seen—although Obama’s silence during the December 2008 Israeli invasion of Gaza that left 1,300 dead registers as a moral absence.

Consider the public’s response to Rev. Jeremiah Wright’s severe denunciations of the United States. First from his pulpit and later from a media podium, Obama’s former pastor derided no particular policy or official but an entire nation and its state apparatuses. Before his coerced retirement, Wright served as a marine and then in the medical corps for President Lyndon Johnson and later as reverend of one of Chicago’s most influential (celebrity) churches that addressed black poverty. Wright may be one example where black achievement intersects with black misery and genocide to produce an analysis from the dead zone. Obama’s denunciations of Wright—without addressing the valid content in his diatribes—exemplify how to avoid being dragged down into a zone in confrontation with white supremacy.

Traditional media and pundits are more outraged by the assertion of U.S. racism culminating in genocide than by the terrifying loss of and damage to (civilian) life. What infuriates the mainstream is the attribution of genocide to their democracy. Millions such as McCain and Palin’s “pro-Americans” reject criticisms that their democratic support—through representatives, deregulation of human rights, xenophobia, and ignorance—fosters racial genocide. Despite the
official lies about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, no one will be impeached or forced to resign from office. Add to this outrage the destruction of Iraq’s infrastructure, the death and maiming of nearly one million people, and the displacement of millions more as internal and external refugees. Mainstream Americans can forgive a wealthy, conservative white man for condemning this practice but will curse a black man and deride his party for its audacity to condemn U.S. human rights violations.

The party spokesperson must have no historical antecedents rooted in racial repression to remind a state of its foundation in white supremacy. There must be no context that points to a larger systemic crisis in humanity, no dead zone to drag the nation into a place where its certainty in itself as “exceptional” might collapse alongside its idealized identity. Not being McCain but instead a carrier of racially fashioned historical antecedents such as enslavement and antiblack genocide, Obama by necessity engages in “intellectual subterfuge”: speak in generalities, announce the ideological conflicts that led to a cultural crisis as over, and posit new challenges to be collectively met by a nation that has not relinquished racial supremacy or imperial yearning. With the historical antecedents of the conqueror, McCain will never charge the United States with racial genocide. With the historical antecedents of the conquered and as the ultimate symbol of black achievement, Obama will never charge the United States with genocide. Such rhetoric would end his political life. And, many would argue, what would be the point? If the dead zone appears to share the traits of the twilight zone, then this indeed would be a futile, politically suicidal gesture. If, however, this speech act stimulated us to think critically and politically in a world marked by violence and deception, then this could work as a precondition for an imaginable future. But if the pragmatic present constitutes the realistic future, why bother to dream outside the framework of American fantasy?

Of course, political leaders, their parties, voters, the opposition, and nonvoters discuss genocide. That painful topic is also studied and debated in Africana thought, academia, media, and policy forums. Yet the topic of genocide is usually restricted to foreign policies and foreign countries or past histories from which we have evolved. When it comes to contemporary expressions of repression, histories are forgotten or curtailed, while the current context is vaguely rendered. For example, in the United States, calls for
reparations to offset enslavement and apartheid are thought of as revisiting the past and as “divisive” and “counterproductive” to “going forward.” Those who forget that past centuries of enslavement and colonialism shape contemporary Africana crises reject Harold Cruise while embracing John Mbiti: when it comes to black disenfranchisement and exploitation, only the present day (villain) matters.

Among nonvictims, genocide is an inflammatory subject because there is no ideological or moral justification for the continuance of a state that countenances genocide. The citizenry complicit in it is considered to be aberrant to the civilized world. The charge of genocide is the touchstone for allegiance or rebellion. A genocidal state is not only immoral and unlawful, but it has regressed to savagery. According to international law and the U.S. Constitution, it must be disciplined and restored to the “rule of law.”

Few speak of U.S. policies as genocidal because the dominant tendency is to analyze national policies as the byproduct of specific administrations or political parties not as the consequence of a state apparatus built on and seeped in racial animus. In the land of the First Amendment, one is free to argue that, irrespective of the political party, the state manifests an antiblack (or anti-Indigenous) animus that promotes premature social and physical death for its most marginalized peoples. However, in a land in which (neo)liberalism and (neo)conservatism dominate intellectual thought, that argument opens one up to being caricatured as paranoid or a buffoon—a Jeremiah Wright with footnotes. The trajectories in Africana thought are clearly delineated as they intersect and clash, and are repudiated as they take leave of each other. Prominent Africana writers such as Orlando Patterson and William Julius Wilson embody black achievement and shoulder a discourse that normalizes and validates the state by ignoring the context and its murderous excesses. One can critique legislation, party politics, and elected leaders and the legislative promises or debacles they sponsor without ever uttering the incendiary word genocide. Harvard scholars have published tracts on the word nigger, tracing the etymology and reflecting on emotional connotations. Yet genocide, which has a much more fearful impact on national consciousness and material well-being, is less rigorously analyzed as part of the black condition.

If you don’t name it and shun the language, then you veil the phenomenon. What is also obscured is state violence, as conven-
tional language maintains that only dictatorships, not democracies, practice racial genocide. Convention assumes that electoral democracies have a failsafe mechanism—an enlightened and empowered citizenry—that prevents their participation (except as liberators) in genocidal practices. It is thus not surprising that those most targeted by historical and contemporary state excesses are those most likely to crash into its apparatuses: racially fashioned policing and the prison industrial complex, homelessness, substandard schools and housing, foster care for children marred by indifference, inadequate oversight and resources, the poverty draft into an immoral war, and “shoot-to-kill” edicts for (black) survivors of New Orleans’s substandard levees designed by the Army Corps of Engineers. It’s no wonder that some stumble at the intersection where elites undertheorize contradictory conditions marked by class and opportunity (or opportunism, more properly phrased) as they are carried off by the trajectory of black achievement and greater America’s expanding embrace.

In the United States, we are routinely asked to fall and genuflect at the crossroads: to acknowledge the positive in U.S. and global “race relations” without dwelling on the negative—the continuance of racial repression and disenfranchisement. But 2008 is the first time that we may likely involuntarily stumble from our own frustrated desires and longings. For the ascendency of a liberal black to the U.S. presidency must mean something profound, if democracy’s future is to culminate in a “golden age” and blackness is to have a place at the table. If antiblack genocide remains a feature of that utopian democracy, the profound becomes profoundly disappointing—although, of course, not for everyone in a democratic state. Racial genocide has been a historical fixture in Western democracies as citizens amassed existential wealth (white privileges) and material wealth (capital and militarism) through antiblack policies. But those realities tend to be muted in public discourse, where blacks and other people of color are invited to sit at the table of accumulation as national and global narratives note progress.

Before the Democratic National Convention in August 2008 that would officially name him the Democratic standard-bearer for president, Obama engaged in a whirlwind campaign tour. His speech on July 24, delivered in Berlin, was historic and moving, and it drew a multiracial mass of 200,000. Obama charged those gathered and viewers around the world to build a global “more
perfect union” (reprising his March speech in Philadelphia on race, in which he “cleaned up” his political gaffe about white bigotry and antiblack voters). The presidential candidate repeatedly challenged witnesses to act on behalf of humanity’s needs and political agency: “Will we stand for the human rights of the dissident in Burma, the blogger in Iran, or the voter in Zimbabwe? Will we give meaning to the words ‘never again’ in Darfur?”

Obama also referenced the site at which he delivered his address as a historical context that pointed toward the challenges of the future, the wall dividing east and west, the significance of reconciliation and reconstruction (among the Germans, within the former Soviet bloc, and within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and between the North and the South).

Given the targeted audience “globally” and in the United States—the Obama campaign toured Europe and the Middle East, not Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean—implicit in his address was the defining metaphor of World War II, the “last good war.” The Obama speech referenced the camps and contemporary genocide. Germany, of course, is synonymous with genocide. Yet there was a broader context that remained unexplored. With the exceptions of its world wars, Nazism, and Stalinism, European imperial powers have played out their genocidal intent on the geographies they colonized and racially fashioned. The genocides that resulted were distilled into World War II and Nazi Germany. Those crimes against humanity led to the UN convention banning genocide:

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

(a) Killing members of the group;
(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
(d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.
Proving “intent” is the challenge. Antidiscrimination cases are difficult for plaintiffs to win because they must prove intent, that is, that the violator intentionally discriminated against you because of gender, race, sexuality, or religion. This takes place in a legal framework. One must prove motive, even though the end result should be determinative. Noting that not only blacks are harmed by antiblack genocide, João H. Costa Vargas argues in *Never Meant to Survive: Genocide and Utopias in Black Diaspora Communities* for a radical critique:

The ongoing marginalization and premature, preventable death of disproportionate numbers of Black persons in the African Diaspora create the very conditions for the revolutionary transformation of our societies. Anti-Black genocide generates the imperatives of liberation and revolution. We either begin to address, redress, and do away with what make possible the multiple facets of anti-Black genocide, or We succumb to the dehumanizing values that produce and become reproduced by the systematic and persistent disregard for the lives of Afro-descended individuals and their communities.¹¹

Because it is not the consequences that are punished but the intent to harm, the burden of proof is placed on the victims.¹²

President Ronald Reagan signed and enacted the genocide treaty in 1988 (after it was amended by the U.S. Senate allegedly in order to restrict its usage by Native American and African American human rights advocates). Genocide is still considered to be a phenomenon practiced by uncivilized, rogue states (i.e., non-Western democracies); it is rarely thought of as applicable to the United States. Seeking its “golden age,” the “postracial” America¹³ obscures repressive realities; thus, it mutes and deflects a general awareness of the full impact of racism on the lives of people. Sever U.S. racism from its logical conclusion—genocide—and matters become even more confusing and sadly satirical.¹⁴

**ELECTING A BLACK PRESIDENT IN POSTRACIAL AMERICA**

The anticipatory moment of relishing the “defeat” of racism through a U.S. presidential election (followed globally, given U.S. imperial
ambitions) renders Barack Obama the iconic harbinger of a hopeful
future. White candidates making the same antiwar speeches have
not amassed multiethnic followings throughout the world. Yet,
Obama delivers a mixed message, shaped by either racial codes
or racial indifference. In a 2008 speech seeking to shore up a
primary victory over his Democratic rival Hillary Clinton, he said,
“We are the party of [Thomas] Jefferson.” With his mixed-race
child-mistress and enslaved progeny bastards at home and rabid
antiblack policies in the nation’s capital and abroad, President
Jefferson teeters. Despite his insistence in Notes on the State of
Virginia that blacks are biologically inferior and unfit for democracy
(while Native Americans are only culturally inferior and, hence,
with proper training could be potential citizens), his political DNA
has established a black legacy. With a mixed-race “bastardized”
heritage and Ivy League education, Obama stands firm: knowing
Jefferson’s racial pathologies, he avoids denouncing them by exiting
the dead zone to embrace (presumably without satire) the founding
father and his followers.

