



Black Revolutionary Icons and 'Neoslave' Narratives

JOY JAMES

University of Colorado

Over the centuries that America enslaved Blacks, those men and women most determined to win freedom became fugitives, fleeing from the brutal captivity of slavery. Many of their descendants who fought the Black liberation struggle also became fugitives. These men and women refused to endure the captivity awaiting them in retaliation for their systematic effort to win freedom. But unlike runaway slaves, these men and women fought for a more expansive freedom, not merely as individuals, but for an entire nation, and sought in the face of internationally overwhelming odds to build a more humane and democratic political order. (Kathleen Neal Cleaver, 1988)

As a slave, the social phenomenon that engages my whole consciousness is, of course, revolution. (George Jackson, 1972)

Neoslave Narratives

Historically, African Americans have found themselves corralled into dual and conflictual roles, functioning as either happy or sullen slaves in compliant conformity or happy or sullen rebels in radical resistance to racial dominance. The degree to which historical slave narratives continue to shape the voices of their progeny remains the object of some speculation.

In his introduction to *Live from Death Row: This is Mumia Abu-Jamal*,¹ John Edgar Wideman argues that many Americans continue to encounter black life and political struggles through the 'neoslave narrative' (popularised in the 1970s by the television miniseries *Roots* based on Alex Haley's fictional text of the same title). Traceable to the nineteenth-century texts that garnered considerable attention, this narrative is characterised by political traits that contextualise antiracist resistance in ways that at times mitigate black radicalism. First, it is marketed through literature (or cinema) accessible to liberal or moral (white) Americans, and so like its precursor, the slave narrative, makes its appeal to the 'moral conscience' of the dominant culture. Second, the neoslave narrative identifies fixed and therefore containable sites of freedom and enslavement. It juxtaposes the southern plantation against the northern city in the 'free' or nonslave state. The former represents the site for the denial of freedom and democracy, the latter the site for their acquisition. In such narratives, the victorious 'slave' must engage in flight — from the plantation, the South, the zones of black immiseration — in order to triumph (see Wideman, 1995).

The successful escape then exists as physical and metaphysical fleeing of 'blackness', understood as containment and debasement, toward 'whiteness', perceived as an enlightened citizenry shaped by ethical and influential liberals safeguarding and expanding the promise of democratic ideals. In the neoslave narrative, the state, despite its limitations and abusive excesses, provides the possibility of emancipation and redemption. Consequently, it cannot be considered or constructed as inherently and completely corrupt. The state permits and maintains the sites of freedom *and* enslavement. Flight and freedom are thus always contained within national borders. Unlike Toni Morrison's 'Flying African' in *Song of Solomon* (1977), freedom is not achieved in expatriation (through death), external migration 'back to Africa', or internal migration toward a black 'nation'. (Clearly this narrative does not lend itself to black nationalist discourse.)

Their assimilationist politics and loyal opposition to the racial state endear neoslave narratives to a general public that disparages radicalism. Such narratives moderate radical politics. As the sympathetic reader lives vicariously through the dangerous risk-taking that typifies the life of the slave rebel and fugitive, she is reassured of reconciliation with prevailing power structures that permitted the liberating, albeit torturous, journey. That the narratives usually forgo calls for revolutionary struggle and (armed) resistance enhances their appeal within the 'mainstream' — the majority of moral-minded women and men reassured that the narratives represent the state as reformable and so inherently democratic.

Nineteenth-century abolitionists and former slaves Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass highlighted in their memoirs the racist barbarism of the South, while reassuring that America works to fulfill on some level its democratic promise — despite its racial rages.² Their late twentieth-century counterparts can provide a similar national function today. Redemption and safety continue to appear in African-American narratives as a variation of black success stories tied to integration, encoded in flight from enslavement — now viewed as black, impoverished urban spaces or 'inner cities' — that bring closure to black rebellion. The construction of fixed or static sites of enslavement and freedom means that rebellion cannot be an ongoing process, at least in this paradigm. Once one disembarks at the 'Promised Land', the final destination of the 'North' as geopolitical terrain or chair of the Democratic National Committee as prime political landscape, insurrection becomes 'folly'. (The irony of final destinations, however, was never lost on African Americans who, confronting northern racism, coined the phrase 'up South'.)