It is unclear how the twenty-first century’s new multicultural
legacy will distance itself from Jefferson’s eighteenth-century
genocidal politics since multiculturalism refuses to name them. Is
the Jeffersonian legacy of racial domination amid racial commingling failing, or is it our legacy of radical antiracist resistance that
falters? If the state has relinquished its genocidal policies, then
blacks should logically support it, since it promises the “future”
golden age of freedom from material want, fear, and repression.
If the state continues to practice antiblack racism, then what is
logical, as opposed to self-serving, in support of it, and what is
the moral relevancy of Africana thought that avoids this crisis?
Multicultural white supremacy can transform election-worthy
blacks into Jefferson’s romanticized “Native Americans”—the ideal
non-European politically conditioned to further the interests of
white elites. If this is the case, we’ve come full circle, despite the
specifics of policy proposals to bring about change. The Jeffersonian
ideological fervor and mandate for superior and inferior races
are unchallenged while progressive legislation is put forward by
multiracial liberal candidates. “Civil rights” becomes the conceptual
framework and lingua franca for redressing wrongs. It is a linguistic
taboo to name racial genocide; of course, if you cannot speak it,
you cannot abolish it—this, the most extreme, logical expression
of racial repression. Progressive legislation is important, of course. But how can it be sustained if it refuses to articulate context, to point to the crossroads and its dead zone that we repeatedly revisit? Civil rights, as opposed to human rights or antiracist legislation, can be whittled away by successive administrations because the default mechanism of white supremacy remains in place. How is such legislation, or its promissory note, a “postracial” America, sustainable if the general consciousness of the citizenry refuses and fails to comprehend antiracist struggles?

Electioneering rather than sustainability is the driving force in party politics. During the 2008 Democratic primaries, both Clinton and Obama supported liberal agendas protecting “minority” interests. Their campaign websites are studies in the use of language to channel political literacy while garnering votes. Clinton offered no rubric for “civil rights” under her “Issues” icon, although there was a category for women. Under the subject of strengthening democracy, her website requested that people submit online forms to her “voter protection team” if they had “seen or heard of any issues with voting or people trying to keep others from voting.” The site was also in Spanish. In turn, on his website under “Issues,” Obama has a civil rights category. His progressive agenda included acts to strengthen civil rights enforcement, criminalize job discrimination, expand the scope of hate crimes statutes, end deceptive voting practices, end racial profiling, reduce crime recidivism by providing “ex-offender” support, eliminate sentencing disparities, and expand the use of drug courts. Obama’s hope for reconciliation of various social sectors into a functional democracy, a more perfect union, resides in some part in the ability to revive the civil rights project, or at least its symbolism, in which “content of character” rather than “color of skin” measures civic virtue. In a September 28, 2007 speech in Washington, DC, at the historically black Howard University, Obama introduced his “Plan to Strengthen Civil Rights”:

The teenagers and college students who left their homes to march in the streets of Birmingham and Montgomery; the mothers who walked instead of taking the bus after a long day of doing somebody else’s laundry and cleaning somebody else’s kitchen—they didn’t brave fire hoses and billy clubs so that their grandchildren and their great-grandchildren would still wonder
at the beginning of the twenty-first century whether their vote
would be counted; whether their civil rights would be protected
by their government; whether justice would be equal and oppor-
tunity would be theirs. . . . We have more work to do. 19

The candidate evokes the movement, the trauma, the sacrifice,
and the commitments to justice. Then he calls for more: vote. 20
Because Obama is the solution. Do not simply “vote” in the civil
rights abstract—vote for him. The work to be done follows only
those avenues delineated within legal strategies: no protests, civil
disobedience, or lawbreaking in their various social and political
forms. The campaign defines the “problem” to be overcome as a
litany of injustices, 21 which in the absence of specific language can
hardly be considered by the general public to be traceable to white
supremacy or predatory capitalism. Social problems and injustices
were delineated by the campaign, and promises were made to
solve those problems. 22 Again, no context was given about how
racism and disenfranchisement became structural components of
our collective past, present, and future lives, and no mention was
made of Cruise’s “historical antecedents.” If mainstream, traditional
(white) voters desired antecedents and context, then these would
have been provided in order to garner their votes. But to provide
antiracist discourse in the absence of an expressed desire for it or in
the face of strong antipathy toward it would have effectively killed
the presidential campaign of the first major party black candidate.
Winners stay out of the dead zone so that they do not falter or fail
with the majority. Losers are another story. Of course, the victims
of genocide, such as communities in the Democratic Republic of the
Congo, suffer the greatest losses.

Continuing to confront the role of racial repression in genocide
becomes more complicated with the political desire and emerging
language for a “postracial” America. Of course, this penultimate
golden age can also be racist. Postracial is not antiracist; rather, it
is a desire to be perceived as nonracist, to not be awed by moral
and political failings. Postracial is supposedly a reference for being
beyond antiblack racism and beyond “black racism” (given the lack
of institutional power that blacks hold over whites and nonblacks,
“black racism” is more accurately defined as chauvinism). Postracial
is not synonymous with postwhite supremacy. Whiteness retains
its hegemonic normativity. The ability to decide to “go beyond
race,” which in conventional language is not leaving whiteness behind but leaving behind a blackness repressed by whiteness, is a power that most nonwhites do not wield. Those elite blacks who decide that discussions of white supremacy are anachronistic derive their authoritative voice from the institutional power of white patronage; they have no independence outside of that context to issue such a call, for it is not borne out in public or social policy or practice.²³

The postracial politics of the 2008 campaign was shaped in part by the successes of the Civil Rights Movement. During Clinton’s and Obama’s jockeying in the 2008 Democratic primaries, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. remained the premier symbol for a successful national transition toward a postapartheid state now understood to be “postracialist.” As Clinton and Obama sparred, each claimed to be the heir to King’s legacy and their opponent to be a poser. Invoking (inter)national transformation of race relations, which they interpreted as based in elected officials or “grassroots” organizations, neither referenced civil disobedience and uncivil and criminal acts against apartheid and discrimination. Their observances suggested the evolutionary movement toward a final destination, marked by the progress from the apartheid and Jim Crow eras that preceded the activism for black and Africana studies in the 1960s and the electoral clout that has helped to create Barack Obama.

The racial-sexual constructs put forward in the postmovement era acknowledge an entrenched black and Africana presence, but one bound by its entertainment value to whites. In a February 21, 2008, Wall Street Journal op-ed, Daniel Henninger writes, “The Democratic Party is undergoing the greatest seismic shift since Bill Clinton came out of Arkansas in 1992.”²⁴ Henninger lists the names and ages of male black Democratic politicians that he views as “cut more or less from the same mold”: Illinois Senator Barack Obama; Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick; Newark Mayor Cory Booker; Washington, DC, Mayor Adrian Fenty; and Harold Ford Jr., a Tennessee politician. In a bipartisan spirit, Henninger also lists prominent black Republicans: former Maryland Lieutenant Governor Michael Steele and former Oklahoma Congressman J. C. Watts complete his list.

These leaders follow in the wake of the “postracial” politics that Henninger dates to The Cosby Show and its fictive heteronormative upper-class family.²⁵ The all-American black Huxtables supposedly
ushered in the “postracial” politics that mark our present-day
encounters. President Reagan also cited the popularity of the show
with whites as indicating that the Civil Rights Movement was no
longer needed. Henninger, a Clinton supporter, seems to applaud
Obama, and his cohort group, as having moved blackness out
of the “other” category of pathology and racial resentment. He
writes: “Right now, Barack Obama is the most famous symbolic man
in America, and in one area of the nation’s life where symbolism
still matters. Is this enough to make someone president? No.”26
The piece concludes by suggesting the true heirs of the King
legacy: “Barack Obama may be taking his country to a new place on
racial politics. His party’s politics looks like a higher mountain.”27
For Henninger, the Democratic Party was synonymous with its
(then-)dominant leadership, the Clintons. Barack and Michelle
Obama, as a high-powered, highly successful American family who
“worked” for their wealth while placing their children’s needs as
central, are likely to be considered the “new” Huxtables by some
Americans. That appeal could help to derail old party politics.28
One hundred eighty degrees removed from the Wall Street
Journal is the Black Agenda Report (BAR). The journal’s managing
editor, Bruce Dixon, writes in the February 20–26, 2008, issue:
“In this year of symbolic optimism, when a Black man is a leading
contender in the presidential race, as well as being a leading
recipient of contributions from Wall Street, from big insurance and
from military contractors, the need to measure and describe life
as it is actually lived by millions of African Americans has never
been greater.”29 Dixon references the economy and racially driven
policing and incarceration as they reflect the most impoverished
sectors (again a 180-degree turn from blackness or racial politics
embodied in the fictive Huxtables, the ultimate black achievement
narrative): “As recently as 1964, a majority of all U.S. prisoners
were white men. But since 1988, the year Vice President George
H. W. Bush rode to the White House stoking white fears with an ad
campaign featuring convicted Black killer and rapist Willie Horton,
the black one-eighth of America’s population has furnished the
majority of new admissions to its prisons and jails.”30 Here, incar-
ceration is not an afterthought or footnote but rather the “criminal
justice complex” is woven into the national political economy
and its racial politics. (The Washington, DC–based Sentencing
Project notes that the majority of drug consumers are white but
the majority of those incarcerated are black or Latino because of disparities in racial profiling, policing, and sentencing.\textsuperscript{31}

The indicator of black well-being and, thus, the meaning of politics are measured, in \textit{BAR}'s estimation, by the most disenfranchised. As a result, readers encounter \textit{BAR}'s continuing criticisms of Obama due to the politician's presentation of racial politics (including his rhetorical embrace of Ronald Reagan, a bipartisan move also criticized by Hillary Clinton) and his literal embrace of white men, identified by \textit{BAR} as the most racially reactionary and conservative sector of American society. However, \textit{BAR} does not mention that black women are the fastest-growing population among the incarcerated and the sector of society most at risk for HIV/AIDS. (When \textit{NewsHour}'s Gwen Ifill moderated the 2004 vice presidential debates, she posed questions about black women and HIV/AIDS to both Vice President Dick Cheney and Senator John Edwards; both candidates were ill-informed on the issue.\textsuperscript{32}

The postracial politics of the presidential election, like the postracial politics of the academy, will not be easily tethered to a black liberation agenda. “Intellectual subterfuge” might permit us to attempt to peacefully coexist with the invisible woman, that is, to continue to profit from her presence in labor or service to more dominant sectors. The Huxtables have provided a reassuring fictional future that has more attraction than futuristic novelist and MacArthur Grant recipient Octavia Butler’s damaged and dangerous heroines. The Huxtables posit the lack of imagination on the political landscape and so facilitate (white) “normalcy” as oppositional to (colored) “pathology” projected onto an alien blackness embedded in criminals, radicals, and anarchist-activists. The political trajectories toward being mainstreamed suggest the promise of the climax, one that in time will reward centuries of struggle, even if the promise might be imaginary. It doesn’t matter how brave we are. In the absence of conventional time that works for us, it matters only that a community of scholars and activists provides a container that holds us as we seek to confront bondage without the promise of liberation. What seems most important is our immediate experience to expand moments of possible freedom through interrogation and critique of the conceptual, political frameworks that constitute our constructive “past” and promised “future” and foster the invisibilities that constitute our blind spots.
Conclusion: The Future of Africana Studies

Inspired by the multidimensional concept of genocide suggested by Patterson and his collaborators in 1951, I [argue] . . . the necessity of coming to terms with the deadly, often state- and society-sanctioned, yet seldom overt contemporary campaigns against peoples of African descent. Approached from various angles, genocide allows us to understand seemingly disparate phenomena as they relate to each other, contributing to the continued oppression and death of Black people in Africa and its diaspora. . . . [We require] a heuristic framework around which we cannot only recognize but also combat the multiple forms that anti-Black genocide has acquired in late capitalist polities.