As former Black Panther leader Kathleen Cleaver notes, there are differences between the fugitive slave and the insurrectionist. There is also overlap. Both rebelled against oppressive conditions and laws — one in flight and the other in resistance. (The state, predictably, reserves its most severe punishment for those who fight it by advocating revolutionary struggle.) Not all contemporary black antiracist texts adhere to the deradicalising features of this progressive story, the neoslave narrative. As Wideman argues, the writings of Abu-Jamal depart from the conventional politics of the neoslave narrative: even if granted a new trial, exonerated, and released from death row and

Pennsylvania's SCI Green prison, Abu-Jamal would still maintain that he is not free as long as US society and state institutionalise black oppression. Consequently, for Abu-Jamal, there is no possibility of freedom without transformation, that is, without revolution. As revolutionary and icon, 'Mumia' stands as a representative figure protesting the corruption of the current order and proffering a vision for a new one. To Wideman's discussion of narratives, which helps to demystify America's attraction to and/or aversion for black revolutionaries, one might add an analysis of the state violence and sexual politics that mark both neoslave narratives and contemporary political struggles around imprisonment.

Gender analyses expand critical depictions of the neoslave narrative and the historic role of black Americans as commodities or racial text for (white) consumers and activists. Considering gender, one sees that racial-sexual violence marks black women's bodies as spectacle. For example, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the narrative of a young woman who survives years of hiding in an attic to save herself from the white sexual predator known as her 'master', adds a sexual dimension to antiblack violence and exploitation uncommon in male narratives. When sexuality is considered, the violator is both racially characterised and gendered: the narrator must survive not only white enslavers but also male predators. New Depths in voyeuristic spectatorship can be uncovered when sexual violence is included in the accounts of black women's lives. Gender is an integral part of neoslave narratives and the construction of revolutionary icons.

Arguably, the contemporary persona in American popular culture most commonly identified with black revolutionary struggle is a woman — Angela Y. Davis. Her 1974 memoir, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*, presents the courageous struggles of antiracist radicals. It also reinscribes the neoslave narrative. Davis's departure at age fifteen from 'Dynamite Hill' in Birmingham, Alabama (so named for Klan bombings of black homes in the previously all-white enclave) for a private high school in Manhattan where she lived with white Quakers, undergraduate study in Massachusetts at Brandeis University, and later study abroad in Europe — all mark flight from black-contained sites of segregation and violence into white expansive sites of privilege, education, and stability. Davis subverts the narrative by returning from Europe to continue doctoral studies at the University of California, in order to be close to the black liberation movement of the late 1960s. Yet, this subversion is itself subverted decades later by her reconstruction as a 'rehabilitated' former political prisoner and current Professor in an elite (European-centred) theory program, the History of Consciousness, at the University of California at Santa Cruz.³

Key features of the 'rehabilitation process' in order for former prisoners to be mainstreamed is that they (appear to) conform to the cultural norm. That norm is dynamic rather than static and so has expanded to include traits of the militant antiracism and feminism of the 1960s (for example, encompassing denunciations of racism, homophobia, and sexism and the use of demonstrations and protests for liberal agendas). Unaltered features of the behavioural norm remain employment and a willingness to acknowledge the errors of past

behaviour. Progressive culture is a consequence of the movement battles; yet it does not prevent the public eye from distancing those it wishes to claim from those who cannot or will not be mainstreamed.

Viewed by some as a radical middle-class academic before her incarceration and later as an internationally known author and celebrity after her acquittal on murder and conspiracy charges and the publication of her memoir, Davis has benefited from the currency of cultural 'hybridity' that marks influential black intellectual elites — a modicum of affluence and a suspension of revolutionary rhetoric. Such cultural currency, compatible with the assimilationist ideology of the Talented Tenth, procures the title of 'citizen', a desired recognition that has proved to be elusive for many disenfranchised peoples.

In contradistinction to the citizen and political celebrity, Davis's co-defendant in the 1971 trial until their cases were severed, Ruchell 'Cinque' Magee (whose 'free' name evokes the nineteenth-century African liberator of the slave ship, the 'Amistad'), is stripped of the title of 'citizen' and is not considered 'embraceable' by mainstream Americans. He has remained incarcerated, in anonymity, for three decades. Davis has pointed out that Magee has not been forgotten; yet many still do not seem to recall his existence. A black male politicised into prison leadership while incarcerated for social crimes, Magee lacks noted literary accomplishments and thus is denied intellectual or celebrity stature, and consequently a measure of social acceptance. In conventional culture, he has no story that many are willing to tell or listen to, one deemed marketable for mass consumption.⁴ Magee will not reflect the successful assimilation of the black rebel. His class or caste works against recognising him as a 'revolutionary' icon in popular culture and therefore against his emancipation. As former Black Panther Party political prisoner Geronimo ji Jaga (Elmer Pratt) notes, Americans are not predisposed toward revolutionaries.⁵

Icons, Gender Politics and 'Panther Women'

Influential male narratives have helped to masculinise the militant or the black prisoner-as-political leader in the American mind and shaped a genre of literature by 'prison intellectuals'. Nationally and internationally, the most prominently known black political prisoners or prison intellectuals are male. The brief incarceration of Martin Luther King, Jr, in Alabama in 1955, produced 'Letter from Birmingham Jail' and popularised civil disobedience to repressive laws and governments. The imprisonment for larceny and pimping of Malcolm X in the 1950s engendered the political man and (1965) *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in the 1960s. The 1971 murder and martyrdom of George Jackson, author of *Blood in My Eye* (1972) and *Soledad Brothers: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1974), by prison guards helped to incite the Attica uprising that met with violent and deadly repression by the National Guard deployed by New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller. All of these racial rebels propelled the presence of black male prison intellectuals into the larger American culture during the movement era. More recently, Geronimo ji Jaga's release in 1997 after spending 27 years in prison — the same length of arduous incarceration

as African National Congress (ANC) leader Nelson Mandela endured (the Black Panther Party and the ANC were each at one time designated 'terrorist' organisations by the US government) — was heralded in black and progressive communities as a political victory.⁶ Current organising for a new trial for Abu-Jamal is galvanised by his radio commentaries and his writings — the incisive critiques of *Live From Death Row*, and the spiritual reflections of *Death Blossoms*; each promotes his stature as an international *cause célèbre* or revolutionary icon. Yet, perhaps the most celebrated contemporaries associated with the iconography of revolutionary antiracism are female, not male.

Conventional political memory associates few women with armed resistance, political incarceration, or martyrdom stemming from struggles against enslavement or racist oppression. From the nineteenth century recall military strategist Harriet Tubman. The twentieth century will remember Angela Davis and Assata Shakur because of their associations with the Panthers. (Native American Anna Mae Aquash, killed during the 1976 American Indian Movement occupation of Wounded Knee, and former political prisoner Lolita Lebron, of the Puerto Rican Independence movement, are significant but lesser known figures in a national culture racially fixated on blacks.)

Few in the US belonged to an organisation that publicly advocated armed self-defence against racist violence before they joined the Black Panther Party (BPP, originally named the 'Black Panther Party for Self-Defence' given that police brutality and killings of African Americans inspired its formation). But it captured the national imagination (and its paranoia). The most celebrated African-American women achieved their (inter)national iconic stature as revolutionaries through the militancy of their racial not their gender politics — and their real or symbolic connections to armed struggle (which poses an interesting dilemma for mainstream feminism). Their iconography so overshadows the tedious, mundane tasks of non-elite activists shaping political realities and history that it inevitably eclipses the stories of rank-and-file organisers. Paradoxically, some women activists who were reconstructed into political celebrities identified with the Panthers spent comparatively short periods of time with its grass-roots constituency: urban, impoverished African Americans.

American cultural focus remains concentrated on the masculinised insurgent-as-warrior soldier. Consequently, the average American political spectator — black or white, red or brown or yellow — is more captivated by the Black Panthers' stance on armed self-defence and their battles with police — and resulting male martyrs — than with the social service programmes largely organised and run by women. Thousands of women worked with and served in the Black Panther Party, comprising the rank and file that implemented the medical, housing, clothing, Free Breakfast and education programmes. Female activists among the Panther ranks displayed an agency that (re)shaped American politics, although their stories recede in popular political culture before the narratives of elites who have become icons. (Before being forced underground, Shakur worked daily in the rank and file.) Iconic imagery and symbolism filter political history and memory so that what one often remembers is the image, not the specificity, of militancy.