—João H. Costa Vargas, “Genocide in the African Diaspora”

Remove the knife from the five-year-old’s throat. The universe will take care of itself.

—Kofi Busia, Omega Institute, July 28, 2008

In The Black Jacobins, C. L. R. James remarks of historians, “They write so well because they see so little.” What is often unspoken and so unseen is the pervasiveness of violence. If genocide is taken off the table for discussion, then there is no immediacy in the struggle. Here’s the point: time does not exist, but genocidal violence does. The golden age is American mythology. There is no evolutionary future, only the immediate struggle. Resisting violence is a mandate. If our writing suffers because we see more than we can articulate, that’s fine. At least we tried. Residing in the dead zone, at the nexus where the fight from violence meets the deeper immersion within it, our only achievement will be to stop fetishizing achievement and romanticizing or condemning dysfunction and despair. The crossroads’ dead zone becomes a threshold, a potential site for working for emancipation.

Crossing back and forth over the threshold, thought is freed from a prevalent cultural drug, U.S. exceptionalism. Globally exported as the deification of democracy abstracted from context, U.S. exceptionalism is justified by some by money and militarism; the more thoughtful point to the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Yet either rationalization posits the religious belief that democracy is an evolutionary trek toward freedom. Given the
Thirteenth Amendment, the convict lease system, and the modern prison industrial complex, the United States has never known democracy severed from captivity. Yet democracy is rarely contextualized within systems (e.g., socialism, capitalism, consumerism, or [multiracial] white supremacy). As a freestanding idealization, it issues its own mandate: history must usher in its own golden age. Thus, the training of a truncated political imagination begins.

U.S. exceptionalism positions party politics and the transcendent political leader to overshadow the agency of genocidal survivors and political resistance. Is there anything more exceptional than a nation of white supremacy deigning to elect a black man as its chief executive?

Hence, at the place where black achievement intersects with black genocide, there is a void that elicits little analytical interest among academic achievers. Most ignore the presence of the intersection, looking past the void with its supposedly obscure or muted signals—there are no yellow, orange, or red flares to indicate national black security threats—of state violence or state-incited genocide in Western democracies. Thinkers see only what is intellectually compatible with our paradigms, shaped and filtered by the dominant ideologies of the “dominant culture” (the latter phrase used by Jeremiah Wright elicited derision within mainstream media).

In Africana thought, some ask: How could a black or Africana man ascend to the U.S. presidency while antiblack racism and genocide flourish? Despite or because of George W. Bush’s 2000 presidency as a bequest from the U.S. Supreme Court following felon disenfranchisement, racially driven intimidation at the polls, and faulty voting machinery for impoverished neighborhoods, people more clearly see the process of electing a progressive black president in the United States. Most seem befuddled by the process through which antiblack racism leads to genocide. In an era in which a black man can be elected president in a non-African nation founded on slavery and white supremacy, what is the meaning of black genocide embedded in domestic and foreign policies, and how might multiracial white supremacy mask that meaning?

American exceptionalism has infiltrated Africana thought. This semantic infiltration shapes a discourse of entitlement. Americans and African Americans, including the newly arrived immigrants from Africa and the diaspora, are entitled to a future that appears to look like the future that whites sought to craft under capitalism and
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racism and sexism—the “American dream.” In a democratic state, the entitled are those (deserving) Americans and blacks, whose coronation occurs through the electoral process. John Mbiti could point out that such a concept of time (and space) is localized and not universal (quantum physics and Vedanta philosophy concur). Harold Cruise could warn that for African Americans to forget historical antecedents—steeped in genocidal policies implemented by a democratic state—would mean essentially the loss of our souls if not our minds. But neither of these arguments has much impact on politics in contemporary Africana thought.

The academy’s neoliberal mandate underscores black and Africana studies as well as other critical studies (ethnic, women and gender, queer, community engagement). Africana thought that circulates as intellectual property is largely produced and disseminated in university or college programs and departments, part of the government or corporate sectors, or all of the above. Given the endowments of elite colleges and universities, Congress has increasingly questioned whether such schools deserve tax-exempt status. Of course, state universities are extensions of the government and are regulated as such. Africana studies and thought may function as political parties in an academic environment with our own versions of the Republican National Committee, the Democratic National Committee, and the centrist Democratic Leadership Council, which attempts to emulate the past victories of archconservatives and reactionaries in the Grand Old Party.

Academics embedded in “political parties” (that is, political agents operating only within the confines of systems dominated by elites) often do not reject achievement or Mbiti’s “concept of history moving forward towards a future climax.” In the absence of an intellectual promise or progress culminating in tangible liberation, there is no apparent (political) purpose or mission statement for Africana thought, outside of gathering more data for those dedicated to alleviating suffering, intellectual investigations, or “opportunities” and career advancement. Grappling with the issue of black genocide outside of a liberal framework is seen as the kiss of death for career-minded academics.

The real and symbolic battles waged during the 2008 primaries have spun out symbolic gestures and performances that captivate a global audience and inspire loyal followers. Yet how do the loyal-
ists—the new political class—perceive and respond to antiblack genocide in all of its nuanced and blatant manifestations?

Sacrifices and struggles to create, institutionalize, and preserve Africana studies would promise, one hopes, a future, stable ground for further movement toward liberation. Yet we might be living in a sci-fi novel, one in which—as in the works of Butler, whose stumble on a Bay Area curb yielded yet another ancestor—we find the convergence of the scientific and the imaginative, of the empirical and the theoretical. All have the possibility of fashioning freedom. Resisting party politics and postracial racism, Africana thought may (re)invent itself, acknowledging a past that cannot be fully celebrated, a present that cannot be adequately explained in conventional terms, and a future that cannot be fully trusted to promise anything like a utopia. Dystopia? As Butler’s work suggests, dystopia is entirely possible. Yet in terms of liberation in the pursuit of (re)invention, we shall find that it is impossible to adequately contextualize any of this if, as Some of Us Are Brave asserts, the invisible woman sitting squarely in the crossroads remains unseen.

Admittedly, this essay stumbles. The intersection is unlit. The center, corners, curbs, and crossing lines are shadowed. In those shadows reside presidential party politics and genocidal policies. In full circle, “historical antecedents” offer both departure and arrival points as we repeatedly cross our own past while projecting a real and imagined future as critical thought radically invents meaningful engagement.

Notes

1. These divergent lines intersect out of necessity. There is a shared condition of “blackness” as alienated and suspect in a white-dominated state and society. The intersection is often jarring, for there is no shared ideological narrative or political will to confront this alienation. I do not assume that the reader agrees that U.S. policies have historically promoted racial genocide. Perhaps, as a friend and colleague has observed, only the “extreme Left” would use this terminology. Even the Kerner Commission report on civil rights and civil disturbances and riots, a report that would be considered “radical” by today’s political norms, did not issue that charge. This failure of recognition could be critiqued as part of the ideology of nationalism or as an expression of genocide itself: if it does not exist, then we are innocents.


To those who disdain or refuse the term *genocide*, despite the compatibility of black conditions with the standards of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Elimination of Genocide, one must ask, “What language would you use?”


5. Contradictory behavior of notables and celebrities who lecture on the morality of the black mass but themselves have moral failings reported in the press has been noted.

6. In Pavlovian moves for the electorate, U.S. presidents and lawmakers have directed the focus on genocide onto international enemies, using epithets such as “Hitler,” “Stalin,” or the “evil empire” during the Reagan administration, and the “axis of evil” in the G. W. Bush administration’s battles with North Korea, Iran, and Iraq.


9. That mainstream news outlets such as the *New York Times* found the Republican presidential candidate’s early tour of Latin America puzzling and anticlimactic reveals how the global citizen remains weighted with hierarchies of value.

11. Vargas, Never Meant to Survive, x.

12. Amari Sekou, a doctoral student, noted the following in a July 2008 e-mail: “Given that UN documents are fairly inaccessible to people, the naming process of genocide, the evaluation of the investigation of it, and the adjudication or punishment of it belong largely in the hands of non-African elites.” Sekou critiques the need to be validated by institutions and authorities that exclude nonelites: “The use of the UN definition produces an air of officialness.”

13. Genocide is more clearly seen and more often addressed in the African context, even if, as in the case of Rwanda, after the fact. In racially fashioned global consciousness, Africa depicts a visceral portrait of the trek off the golden path into hellish quagmire. Celebratory democratic moments, such as the presidential elections of Nelson Mandela (1992, 1996) and Thabo Mbeki (2000, 2004) in South Africa may deflect from black mass poverty, misery, and violence that remain entrenched. Propaganda informs that genocide preceded the African National Congress’s entry into government but did not follow the ruling party into office.

14. Following the ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the United Nations designated rape as a “war crime.” In Sudan, rapes of girls, women, and boys and their mutilations or branding are part of ethnic cleansing.

   By expanding the scope for struggle rather than shrinking it in an attempt to manage crises, the chaotic, unstructured nature of violence reveals itself to a fuller extent. The UN “manages” genocide by having an “acceptable” number of dead and displaced before rhetorical intervention is made; military intervention with UN peacekeepers, if it happens at all, tends to occur well after the start of violence. Exactly how does one count genocide? Situate antiblack genocide in the global economy of arms trade speculation (e.g., China in Africa), the destruction of global food markets, theft of natural resources and labor, and the expansion of repressive penal industries?

15. “This primary season may not be over, but when it is we will have to remember who we are as Democrats, that we are the party of Jefferson and Jackson, of Roosevelt and Kennedy, and that we are at our best when we lead with principle, when we lead with conviction, when we summon an entire nation to a common purpose and a higher purpose.” “Transcript: Senator Obama’s Remarks in N.C.,” New York Times, May 6, 2008, accessed May 8, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/06/us/politics/06text-obama.html.

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20. If party politics simplify narratives and “reality” is spun for electoral advantage and economic gain, then despite their differences ideologues tow the same party line. Even the Republican and Democratic Party elites have more in common than disenfranchised groups seeking admittance. The Democratic National Committee’s failure to contest voting irregularities in 2000 in Florida and in 2004 in Ohio and a report that one out of seven black votes is routinely thrown out suggest that increasing the voting rolls has more to do with increasing (or, for Republicans, decreasing) the electoral advantage of a particular party, not the expansion of black rights under white supremacy.