Kathleen Cleaver recalled during the 1998 Black Radical Congress in

Chicago that the poster which shows her posing with a rifle — a poster that promoted her international visual recognition and notoriety — was a tactical and symbolic challenge to police raids on the apartment that she shared with Eldridge Cleaver, who as an ex-convict could not legally possess weapons without violating his parole. According to Kathleen Cleaver, soon after the photograph was taken, she left the country and had no control over the use of the image. Davis never posed with guns. Yet, having grown up on ‘Dynamite Hill’ she was raised in a house that stored guns as a precaution against Klan violence, and weapons registered in her name would be linked to Jonathan Jackson’s tragic attempt to free his brother and other Soledad prisoners in 1970.⁷

Violence, race, and sex mark the symbolism surrounding black female radical icons. Part of the narrative of the ‘conventional’ female revolutionary is the prominence of the male comrade. A number of black female icons were recognised as the lovers or partners of black male revolutionaries, prison intellectuals, who radicalised and linked them, at least in the public mind, to antiracist armed struggle. 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 (1974 to 1977); and Angela Davis’s relationship with George Jackson, which began while she was organising for the incarcerated Soledad Brothers — all serve as markers, promoting the image of black female militants as sexual and political spectacles. (Assata Shakur least fits this paradigm given that she was already an incarcerated revolutionary when she conceived and gave birth to her codefendant’s daughter.) African-American male revolutionaries are not perceived as having been politicised through their romantic or personal relationships with female counterparts; rather, their speeches and deeds mark them for public recognition. The same cannot be said, to the same degree, for female black revolutionary icons. Not because they did not produce important works, words and acts for liberation, they did. But because they were, and are, viewed as appendages to male initiatives and endeavours. And so their very appearance co-mingles in the conventional mind with that of the male revolutionary.

Notwithstanding the dominance of the elite and male presence in black and American radicalism, out of the recent volatile era of black insurgency, antiwar demonstrations, and women’s liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a few black women have become representational icons for female radicalism and black revolution. Although their connections with the rank and file and national leadership of the revolutionary period of the Black Panther Party (1966–69) were tenuous or brief, Angela Davis, Kathleen Cleaver, Assata Shakur, and Elaine Brown have achieved (inter)national stature as revolutionaries through their real and symbolic associations with the Panthers. This is primarily because the Black Panther Party, not the Black Student Union, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), or even the Communist Party — organisations of which the women were members — embodied revolutionary struggle for black freedom. The Black Panther Party remains the organisational icon (with Malcolm X the individual icon) for black militant

resistance to white domination and terror (that iconography is appropriated today by political formations that may have little in common with the Panthers' revolutionary Ten Point Program). Despite sexism and misogyny within its ranks, the party was instrumental in propelling select women into the national and international spotlight as revolutionaries.

Without diminishing the contributions of past activists in radical movements, one can highlight the problematic aspects by which past activism becomes personified, and consequently distorted, in representations of elites. A select, elite group of African-American women served with their male counterparts in the 'central committees' that comprised Panther leadership before, during, and after the factionalism and infiltration that led to the party's demise as a revolutionary organisation. The deradicalising tendencies of iconography mask the diverse and significant contributions 'Panther women' made in face of considerable difficulty and hardship. These contributions stemmed from the rank and file. Working in anonymity, they shared the risks of police persecution and bore Party discipline and organisation, raising revenue by selling Party newspapers on street corners and delivering social services to impoverished and under-resourced black communities. The elite (largely Oakland-based) leadership suffered state violence and carried the weight of representation and dissemination of political ideology and decision-making. For iconic and rank-and-file women, this weight of representation would include sexualisation.

Unlike their black female predecessors and elders in the southern civil rights movement — activists Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Rosa Parks and Septima Clark — Panther women leaders were romanticised as icons, noted for a particular form of physical appearance tied to 'fashion', skin-colour, and youth that led to their commodification. The production of political ideas and leadership in the civil rights and black power movements reveals a striking paradox in terms of iconography. Key strategists for the southern civil rights movement included older women; the above-named were mostly middle age at the height of the southern movement. For instance, in her fifties, Ella Baker was instrumental in the group 'In Friendship' that supported the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and consequently she became the first *de facto* director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and eventually the 'godmother' of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) whose leaders included Fannie Lou Hamer (a former Mississippi sharecropper) and the young Ruby Doris Smith Robinon (one of the exceptional young women who formed SNCC's national leadership but died at an early age from cancer). Unlike the older celebrated women in the southern movement, the women who became national political celebrities in the Black Panther Party tended to be under thirty (former Panther K. Kim Holder has described the Panthers as a 'youth organisation'). Unlike their southern activist predecessors and peers, these particular women would be constructed by sectors of the media (and later Hollywood's blaxploitation cinema) as black *femmes fatales*.

The construction of black female radicals in the Black Panther Party as 'revolutionary sweethearts' fuelled their popularity with both males and females, particularly in segments of the culture that tended to idolise, and

continues to revere, rather than critically engage with black radical heroes and heroines. In Henry Louis Gates, Jr's 1998 PBS Frontline documentary on class stratification and African Americans, *The Two Nations of Black America*, archival footage was used to ridicule and demonise the Panthers. Gates suggests that when he was a student the Panthers used him and other Yalies as 'cannon fodder' in their battles with police around the New Haven Panther trial).⁸ By contrast, the documentary sexualises the young Angela Davis and Kathleen Cleaver, and resists demonising them as it does their male counterparts. While the narrator Gates confides that Martin Luther King, Jr and the southern civil rights movement held little attraction for him as a youth, the film flashes archival images of the 'sexier' Panthers, replete with the faces, bodies, and youthful beauty of Davis and Cleaver.⁹ Paradoxically, both women, by virtue of their past activism, bring a 'left' credibility to the neoliberal politics of a documentary hostile toward the organisation that helped to propel them into the national and international spotlight. (Davis also had the international platform of the Communist Party.)

Gates offers no gender analysis within his documentary. In much of the popular and academic discourse concerning gender politics and the Black Panther Party, discussions vacillate among female apologias protecting the reputations of male radicals, criticisms of an allegedly uniform sexism and misogyny, and feminist revisionism safeguarding the emergent iconic stature of 'Panther women'. Iconography remains central to most representations of the Panthers. For instance, a recent anthology, *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]*, features on its jacket only one female image — the cover of *The Black Panther* newspaper carrying a photo of Angela Davis, taken when she was not a member of the BPP. (Rejecting the photographs of rank-and-file women, or Brown or Cleaver, the book is marketed within the tradition of using female images for advertising.) The anthology's section on 'Gender Dynamics' explores the roles of women within the BPP. With the exception, however, of an autobiographical essay by a former Panther in which the author recounts sexual harassment within the Party,¹⁰ the issues of domestic violence by (revolutionary or cultural) nationalist leaders and the normative silence about battery and rape are not explored. For example, there is no discussion of how the Oakland-based leadership broke that silence on domestic violence by publishing a photograph of Kathleen Cleaver's battered face on the cover of an issue of the *Black Panther Party* newspaper, no doubt because Huey Newton sought to discredit and 'purge' Eldridge Cleaver from the Party. The issue of female abuse and battery by male leaders and the rank-and-file in the Black Panther Party led by Newton and Eldridge Cleaver (before the 'split') and its rival organisation Us headed by Maulana (Ron) Karenga remains a taboo among African Americans. In addition, the issue of black women's complicity in violence and destabilisation of a radical political group appears to generate little interest.¹¹

For example, the counterfeminist and antirevolutionary aspects of female Panther leaders represented by former BPP Chair Elaine Brown go unexplored in her reconstruction as a 'feminist' within the anthology. In Brown's 1993 memoir, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*, black women save themselves

from predatory black male radicals and revolutionaries. This somewhat inverts Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative given that the State, capitalism, and white supremacy recede from centre stage in this black radical feminism where the 'enemy' is viewed as dangerous black men. Brown's flight to freedom in part is an escape from abusive Panthers. Women's complicity in state and patriarchal abuses remains largely unscripted in her neoslave narrative.¹²