22. Obama’s campaign website listed problems and solutions; pledging that the candidate would if elected president: strengthen civil rights; “combat employment discrimination”; “expand hate crimes statutes”; and “end” deceptive voting practices and voter intimidation and racial profiling. Barack Obama website, “Civil Rights.”

23. Racial and class biases are instrumental in U.S. arrests, sentencing, and executions; the majority of offenders are white but the majority of the incarcerated are not.


25. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Michelle Obama’s more moderate language and visual images increasingly evoke Claire Huxtable, whose demeanor is more suitable for a black first lady. Zillah Eisenstein has written extensively on race, feminism, and Michelle Obama.


30. Ibid.
31. See the online Sentencing Project reports, http://www.sentencing-project.org.
34. Christianity materialized as an instrument in imperialism as has democracy.
35. See “Democracy and Captivity” chapter in this volume.
36. Wright’s angry “paranoia” and incivility is rarely viewed as a radical analysis of structural repression in U.S. imperial and racial policies. Citing U.S.-sponsored terrorism as a possible trigger for retaliatory violence is a reference to state violence: the Central Intelligence Agency torture manuals and assassinations; School of the Americas’ training of death squad leaders; covert funding of counterrevolutionary paramilitaries and human rights violators.
37. For a discussion of “multicultural white supremacy,” see the work of Jared Sexton.
38. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* (New York: Feminist Press, 1982).
Racism, Genocide, and Resistance

Genocide in the War Zones

Racism killed Malice Green, and if racism itself is not destroyed, it will destroy our nation. It got Malice Green at night. It will get you in the morning.
—Rev. Adams’s 1992 funeral eulogy for Malice Green, beaten to death by Detroit police

Outside of a few communities, people rarely speak about racist state murders in a language that allows one to understand and mourn losses. Atrocities can inspire a truth telling competent to critique and condemn racist violence. This truth telling most often happens in eulogies at funerals and memorials. The rest of the time, we usually hear and speak the semiliteracy of convention shaping the dominant discourse on “race.” This literacy arises from severing racism from its logical culmination in genocide, and the referent for human atrocities to holocaust(s) commodified for mass consumption. Resisting racist destruction and genocide requires demystifying contemporary racism, genocide, and fascism, and organizing to implement international rights conventions in the United States.

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> It is sometimes incorrectly thought that genocide means the complete and definitive destruction of a race or people. The Genocide Convention, however, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on November 9, 1948, defines genocide as any killings on the basis of race, or in its specific words, as “killing members of the group.” Any intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, racial, ethnic or religious group is genocide according to the Convention. Thus, the Convention states, “causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group” is genocide as well as “killing members of the group.”

> We maintain, therefore, that the oppressed Negro citizens of the United States, segregated, discriminated against, and long the target of violence suffer from genocide as the result of the consistent, conscious, policies of every branch of government.\(^1\)

U.S. domestic genocidal policies, mirroring foreign policies of racial imperialism, have historically focused on Native and African Americans. The Senate delayed ratification of the Genocide Convention to 1986 because Congress feared Native and African Americans’ use of the Convention against the United States in international courts.\(^2\) Currently, the International Indian Treaty Council and the Freedom Now Party use the UN Convention on Genocide to petition the UN and educate communities about U.S. domestic repression: upward of 100 U.S. political prisoners, the disproportionate imprisonment of African, Latin, and Native Americans, and the torture in U.S. prisons. Activists and writers also argue for the enforcement of the Convention, which prohibits involuntary sterilization of a targeted population. This occurs under the guise of “population control,” as sexism and racism shape U.S. genocide to focus on Puerto Rican, African, and Native American
women: For example, the U.S. Indian Health Service (IHS) of the Bureau of Indian Affairs has involuntarily sterilized approximately 40 percent of all Native American women. Children are not exempt from state racist policies: in 1990, the IHS inoculated Inuit children with HIV-related hepatitis-B vaccine, which the World Health Organization had banned; in 1993, the HIV-correlated hepatitis-A vaccine was tested on Native Americans of the northern plains reservations.¹

Implemented into law in 1988 with restrictive amendments, the Convention on Genocide theoretically criminalizes and outlaws such policies creating or inciting genocide. In practice, the United States has consistently positioned itself as an outlaw state; its crimes against humanity, targeting African and Native Americans for the most severe repression, shape the daily life of these populations. With African American infant mortality doubled that of whites, by the mid-1980s, life expectancy for whites had increased (from 75.4 to 75.4 years), while life expectancy for African Americans had decreased (from 69.7 to 69.4 years).² Native American life expectancy on reservations is forty-five and forty-eight years for men and women, respectively.³ Manning Marable’s grim assessment of the possible impact of state policies on city residents applies to those who live on reservations:

The direction of America’s political economy and social hierarchy is veering toward a kind of subtle apocalypse which promises to obliterate the lowest stratum of the Black and Latino poor. For the Right will not be satisfied with institutionalization of bureaucratic walls that surround and maintain the ghetto. The genocidal logic of the situation could demand, in the not too distant future, the rejection of the ghetto’s right to survival in the new capitalist order.⁶

Conventional language’s catchall term, racism, which is virtually meaningless when severed from genocide, is more obscurantist than analytical. Most language mystifies racism to disconnect it from institutional white supremacy and genocide and privatize it as personal behavior and speech. Dismembered language distracts from the impact of racist state policies, since how we talk about racism determines what we do about genocide.
Racist Discourse, “White Rights,” and White Supremacy

How do you get to be the sort of victor who claims to be the vanquished also?

—Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy*

The race discourses of various ideologies distance racism from genocide. The result of this distancing is that issues of identity replace institutional analysis. Racialized identity and speech are endemic to the United States. Yet, a focus on these alone deflects from the political and economic aspects of structural racism and white supremacy: Whether or not anything is publicly said, policies perpetuate dominance and genocide.

Racism has come to be understood as “a form of discourse . . . that can be effectively blocked by means of linguistic taboos.” Perversely, as racial epithets become taboo, so does antiracist terminology; “race” supplants “racist”; “multiculturalism” and “race relations” supplant “antiracism” in the language of conservatives and progressives alike; reformist policies such as affirmative action (“quotas”) are denounced as “polarizing” and “antidemocratic.”

The absence of racial epithets notwithstanding, supremacist language and racial mythology inspired the electoral campaigns of neo-Nazi David Duke and former presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush. All shared the rhetoric of European neofascist movements, that is, the language of “white rights” and the redress of “white victimization.” Neofascists’ denunciation of “white victimization,” allegedly stemming from “black racism” and equity programs, proves frighteningly compatible with the language of conservatives, moderates, and progressives. “White rights” provides the ideological ground for neconservatives to advocate, and neoliberals to ignore, genocidal policies. The ascent from rightist to leftist racism is not as steep as one would like to imagine.

For example, in the “Whiteness” issue of the *Village Voice*, Slavoj Zizek offers an interpretation of Malcolm X that could allow for some to argue against whites actively accepting responsibility for white supremacy: “Only by acknowledging that, ultimately, they can do nothing, that the emancipation of African Americans must be their own deed, only by renouncing the false self-blame of whites, which conceals its exact opposite, patronizing arrogance, can whites actually do something for African American emancip-
tion.” Yet African Americans are not a politically monolith group; outside a multiracial coalition they could not mount a successful struggle against white supremacy. From the abolitionists (such as John Brown) to the freedom riders to the activists in solidarity with the Panthers and other antiracist militants, the struggle has always been interracial with whites playing a critical role, although also criticized for attempting to usurp leadership roles. In the same *Voice* issue, *Tikkun’s* editor Michael Lerner wrote “Jews Are Not White”; without differentiating between Ashkenazi, Sephardic, or Ethiopian Jews, or referring to the complicity of non-WASPS in white supremacy, he argues that multiculturalism has become the tool of an elite of minority intellectuals seeking to establish themselves inside an intellectual world that has too long excluded them. . . . Jews must respond with an equally determined insistence that we are not white, and that those who claim we are and exclude our history and literature from the newly emerging multicultural canon are our oppressors.  

Here, few other than Aryans qualify as members of a mythic construction of “whiteness.” In the face of “blackness” or presence of blacks, Jews would not self-identify as black, although propaganda of European Jews as “deficient” in whiteness fuels anti-Semitism, which is not identical to racism, or antiblack racism. White supremacy accommodates non-Aryan “whites” in Israel and Palestine, Southern Africa, and throughout the Americas. The mystification of racism promotes a conventional language that, with increasing aggressiveness, argues for white rights under white supremacy. The fundamental state and white right is not to be held responsible for racial oppression. The ultimate white right is to claim to be victimized by those resisting being targeted for genocide.  

Ethnic “minorities” lack institutional or state power to dominate dominant ethnic groups. Racism is not real and alleged ethnic chauvinism. Oppressive state hierarchies exist so the critical distinction between chauvinism and racism must be maintained. Transforming odious ethnic chauvinism into a colorized version of white supremacy—which is the only global racialized oppression known for half a millennium—trivializes white supremacy. Colonialized groups are granted the equal opportunity of being labeled “ethnic oppressors” or “reverse racists” when a false equality
projects illusions of domination that deflect from real structures of oppression. This false illusion of domination, by fictionalizing state racism and complicitous populations, rationalizes an otherwise illogical concept: red, black, brown, or yellow “racists” or racial oppressors within a white supremacist state. Only when racism is severed from genocide does one argue that oppressed ethnic groups can implement policies creating racism and anti-Semitism. Here, denigrating structural critiques elevates debates of ethnic identity and innocence to degrade struggles against domestic genocide.

MEMORY AND MEANING

The present political chaos is connected with the decay of language.

—George Orwell, Politics and the English Language

However impossible it is to talk about racism meaningfully without discussing genocide, it is equally impossible to speak with moral opprobrium of genocide without reference to fascism. Genocide’s meaning stems from the tribunals following the Nazi atrocities of World War II. Constructed as the antithesis and anathema to Western democracy and civilization, the concept has great political and ethical weight, which has rarely been brought to bear on the United States. The label “fascist” is even more infrequently applied to U.S. policies. Like most states, the U.S. denies that its policies are racist, with genocidal or neofascist consequences. However, it uses both terms in interventionist rhetoric to mobilize civilian support (e.g., for the bombings of Panama and Iraq, George Bush referred to Manuel Noriega and Saddam Hussein as Hitler-like personas or “fascists”).

The term “fascism” is usually limited to specific historical events in Europe, leaving unexamined the phenomenon of fascism and neofascist aspects in state racism. Describing “fascism” as “a system of political, economic, social and cultural organization,” Noam Chomsky rejects conventional restrictions:

If we want to talk about [fascism] reasonably we have to disassociate it from concentration camps and gas chambers. There was a fascism before there were extermination camps. . . . From a socio-cultural point of view, fascism meant an attack on the
ideals of the Enlightenment . . . on the idea that people had	natural rights, that they were fundamentally equal, that it was
an infringement of essential human rights if systems of authority
subordinated some to others.10

Chomsky’s argument demystifies fascism as a distant evil; yet
it does not acknowledge that the Enlightenment ideals of the
civilized, rational mind were (are) themselves premised on racism.
The European Enlightenment’s construction of the Western liberal
individual as the standard for civilized humanity concurred with
its reconstructing those enslaved or colonized by Europeans
with an essentialist inferiority. This worldview placed and places
“the colonized beyond the liberal equation of universal freedom
and equality by rendering them in racist terms as qualitatively
different. . . . Racism was, in short, basic to the creation of
liberalism and the identity of the European.”11 The Enlightenment
legacy dulls recognition of the pervasiveness of racism’s influence,
just as the language of denial and rhetorical opposition hinder
radical resistance to racism.

Given the racialization of the value of human life as an Enlight-
enment legacy in Europe and European settler states, and the
narcissism of white supremacy, the presence of humanity, and
abhorrence over its loss, is based on “whiteness,” constructed
as European. (This is reflected in Western European and U.S.
indifference to the genocide of Bosnian Muslims as the “Other”
Europeans.) It is difficult then to assess the conventional meanings
of genocide within the context of state and social constructions of
Nazi Germany’s genocidal policies as the referent for memory and
meaning concerning racist atrocities.

The 1993 dedication of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in
Washington, DC legitimizes the historical reality of Nazi Germany’s
genocidal policies against Jews, which an estimated one-fifth of
the U.S. population denies.12 Yet, the Museum, the state, and
 corporate donors promote a consciousness in which this tragedy,
abridged from historical, concurrent, and contemporary geno-
cides, manifests as the only real expression of genocide. No national
poll is likely to be conducted to see what percentage believes
Indigenous and African holocausts happen(ed) in the Americas.
The national museum, dedicated to preventing future holocausts,
with no mention of American genocides or U.S. national racism
and anti-Semitism, valorizes the U.S. government and ignores its genocidal policies. It calls us to awaken to, or to be anesthetized by, the horrors of holocausts as past “events,” occurring outside of this nation, which is now reconstructed as the protector against genocide. The contradictions of the U.S. national museum suggest that the spectator was never intended to be an actor:

[The museum narrative] suggests an outcome that isn’t really possible. . . . It strains toward completeness and closure and understanding; these dramatic reassurances are evoked, but never satisfied. Except to the extent that the museum hints at a moral to the story: American democracy. Press materials explain, “the charter of the Museum is to remind visitors of the importance of democratic values and to underscore our national commitment to human rights.” On the way out of the exhibit one practically walks into a wall bearing the seal of the United States. Arched over the eagle and “E Pluribus Unum” are the words “For the dead and the living we must bear witness.”

Bear witness to what? The German holocaust is presented as “a discourse, a representation forever being deconstructed, a spectacle, an industry” that promises comforting closure to and containment of human barbarism and tragedy: “The Nazis came to power, committed atrocities, and were defeated. The end.” Whoever tells this particular story omits information on collaborators and contemporaneous European genocides. Collective memory of selective holocausts, remembered in fragmented fashion, reveals the depoliticizing aspects of race language: The language of the horrified spectator is not necessarily the language of the antiracist activist. “Identification” through viewing a spectacle, no matter how horrific, does not necessarily lead to analysis, moral commitment, or political organizing. Ongoing genocidal practices diminish before the symbolic, as national memory is shaped more by marketing than by regret for racist policies and philosophies that (inevitably) culminate in genocide.

State-constructed memory and meaning obstruct confronting racism as “genocide.” Calls to consciousness, relying on mystified and Eurocentric constructions of humanity and suffering, are conditioned by the surrealism and hypocrisy of regret. With the loss of European life as the only common and binding referent
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for atrocities, no conventional language denounces the genocide of Native and African Americans as inherently meaningful and significant, with its own moral and political value. To the extent that resistance is tied to this language, Native, African, and European American writers use the German Nazi atrocities (as the recognized referents for “holocaust” and “fascism”) to make U.S. genocidal practices “meaningful.”

LAW AND RESISTANCE

First the law dies and then people die.
—1993 sign in Solingen, Germany, protesting neo-Nazi murders of five Turkish girls and women; and parliament’s amending the constitution to restrict asylum for foreigners

To prevent atrocities, we are told, we have law. U.S. constitutional law gave us slavery, broken Indigenous treaties, suppression of political dissent, codified sexism and homophobia, and opened doors for monopoly capitalism. In addition, constitutional law, as an Enlightenment project, exists within a worldview that posits “law’s innocence,” as law first “marks out the areas” within which racism is allowed to operate legally, and then rationalizes its operation.16

The limitations of constitutional law stem from its malleability by dominant elites and structures that define rights and their enforcement, and a universalizing Western worldview excluding the contributions to law of traditional Native American and African cosmologies. These limitations also shape the frailties of international law. However, the language of UN conventions provides specific norms to address the classism, racism, and sexism of U.S. constitutional law, oppressive policies, and obscurantist language. Understanding that law in itself is insufficient for political change, activists organize for the implementation of international human rights conventions, working for the language of the conventions as an educational and political strategy to resist genocidal policies, by expanding and redefining the conventional concept of rights and entitlements within the United States.

Although the conservative nature of the U.S. Supreme Court makes the enforcement of conventions unlikely, according to the U.S. Constitution’s “supremacy clause,” treaties are part of the “supreme law of the land,” and preempt national law (just as federal law prevails
over state laws). Calling for the enactment of treaties challenges U.S. foreign and domestic policies. For example, the Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid supersedes the weak Congressional bills and prevents further U.S. support for the destabilization of Southern Africa. The Geneva Conventions (1949) and Nuremberg Principles war crimes or “crimes against humanity,” covering the treatment of military, civilians, and political prisoners during times of war, would criminalize CIA-directed/U.S.-funded contra wars and internal, domestic wars waged against U.S. activists.

When the United States signed the UN Charter it agreed to uphold: “equal rights and self-determination of peoples . . . higher standards of living, full employment . . . universal respect for, and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.” If accountable to that Charter, the United States would discontinue in the 1990s its policies of the 1980s, during which it spent approximately $1 billion a year on the Pentagon and engaged in covert operations to destabilize governments and liberation movements. Also, if international law prevailed, there would be a conventional understanding of the criminality of the U.S.-dominated financial institutions, which structure economic exploitation so that, for example, each year African, Caribbean, and Latin American nations transfer $20 billion or more to their historic colonizers, more than they receive in aid and loans; 14 percent of the world’s population consume 70 percent of its resources; and an estimated half million young children die. The Charter would remand domestic “austerity” programs in which millions live below a whimsically set poverty line, and over 1 million are estimated to be homeless; African Americans are poorer today than twenty-one generations ago; two out of three adults in poverty are women; and women of color are twice as likely to be poor as white women. The enforcement of human rights law would decrease the number of war zones.

The Charter and other conventions also prohibit state repression, illegal surveillance and imprisonment, increasing police powers through the U.S. preventive detention law, the 1984 Bail Reform Act, and the criminalization of radical political dissent. It also makes illegal “The Federal Violence Initiative,” which criminalizes an entire population. Approved by the National Mental Health
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Advisory Council, the “Initiative” is federally funded “to identify at least 100,000 inner city children whose alleged biochemical and genetic defects will make them violent in later life. . . . Treatment will consist of behavior modification in the family, special ‘day camps,’ and drugs.”

Various organizations seek the enforcement of the conventions and Charter as the language of rights in the United States. At the 1985 UN Conference on the Decade on Women in Kenya, the Women’s Coalition for Nairobi, organized by U.S. Women for Racial and Economic Equality, obtained over 2,000 U.S. delegates’ signatures on a petition calling for the U.S. government to obey the UN conventions and Charter. The petition demanded nuclear disarmament; equal pay and full employment; full rights for undocumented workers; “quality of life measures” to eliminate economic, racial, and sexual violence and discrimination; quality reproductive choice and child care; and aid to women in independence struggles in Southern Africa and the Middle East. In 1986, Marcia Walker, Mayor Pro-Tem, and Kathleen P. Salisbury, City Clerk, signed ordinance No. 2807 of the Burlington, Iowa City Council to bring the city’s human rights ordinance into compliance with the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. In 1993, New York Assemblyman’s Roger Greene formed an independent party, “The Children First Party,” based on the UN conventions on the rights of children, to focus on legislation dealing with children’s needs and rights. Also, in 1993 the New York–based Center for Constitutional Rights used international law in arguing its case for Diana Ortiz, the U.S. nun tortured and raped by U.S.-funded death squads in Guatemala.

Conclusion

Racism in U.S. foreign and domestic policy culminates in genocide. The inability of conventional language to confront the devaluing and destruction of human life based on white supremacy creates a silence around U.S. “race wars” and struggles for survival and liberation. The reduction of “racism” to speech, social manners, or the incivility of aberrational minorities ignores state racist violence and the massive increase in white supremacist hate group activities. Rendering racism an abstraction and its attendants, genocide and
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fascism, social fictions, racialized language’s obscurantism transcends ideology and ethnic, class, and gender identity. By rejecting this language, activists create, with international human rights conventions, a literacy in political and moral language adequate to convey and confront the devastation of genocidal policies. Demystifying racialized speech and organizing to implement human rights treaties as “law,” simultaneously enforceable for national and international communities, might be our most important forms of resistance to racism as genocide.

Notes

13. Ibid., 35.
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All Power to the People!
Arendt's Communicative Power in a Racial Democracy

INTRODUCTION: THE SEARCH FOR (COLOR-BLIND) POWER

Hannah Arendt’s innovative, liberal political thought provides insights into the complexities and contradictions of the world’s premier democracy, its racialized practices and policies, and its mythologized status. Derived from personal experience as well as political practice and theory, Arendt’s theory of power posits that it is neither force, domination, nor oppression; power is collective action for a common ideal rooted in freedom. A German Jew who survived Nazi genocidal campaigns during World War II, Arendt fought in the French Resistance and saw her mentors and friends Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger come to their own realizations about power, community, and violence: Jaspers was persecuted by the Nazis; Heidegger became one. Her adopted country, the United States, offered Arendt the space and platform to advocate for the return of a mythologized democracy, the Athenian *polis*, in order to valorize and solidify American democracy (a bourgeois democracy, one which functions as empire). Yet, this revival reifying rigidly distinct spheres of governance/domination fails to include a sustained critique of institutional racism and racialized exclusion and domination in her host nation.