In 1974, when Newton expelled Bobby Seale as chair of the Black Panthers and appointed Brown, the organisation was neither national nor revolutionary.¹³ Lee Lew-Lee's documentary *All Power to the People! The Black Panther Party and Beyond* argues that under the West-coast elites' deadly factionalism, the party became counterrevolutionary. Brown describes a 'taste of power' that included an authoritarian female reign in what was essentially a local organisation, heavily infiltrated and disrupted by the FBI, internal factionalism, and elitism.¹⁴ (On some levels, her story mirrors a narrative of a woman taking leadership in an elite military unit.) A formidable supporter of Newton, even while he careered out of control, Brown had men and women 'disciplined' with beatings and survived challenges to her reign and death threats. Black feminist reconstructions of Brown are often silent about her disclosures of her own sexual excess, manipulation and deployment of physical punishment against African Americans. For feminists, what appears to be most striking is her story of surviving male abuse and violence.¹⁵

Cleaver and Davis worked with SNCC before becoming members of the Black Panther Party. Cleaver, the daughter of a US Ambassador, dropped out of Barnard College to relocate in 1966 to Atlanta to work in the SNCC and to organise support for incarcerated Panthers. While a graduate student at UC-San Diego (where she helped to form the Black Student Union), Davis joined both the Los Angeles chapter of SNCC and the Communist Party USA, serving in the leadership of the latter organisation for twenty years. The SNCC had been in existence since 1960 and was on the wane as the 'black power' ideology began to take root among black radicals and masses. During the height of Black Panther radicalism, Cleaver spent years in exile in Europe or Algeria, supporting Eldridge Cleaver who having violated parole feared imprisonment, and later, retaliation from Newton after the Party 'split'.

At the Black Radical Congress mentioned earlier, Angela Davis and Kathleen Cleaver were interviewed by young activists who questioned them about their roles in movements in the 1960s and early 1970s. As former radical activists and current radical academics-intellectuals, Davis and Cleaver have become public 'historians' analysing past radical or revolutionary black movements. Identified with past revolutionary movements, their roles as historians of black radicalism have become central to their iconography with the rise of Panther currency in American popular culture. As translators of cultural and political views and practices, these women offer important views of past revolutionary politics for contemporary audiences that complement, and contradict, current revolutionary politics.

The most influential of contemporary public historians with experiential knowledge of black radicalism is Angela Davis. Although it was the Communist Party USA, not the Black Panther Party, of which she was a staunch

member and supporter, her work with the Soledad Brothers, associated with the Panthers and Soledad leader George Jackson, a Panther Field Marshall, would mark her as 'black revolutionary'. When her striking presence on the campus of an elite university, UCLA, with her ability to appeal to and influence the youth of the middle and upper classes — by virtue of similar training — with critiques of capitalism and white supremacy, made her a formidable spokesperson and opponent to state oppression, she became targeted by the California state and various police agencies. The 'cultural dialectic' in a society expanding to embrace past radicalism (and in some ways condition it) coupled with her class background and elite education would elevate Davis's status to American icon. Davis's vindication in the 1972 acquittal of all charges became viewed and understood by many progressives as one of the infrequent 'people's victories' against a totalising state. This victory created the political space that permits left-liberals to 'identify' with her today (if she had been convicted by the courts, presumably Davis would face either the anonymity of other US political prisoners or the iconic stature of Mumia Abu-Jamal). Davis's FBI hunt, imprisonment, and trial made her a *cause célèbre*, one promoted on an international level by the Soviet Union, and other Communist states. Some, but not all, who celebrated her heard, read, or heeded her 1970 pronouncements on freedom before her capture and incarceration:

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 [Guevara] 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 relationship 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.¹⁶

Hunting the 'Slave' and Revolutionary

The 'neoslave narrative' appears as normative in American society and is not based merely on rhetorical, political imagery or the imaginary of black nationalism. Slavery continuously recreates itself under US law. The 13th Amendment to the US Constitution codified rather than abolished slavery, designating involuntary servitude as permissible against those duly convicted of crimes. In the postbellum rise of the convict prison lease system, slavery manifested in vicious and virulent fashion, as is evident in Louisiana's Angola prison, originally the 'Angola plantation', where emancipated blacks were worked to death. After the civil war, more African Americans died as public property in the state-corporate enterprise of the convict prison lease system than they did under the lash as the private property of individual plantation owners. Essentially, the US outlawed slavery by restricting it to incarcerated

criminals (under state or corporate management); then through legislation (Black Codes and Jim Crow laws) and cultural imaging, it proceeded to criminalise blacks. Restricting 'involuntary servitude' to prisons which exist as largely black or racialised sites today (some seventy per cent of the nearly two million people now housed in prisons, jails and detention centres are 'people of colour') filters the appearances of postmodern black revolutionary icons through the historical lens of antislavery battles. The neoslave narrative re-emerges and recreates itself in response to continuing black disenfranchisement and racial exploitation.