Arendt’s theory of power as communication rather than domination is based on the division of space into the non- or prepolitical private realm and the political public realm.¹ Such a division engenders power as communication, according to Arendt, for the

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private realm “frees” inhabitants of the public realm from labor and work, biological and material necessity. She appears not to see that her idealized political state, the Aristotelian polis, subverted and undermined power and politics by oppressing the household. With the polis of ancient Greece as her model for democratic power, Arendt ignores the fact that enslavement and economic exploitation and forced relegation to the “powerless” private realm enabled an Athenian elite (of propertied males) to practice democracy. Subjugation constructed a restrictive public space dedicated to the ideal of power as communication, reason, and persuasion, a site advocating freedom but built on oppression. The practice of power as communication by an elite citizenry predicated on the enslavement and exploitation of the majority (women, children, men) is the historical reality of the United States. This historical legacy (of genocide, slavery, and imperialism) has profound implications for political power, freedom, and community. Although Arendt shares with the Black Panther Party, a black antiracist Marxist militant organization created in 1966, a populist mandate—all power should reside with the people—she is much more restrictive about who constitutes “the people.”

Binary opposition to designate superiority/inferiority and normalcy/deviancy as biologically inscribed is common in a racialized democracy; political speech routinely attributes criminality, deviancy, corruption, and pathology to “the nonwhite” or non-European. The ultimate political binary is that of the civilized/savage. In binary opposition, antiblack racism has played a critical historical role in rationalizing economic, social, and political hierarchies. Arendt’s binary divisions, adopted from the polis, mask racism (which was not the foundation of slavery in ancient Greece) by concealing the private realm of domestic service, field labor, and child rearing as the designated work for racialized peoples (and women). Reproducing the split between the public and private realms as necessary for the manifestation of true power, her uncritical embrace of polarities and hierarchies promotes elitism based on subordination. With racism as such a persistent and pervasive feature of American democracy, polarities and hierarchies become “naturalized.” The dualism to which she subscribes dismisses the political significance of the “private realm” and the bodies contained and policed there, allowing the personified public body to appear as both representative and universal (with
little mention of the homogeneity of its appearance—propertied males racialized as white). The political person—naturalized and universalized as affluent, masculine European (or some approximation thereof)—shapes Arendt’s color and gender-blind analyses. Her model is premised on an inequality marked by assumptions of biologically determined superiority/inferiority; this model impedes critiques of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, racial domination, and state violence.

State violence (through the laws, the police, the military) practiced in the “private” realm shapes the practice and sites of power in the public realm but also incites communicative power and democratic action among those resisting oppression and exclusion from governing. The practice of voting disenfranchisement of African Americans through bureaucracy (poll tax), violence (imprisonment), and terror (lynching and/or police brutality) also suggests that the private realm was never truly understood in the United States as a site void of the practice of politics. Hence, political and state interventions in the private realm (really realms, given the multiple sites of political exile household, factory, field, prison—which overlap and reside within each other) by governing elites to quell rebellions, from Nat Turner to the Black Panther Party, were not merely law-enforcement responses to criminality. Although the state represented them as such to claim that it has/had no political trials, political prisoners, or political executions, these were political maneuvers to reinforce and segregate political space and governance. Native and African Americans have historically been immersed in distinctions between domination and democratic power for freedom and community (see the slave narratives of abolitionist Frederick Douglass, or the memoirs of antilynching crusader Ida B. Wells). Collective responses to enslavement, segregation, and imprisonment were infused by discussions and practices concerning violence, power, and liberation during the time of Arendt’s writings on civil disobedience, violence, and revolution in the 1960s.

Any of these events, seriously studied for the exercise and contradictions of power and violence, might have profoundly altered Arendt’s allegiance to the state and her belief in its rehabilitation. None of these events merited much attention or consideration from her, perhaps because these political agents had already been delegated prepolitical or criminalized roles, and their places of
power and communicative interaction—rural Southern black communities, impoverished urban black neighborhoods, and prisons whose populations would become increasingly racially determined—had been designated as nonpolitical sites.

Action within the private realm to challenge public power and domination exercised (by U.S. law and police) in the public realm to manage or control the private realm and dissent are phenomena shaped by race and repression. Ignoring the historical and contemporary specificities of this democracy and its racialized state violence and dominance allows Arendt to construct a theory of power that floats freely above a foundation mired in racially fashioned domination. A clearer vision requires that one review what Arendt’s political thought omits: major trajectories shaping the understanding and practice of power in the United States.

During the Civil War, which initially was not fought to abolish slavery, the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (the Emancipation Proclamation) codified rather than ended slavery, proclaiming it legal for those duly convicted of a crime. Following the Civil War, when private ownership of humans was banned, the Thirteenth Amendment’s legalization of slavery for those convicted of crimes fueled the convict lease system—that is, the state owned humans. Under this joint venture between the state and private industry, African Americans were criminalized (crimes included economic competition with whites and exercising political power, along with theft or harm to people) and worked to death at faster rates than they had been under slavery. The prison replaced the plantation, and public ownership of racialized humans meant a renewal supply of labor through police sweeps. Over the decades, Slave Codes became Black Codes and, later, the basis for Jim Crow segregation, refining binary divisions and the dichotomy between dominance and power embedded in a racial state. Government policies/legislation and social practices worked to politically and economically disenfranchise a racialized domestic realm (populated by Native, African, and Latin Americans) and a racialized foreign realm qua domestic realm populated by Indigenous peoples, Africans, Latin Americans, and Asians (hence the appearance of a metaparadigm in which U.S. foreign and domestic policies seem to mirror each other in terms of the treatment of the non-European as colonized/dependent Other).

Diminished power became naturalized as part of the American political landscape because of the foundation on which the (Athenian
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American democracy was built: self-governance predicated on the rule of other humans (constructed as inherently inferior). Democratic power, which extended to collective control of the state, was never intended for all of the people. Responding to the trajectory of racism that stems from slavery through the convict prison lease system through Jim Crow back into the prison industrial complex, despite desegregation legislation and integrationist policies, suggests that the militant assertion “All Power to the People!”—for the Panthers, governing power to the racialized mass, the “lumpen,” workers, laborers, the unemployed, and the criminally employed—sought to destroy that trajectory. Arendt’s liberalism, which appears not to have considered that the Athenian polis and its progeny might in fact be Trojan horses, rejected such antiracist radicalism. Challenging the fundamental flaw of democracy, as we know it, antiracist radicals (among whom the Panthers of the late 1960s and early 1970s came to epitomize the uncompromised defiance of the racially determined “household” or private realm) demanded liberation through revolutionary change in U.S. domestic and foreign policies.

This struggle to expand and realize communicative power and construct a nonracial democracy is as old as the nation-state. Arendt’s personal observations of racism in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s, the decades of the Southern Civil Rights Movement and the rise of black power movements, centered on Jim Crow segregation and racist terror. The Civil Rights Movements of the 1950s and 1960s transformed American politics and inspired mobilization among and between various sectors of the politically and socially disenfranchised: women, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities, Chicanos/ Latinos, Native Americans formed movements; and the poor, immigrants, and the criminalized organized. Arendt’s pronouncements about the Civil Rights Movement were “ambivalent” at best. Criticizing desegregation activism in the battles for school integration in Little Rock, Arkansas, while condemning racism in general, she failed to discern a racial phenomenon other than social racism, which she decried. However, disenfranchisement on a continuum, hidden behind “private” sentiments of racial ideology and preference, creates a facade of universal democracy. This facade obscures racial dominance and state violence as political acts against the political power of the private realm. Racism is political, not merely social;
as a political phenomenon in the United States, it was never fully analyzed by Arendt.

Arendt’s lack of attention to the phenomenon of racial ruling within the United States reflects her relegation of the racialized and criminalized to the outer realms. Understanding the limitations to the manifestation of power valorized by Arendt requires an understanding of the racial dominance and violence embedded within U.S. democracy. It is critical to examine the political implications of the racist nature of policing and incarceration. Arendt warned about the military-industrial complex of her time, but given her insufficient attention to racial dominance, she could not anticipate the continuance of slavery through the prison-industrial complex. Prison, the most excluded realm within the private sphere, is also a space where power and domination appear in their most extreme forms.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, two million people, some 70 percent of them African, Latino/Chicano, Native American, or Asian American, lived behind bars in U.S. prisons, jails, and detention centers, three times the number documented twenty years earlier. Although some might argue that this nether realm is populated by those who “chose” it by demonstrating their incapacity for “human togetherness” (Arendt’s term discussed below), surely we must note the “coincidence” that the construction of a population unfit for self-governance and communicative power remains racially determined. Although they comprise only 12.5 percent of the U.S. general population, African Americans comprise 50 percent of the U.S. prison population. In a democracy in which nearly one in every twenty-five adults goes to jail each year, one in three black males is tied to the criminal-justice system (and, in states that strip the franchise from felons, they potentially cannot vote). What would it mean for a democracy to create a private realm of bodies to be ruled, and to racially mark them? Consider the following: One is eight times more likely to be sentenced to prison if one is black than if one is white for a similar offense. Defendants receive multiple times the sentencing for use or sale of crack—considered a black urban drug—as opposed to powder cocaine—considered a white suburban indulgence. Although the majority of drug offenders are whites, most defendants sentenced to prison for drug use and sale are African Americans and Latinos; although the proceeds from the “drug war” are mostly concentrated
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in European and European American banks and finance, the wars against drugs, both domestic and foreign, target the non-European (American). Logically, one might deduct that such wars function not merely on the level of criminal justice or law enforcement but on the level of political inclusion or exclusion.\(^5\) By racially fashioning the “criminal” or “public enemy,” one determines the parameters of political community and communicative power and who is capable or worthy of it. Racial profiling and policing ranges from the infraction (driving while black or brown) and “voting while black or brown” in the 2000 presidential election to xenophobia and anti-Muslim/Arab racist assaults following the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The idealized *polis* or democratic state is the ultimate gated community as the sequestered space of democratic power.

The final exclusion from political community is, of course, through death. State executions are racially determined in part (50 percent of those now on death row are people of color, from minority groups representing only 20 percent of the U.S. population).\(^6\) From 1977 to 1986, 90 percent of prisoners executed were convicted of killing whites, although the number of black victims was approximately equal; in fact, one is four times more likely to be sentenced to death for being convicted of killing a white person than of killing a black person.\(^7\) (Ironically, there appears to be a diminishment of the “3/5th human being” status which the U.S. Constitution granted to enslaved blacks.)

It is not that Arendt ignored racism. While condemning it, she tended either to generalize or to selectively examine it. Her examinations, which include torture and economic profiteering from racism, exempt the United States, as in her discussion of imperialism and totalitarian terror. For example, she sees totalitarian terror as a twentieth-century phenomenon and as relatively new in political history. Her assertion that totalitarian terror is a relatively new form of government oppression is odd. Genocide is not unique to the twentieth century, assuming that one would agree that genocide is a byproduct of totalitarian terror. As a form of state racial terror, it is a relatively stable feature in history through European and American imperialism. Arendt notes in “Imperialism,” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the late-nineteenth-century genocide of 20 million Congolese by the Belgian government. The genocide of the Native populations of the Americas by Europeans and Americans also predates the twentieth
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century and reflects the roots of twentieth-century totalitarianism and terror in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century imperialism and genocide. In “On Violence,” Arendt suggests that the legacy of Europe’s imperial, racial wars and conquests offers a cautionary tale: “The much-feared boomerang effect of the ‘government of subject races’ . . . on the home government during the imperialist era meant that rule by violence in faraway lands would end by affecting the government of England, that the last ‘subject race’ would be the English themselves.” What transpires when the new “race” (as socially constructed) is a hybrid construction of and for the propertied “American”—an American whose racially influenced notions of dominance are masked in the guise of economic or national(ist) superiority or “law-abiding” conformity and citizenry?

Arendt’s discussions of anti-Semitism create a somewhat abstract totalitarian terror as she fails to explore fully how Nazi terrorism was based on racist ideology (reportedly, both Nazis and Afrikaners, creators of apartheid in southern Africa, cited U.S. development of reservations to imprison, impoverish, and starve Native Americans as a model to emulate). Racism transforms subjects into either rulers or the ruled. Racism is a fundamental component of terror, and so of violence. Hence, colonized peoples, Native Americans and African-Americans, have disproportionately been the targets of excessive violence and terror emanating from the state and its racialized (white) majority. With racial violence and exclusion, the reduction of (human) subjects to (animal) objects transforms repression into “work” much like politics is transformed into making and work. We can appreciate Arendt’s arguments for power and against domination, while noting that being “color-blind” or closed to an analysis of U.S. racial ruling renders aspects of her thought overly abstract and indifferent to racial control.

Communicative Power

Arendt argues that power is communal rather than coercive. It cannot be exercised over someone; it can only be practiced with others. Dependent on community, it is a collective enterprise, one rooted in noncoercive relationships for the common good. Power as community and relationship becomes the goal or end rather than the means for some other objective. Arendt does not discount the role that specific goals or objectives play in inspiring political
associations; rather, she maintains that transcending all specific or limited ends is the ideal.

Arendt's theory of political power contradicts the notion of power as control posited by Max Weber. For her, the contemporary “human condition” is one of disappearing political power, person, and space; it is one of disappearing humanity as words and deeds become characterized by violence and domination rather than by reason and persuasion. Confusion about the “nature” of power stems from “a firm conviction that the most crucial political issue is, and always has been, the question of Who rules Whom?” She continues, “It is only after one ceases to reduce public affairs to the business of dominion that the original data concerning human affairs appear, or, rather, reappear, in their authentic diversity.” The current confusion, argues Arendt, stems from Western political philosophers who have historically misunderstood their enterprise by adhering too rigidly to the “Platonic approach.” That is, they overemphasized the search for ideal forms and eternal truths, confused politics with ruling (perhaps opportunistically to ensure the “peace” needed for contemplation), and located contemplation apart from the world of action and experience. What many have failed to comprehend, she argues, is that political community exists where “the revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are with others and neither for nor against them—that is, in sheer human togetherness.”

In place of the ancient Greek vocabulary of ruling, European nation-state sovereignty, the Hebrew-Christian patriarchal tradition of obedience to law, and John Stuart Mill’s psychology of the will to dominate, Arendt offers another interpretation of politics and power: “The Athenian city-state . . . had in mind a concept of power and law whose essence did not rely on the command-obedience relationship and which did not identify power and rule or law and command. It was to these examples that the men of the eighteenth-century revolutions turned when they ransacked the archives of antiquity and constituted a form of government, a republic, where the rule of law, resting on the power of the people, would put an end to the rule of man over man, which they thought was a ‘government fit for slaves.’” Yet, the eighteenth-century American revolution worked to consolidate the economic power of the ruling elite landowners; the Founders’ intent was to restrict possibilities for economic democracy and for increasing the size of the political electorate. For Arendt, power is found in citizens’
noncoerced consent. In a representative government, the people are supposed to rule those who govern them. Without consent there is neither power nor legitimate government.

Plurality expressed in the need and desire for communication and collective action characterizes both a democratic nation and the human condition, according to Arendt. Plurality, like friendship, exists only between peers; without equality, commands replace communication; then there is neither common ground for communication nor anything (i.e., diversity and uniqueness) to communicate. Plurality embodies both commonality and diversity; for Arendt, political equality is contingent on admittance into the political peerage or community. Those excluded are prevented from practicing this power. The basis for racially determined exclusion logically should be a central issue in this theory of politics and power in which arbitrary exclusion based only on the ability to exclude contradicts power as communication; in addition, exclusion based on a “universal truth” of inferiority and inclusion based on “superiority” contradicts Existenz philosophy.

Arendt cites a number of obstacles (which, given the construction of the public realm, preclude any mention of racism, sexism, or impoverishment) that diminish human togetherness and power. This diminution occurs when politics is misperceived as either making (instrumentality) or being similar to warfare; when tyranny curtails power; when the “myth of the strong man” distorts power’s communal nature; and when violence supersedes communicative action: “Whenever human togetherness is lost, as for instance in modern warfare, where men go into action and use means of violence in order to achieve certain objectives for their own side and against the enemy . . . In these instances . . . speech becomes indeed ‘mere talk,’ simply one more means toward the end, whether it serves to deceive the enemy or to dazzle everybody with propaganda. . . . In these instances action has lost the quality through which it transcends mere productive activity.”

**Tyranny and Violence**

Tyranny is the antithesis of democracy. The tyranny of a racialized democracy resides in its ability to use violence and domination much more freely against marginalized sectors, whether Native Americans on reservations or Palestinians in occupied territories.
It is not fully clear how Arendt would distinguish between state violence and state terror in connection to U.S. destabilization of democratic movements within its borders and of “Third World” governments. Yet, U.S. politics revolve around coeval manifestations of democracy and tyranny, of collective power expressed in its electoral bodies and dominance through violence or terror. For instance, tyranny within American democracy allowed the use of police terror to destabilize antiracist dissent. Before his execution by the Chicago Police Department and the FBI in December 1969 in a counterintelligence program operation (Cointelpro), twenty-one-year-old Black Panther leader Fred Hampton, in call and response, rallied organizers with the familiar Panther chant: “All Power to the People! Brown Power to Brown People, Red Power to Red People, White Power to White People, Black Power to Black People.”

Arendt ignored the promise and pitfalls of radical antiracist organizations such as the Black Panthers, the American Indian Movement, the Young Lords, the Brown Berets, and the Independistas (all groups argued for the right of self-defense from racial and state violence, and some of their members bore arms). She preferred to lump them generically into a category of rebellious minorities, unsuited and perhaps, at least temporarily, unqualified for the burden of full citizenship in this democratic state. The rebels who truly interested her were the white, middle-class, disaffected university and college students protesting the Vietnam War (her students at the New School in New York City, the heirs apparent to her romanticized polis). In “On Revolution,” Arendt endorses physical resistance to oppression in the form of revolution. Yet, that resistance is never extended to radical antiracist formations, so when antiracists withdrew their consent because the government lost its legitimacy, she possessed no framework to analyze the ensuing battle between the state and its subject racialized minorities. She argues that people choose violence over action because they idealize violence: the “implications of violence inherent in all interpretations of the realm of human affairs as a sphere of making” produced a glorification of violence as the only means for “making” political change. Criticizing middle-class white students for romanticizing violence, Arendt denounces the “strong Marxist rhetoric of the New Left [which] coincides with the steady growth of the entirely non-Marxian conviction, proclaimed by Mao
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Tse-tung, that ‘Power grows out of the barrel of a gun.’”\(^{20}\) (The Panthers sold Mao’s “Little Red Book” to finance the purchase of guns for their patrols to monitor racist and brutal police in Oakland; in fact, working-class Black Panthers sold the book, at a considerable mark-up, to middle-class white students at University of California, Berkeley.)

The outcome of all political action, because it embodies freedom, is never completely predictable; consequently, it is unlike violence as a tool or technique. Politics is characterized by freedom rather than control; so, too, is violence, with its unpredictability. There is no certainty of the intended outcome, writes Arendt, although violence is generally employed to ensure intended results, it remains arbitrary and uncontrollable.

There are instances when violence or war is the only logical or rational choice; yet it is illogical and irrational to romanticize violence, using it indiscriminately, and to institutionalize it within the political community by confusing or equating it with power. (This, of course, was one of the failings of the Panthers—their tragic and destructive responses to violent state repression by the FBI’s Cointelpro.) Arendt elaborates:

Violence, being instrumental by nature, is rational to the extent that it is effective in reaching the end that must justify it. And since when we act we never know with any certainty the eventual consequences of what we are doing, violence can remain rational only if it pursues short-term goals. Violence does not promote causes, neither history, nor revolution, neither progress nor reaction; but it can serve to dramatize grievances and bring them to public attention. As Conor Cruise O’Brien (in a debate on the legitimacy of violence in the Theatre of Ideas) once remarked, quoting William O’Brien, the nineteenth-century Irish agrarian and nationalist agitator, sometimes “violence is the only way of ensuring a hearing for moderation.” To ask the impossible in order to obtain the possible is not always counterproductive. And indeed, violence, contrary to what its prophets try to tell us, is more the weapon of reform than of revolution.\(^{21}\)

Arendt notes that if “goals are not achieved rapidly, the result will be not merely defeat but the introduction of the practice of violence into the whole body politic. Action is irreversible, and a return to the
status quo in case of defeat is always unlikely.” According to Arendt, student radicals did not recognize that the practice of violence engenders a more violent world. She writes that student rebels’ idealization of violence as the cornerstone of change is derived from a faulty interpretation that views history as “a continuous chronological process, whose progress, moreover, is inevitable, violence in the shape of war and revolution may appear to constitute the only possible interruption.” Presenting an intellectualized abstraction of why people resort to violence for change, she contradicts her quotation of O’Brien that “sometimes violence is the only way of ensuring a hearing for moderation.” Of course, what must follow to ensure not just a more violent world is action: “It is the function, however, of all action, as distinguished from mere behavior, to interrupt what otherwise would have proceeded automatically and therefore predictably.” But if one does not consider the Other to be human or civilized, there can be no negotiations, only domination, and the prospect of more violence and terror erupting in response to violence and terror (past and potential, real and imagined).

Tyrants who aspire to power as control and politics as ruling may or may not use force; nonviolent tyrants “if they know their business may well be ‘kindly and mild’ in everything.” Whether violent or nonviolent, tyranny encourages citizens to preoccupy themselves with manufacturing and the acquisition of property, positions, or titles: All tyrants “have in common the banishment of the citizens from the public realm and the insistence that they mind their private business while only ‘the ruler should attend to public affairs.’” Part of what is to be acquired and maintained is the existential wealth of racial superiority.

Addressing material needs or desires, as well as fears, tyranny “buys” one out of political freedom, power, and political community. (If corporate capitalism’s and consumer culture’s obsession with material wealth creates a citizenry more interested in status and money than in developing identity and realizing humanity through power, arguably capitalism undermines communicative power and political community and would be the focus of an extensive critique by Arendt.) States can combine violent and nonviolent methods to deter the development of democratic power, mingling persuasion and coercion. For Arendt, the great danger of tyranny that combines power and violence (two distinct phenomena that can appear together) is not so much the brutal,
physical oppression of the people as it is the loss of community and political efficacy of both citizenry and tyrant. Tyranny “prevents the development of power, not only in a particular segment of the public realm but in its entirety; it generates, in other words, impotence. . . .” In addition to tyranny, Arendt was concerned with a greater evil—terror. Terror is the extreme manifestation of violence. Contrasting violence with terror, she states that she would not characterize violence as “evil” and so implicitly characterizes terror as such. For her, political terror is found only within totalitarianism—specifically Nazism and Stalinism as described in The Origins of Totalitarianism. Terror magnifies all the destructive elements of violence and emerges when violence has destroyed every form of political action, power, and resistance. Its effectiveness depends on the destruction of all community, on the “social atomization” or alienation of the individual citizens who fear to speak or act collectively.

War technology accelerated the chain reaction or “snowball effect” of violence, according to Arendt. Violence, once initiated, is uncontrollable; nothing exemplifies this more than the image of nuclear war, which points not only to the uncontrollable nature of violence but to the finality of its destruction. Few have analyzed the phenomenon of violence, though many have concentrated on war and warfare, according to Arendt, and the neglect of the study of violence has much to do with the perception of violence as so ingrained in human affairs that violence itself became a “marginal phenomenon.” “Anybody looking for some kind of sense in the records of the past was almost bound to see violence as a marginal phenomenon. Whether it is Clausewitz calling War ‘the continuation of politics by other means’ or Engels defining violence as the accelerator of economic development, the emphasis is on political or economic continuity, on the continuity of a process that remains determined by what preceded violent action.” Arendt quotes Russian physicist Andrei Sakharov: “A thermonuclear war cannot be considered a continuation of politics by other means” for it entails universal suicide.

One World

For Arendt, international affairs provided the initial stage (she argues this because she discounts [domestic] violence in the private realm)
for the appearance of violence and provided the space for its final appearance: “The chief reason warfare is still with us is neither a secret death wish of the human species, nor an irrepressible instinct of aggression, nor, finally and more plausibly, the serious economic and social dangers inherent in disarmament, but the simple fact that no substitute for this final arbiter in the international affairs has yet appeared on the political scene.” She argues that Hobbes’s statement that “Covenants, without the sword, are but words” is likely to remain true “so long as national independence, namely, freedom from foreign rule, and the sovereignty of the state, namely, the claim to unchecked and unlimited power in foreign affairs, are identified [as synonymous].” A nation may remain independent of any other nation without retaining its sovereignty, which Arendt defines as the refusal to defer to a higher authority (e.g., world community). Sovereignty and independence are not synonyms; the former fosters resistance to recognized arbiters.

Maintaining that the construction of power stems from communal practice rather than dominance, and that community signifies plurality, diversity, the many, her critique of nation-states’ refusal to limit expansionism allows her to write that “sovereignty, the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership, is contradictory to the very condition of plurality . . . [no one] can be sovereign because not one . . . [but many] inhabit the earth.” This plurality and power in fact manifest in activism to counter the state’s refusal to allow it to be disciplined by international law and human rights conventions.

Since the United Nations and the World Court lack the “sword” to enforce their decisions, violence remains a “natural element” of international politics. The reduction of violence inherent in international affairs is possible, writes Arendt, only if individual nation-states acknowledge a higher authority than their own sovereignty. Echoing Karl Jaspers, she maintains that “nations must renounce sovereignty for the sake of a world federation.” The fear of global destruction, she writes, produces an “intolerable position of global responsibility,” one which Jaspers attempts to address with a concept of world citizenship that bases the solidarity of humanity on “mutual understanding and self-clarification on a global level.”

Arendt’s appreciation of Immanuel Kant and Jaspers led her to advocate strongly world community and world citizenry: Humanity
and power find their fullest expression in world community based on diversity, acceptance, and communication. Through its foreign policy, the United States extends the private realm, of the less than civilized, the subordinate, the politically unworthy, the nonpeer, to the so-called Third World—the peoples of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Not only to governments (many of which are not democratic or are democracies in name only) but to the disenfranchised confined to the private realms—the poor, women, imprisoned radicals are deemed politically unworthy for world citizenship.

Can democratic theorists afford to ignore the fact that the United States undermines institutions that sustain world community? Although the International Court of Justice and the United Nations were created in response to World War II, the United States declares itself to be bound by neither the International Court of Justice nor by proclamations of the United Nations such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In theory, human rights protections exist for everyone in the United States under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the international convention’s ban on racial discrimination, abuse, and torture. The United States continues to exempt itself from international human rights obligations and place itself above the law; the government can weaken treaties it ratifies with reservations. The United States’ withdrawal from the International Tribunal on War Crimes in May 2002, and from the earlier (September 2001) United Nations World Conference Against Racism and Xenophobia in South Africa, heralded its aloof position toward antiracist initiatives. It failed to sign on, as the European Union did, to a statement designating the slave trade as a “crime against humanity.” Yet within days, the United States would condemn the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks as “a crime against humanity,” call on Americans to relinquish voluntarily their political rights, and demand global solidarity in a world community united to isolate and “destroy”—a word of finality and eschatology—terrorism. War is pursued with diminishing democratic input in a military campaign initially named “Infinite Justice” and overseen by the Pentagon, the White House, and its new cabinet-level post for the “Defense of Homeland Security.”

The challenge of extending all power to all of the people requires a willingness to share democratic responsibilities while rejecting promises of protection, comfort, and supremacy: “It is the obvious
short-range advantages of tyranny, the advantages of stability, security, and productivity, that one should beware, if only because they pave the way to an inevitable loss of power, even though the actual disaster may occur in a relatively distant future."37 The possibility of realizing “All Power to the People!”—not the police or ruling elites but the international mass resisting force and violence from others and among themselves—relies on a democracy that recognizes permeable boundaries between public and private, self-governance and subjugation as “We the People” seek “a more perfect union” as desire for communal peace.

Notes
4. Arendt cites the rhetoric from the military, government and Pentagon, as jargon which arose when World War II was followed not by peace but by the “Military-Industrial-Labor Complex.” Such jargon states, “The priority of war-making potential as the principal structuring force in society”; “economic systems, [as well as] political philosophies and corpora juris serve and extend the war system, not vice versa”; “war itself is the basic social system, within which other secondary modes of social organization conflict or conspire.” Hannah Arendt, “On Violence,” in Crises of the Republic (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1969, 1972), 111.
5. Arendt rejects any analysis of gender domination and gender violence. Women, de facto white women, were the last group of the private realm to be legally granted the vote in the United States; women, while a small percentage of the imprisoned, have seen their incarceration rates dramatically increase. The patriarchal punishments of the private realm, within the family, have been relocated to bureaucracy, where the state acts as surrogate father seeking paternal control. Most of the women incarcerated in the United States are nonviolent offenders convicted of economic crimes or drug use. The majority are mothers, poor, and women of color.
6. Over 65 percent of juvenile offenders sentenced to death since the 1976 reinstitution of the death penalty have been either black or Latino; one of the few democratic nations to execute minors, the United States has executed more youths than has any other industrialized nation.


8. In an interview with B92, Belgrade radio, in September 2001, Noam Chomsky observed, “The horrendous terrorist attacks on Tuesday are something quite new in world affairs, not in their scale and character, but in the target. For the U.S., this is the first time since the War of 1812 that its national territory [as opposed to its colonies] has been under attack. During these years the U.S. virtually exterminated the indigenous population, conquered half of Mexico, intervened violently in the surrounding region, conquered Hawaii and the Philippines (killing hundreds of thousands of Filipinos). . . .”


11. Jurgen Habermas writes, “Max Weber defined power (Macht) as the possibility of forcing one’s own will on the behavior of others. Arendt, on the contrary, understands power as the ability to agree on a common course of action in unconstrained communication. Both represent power as potency actualized in actions.” Jurgen Habermas, “Hannah Arendt’s Communication Concept of Power,” *Journal of Social Research* 44, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 4.

Habermas maintains that *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *On Revolution* are the basis for Arendt’s theory of power; yet, he asserts, because both totalitarianism and revolution are aberrations in Western mass democracies they are insufficient bases for the construction of a theory with broad application. Arendt’s theory of power, developed in *The Human Condition* (1956), *The Life of the Mind* (1973), and *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (1983), argues power as community and
community as goal and precondition for nonviolent human interaction.


14. Countering John Stuart Mill’s assertion that civilization is based on the desires to exercise power over others; and not have power exercised over oneself, Arendt writes that “submission, an ardent desire to obey and be ruled by some strong man, is at least as prominent in human psychology as the will to power. . . . Conversely, a strong disinclination to obey is often accompanied by an equally strong disinclination to dominate. . . . [The] purpose [of the ancient slave economy] was to liberate citizens from the burden of household affairs and to permit them to enter the public life of the community, where all were equals; if it were true that nothing is sweeter than to give commands and to rule others, the master would never have left his household.” Arendt, “On Violence,” 138–139. Arendt quotes from Mill’s Considerations on Representative Government (1861, 59, 65 [Arendt’s citation]). Given that Arendt is not addressing racism and desire, libidinal economies, her response to Mills is incomplete.


16. Arendt, The Human Condition, 180

17. See the writings of Noam Chomsky for descriptions of deployment of terror in U.S. policies.

18. The FBI illegal Cointelpro or counterintelligence program consisted of wire taps, break-ins and assassinations to destabilize social justice movements. In 1975, the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (the “Church Committee,” named after Senator Frank Church [D-Idaho]) held hearings on the FBI.


21. Ibid., 176.

22. Ibid., 177.

23. Ibid., 132.

24. Ibid., 132–133.


27. For discussions of “conspicuous consumption” and “false needs,” see, respectively, Thorstein Veblen, Theory of the Leisure Class (Boston:
Sovereign Political Subjects

Houghton 1899), and Herbert Marcuse, One Dimensional Man (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).


29. Arendt, “On Violence,” 154–155. Atomization “is maintained and intensified through the ubiquity of the informer, who can be literally omnipresent because he no longer is merely a professional agent in the pay of the police but potentially every person one comes into contact with.” Arendt maintains that the difference between “totalitarian domination, based on terror, and tyrannies and dictatorships, established by violence” is that the former fearing all power and turns against enemies and friends. Arendt, “On Violence,” 154.

30. Ibid., 110–111.

31. Ibid., 111. Prior to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, bipartisan authors of a 1988 Heritage Foundation report, Discriminate Deterrence, argued that a “winnable” nuclear war was an unmarketable concept; and that the “East/West” conflict must be deemphasized to allow U.S. conflicts with the “Third World” to shape policy into the twenty-first century. The United States had intervened militarily in the “Third World” over thirty times since the end of World War II, including economic and military assistance for death squads in El Salvador, genocide in Guatemala, contra terrorists in Nicaragua and Angola, and occupations and dictatorships in the Middle East.


33. Ibid.

34. Arendt, The Human Condition, 234.


36. On December 10, 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want . . . as the highest aspiration of the common people.”

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