Historically within the US, black resistance to white or state domination has been associated with violence. The grim pronouncements of an 'unfixed' freedom are linked to institutional anti-black violence. In the post-slavery era of the US, the most devastating forms of policing to undermine black advancement were mass incarceration and lynching (in which law enforcement officials occasionally participated). In the post-civil rights movement (called the 'second reconstruction' by some), violent policing has assumed the principal form of racialised incarceration together with COINTELPRO, the FBI's clandestine and deadly campaign to undermine radicals and revolutionaries. Given that the state acknowledges no morality outside its laws, revolutionaries become legal criminals and social immorals.

The story of COINTELPRO lends itself neither to the redemptive aspects of neoslave narratives nor the state's morality plays. Deployed since the 1920s in some fashion against communists and black civil rights activists, the illegal FBI counterintelligence programme destabilised progressive political movements by targeting radicals and revolutionaries. The programme remains in effect today with the continuing harassment and incarceration of its captives.¹⁷ In 1968, when FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, designated the Black Panther Party as the 'greatest threat to the internal security' of the US, imprisonment as well as executions or assassinations of dozens of Panther leaders followed.¹⁸ However, no concerted national outrage emerged in response to the state's violent repression of black insurgency. (American sympathy for persecuted blacks elected by antebellum fiction such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would find no cultural counterpart for black revolutionaries persecuted by state violence a century later.) The lack of concern was tied partly to ignorance and partly to the consequence of negative media depictions of black revolutionaries. According to the US Senate's 1976 Church Commission report on domestic intelligence operations:

The FBI has attempted covertly to influence the public's perception of persons and organisations by disseminating derogatory information to the press, either anonymously or through 'friendly' news contacts.

American cultural perceptions of black militants continue to be influenced by media stigmatisation and state disinformation. The 'shadow' tracking black militant life took shape in violent policing as the hunt for black revolutionaries led to executions, jail cells, lockdowns, and exile. Revolutionary icons do not all uniformly return us to those grim realities.

COINTELPRO survivors are exiled or imprisoned militants. The most

(in)famous are accused of killing white police officers. That particular criminal charge — the killing of white police attributed to black rebels — functions today in a manner similar to the rape charge — the sexual assault of white females by black males — during the lynching era. This specific accusation, irrespective of evidence or facts, mobilises intense, punitive sentiment and racial rage that supports police, prosecutorial, and judicial misconduct in order to achieve swift and deadly retribution. Yet, contemporary progressive elites establish varying relationships with revolutionary icons in their advocacy for political rights and just trials for COINTELPRO survivors. In the tradition of Ida B. Wells, the journalist who championed the most vilified of the criminalised at the turn-of-the-century, prominent black writers and intellectuals — Alice Walker, Angela Davis, Manning Marable, Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates, Jr, John Wideman, and others — have publicly called for justice for the best-known of the criminalised at the end of the twentieth century: political fugitive-exile Assata Shakur and death-row inmate Mumia Abu-Jamal were both convicted of killing white policemen in political trials where prosecutorial zeal and malfeasance denied defendants due process. That Walker and Gates offer support despite their antipathy to the Black Panther Party (from which both Shakur and Abu-Jamal resigned, given their own criticisms) suggests that black elite advocacy for African-American political prisoners reflects not agreement with revolutionary ideology and/or tactics but a shared sensibility resenting and resisting (largely through rhetoric) state repression of black rebellions (Walker, 1991).

Revolutionary 'Slave' Fugitives

While Angela Davis's 1972 acquittal *proves* to some liberals that the 'system works' (and conversely, for conservatives, that it is dangerously flawed), Assata Shakur's 1979 escape from prison rejects that conviction. Shakur's political life reworks the neoslave narrative to invert its deradicalising tendencies with the testimony of an unreconstructed insurrectionist. Standing as a 'slave' fugitive for twenty years, Shakur represents the unembraceable, against whom, as well as whomever offers her refuge, the state exercises severe punitive sanctions. Nevertheless, Shakur's 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 US, as the site for (black) freedom. The US media reported in 1998, however, that the US State Department was seeking to negotiate with the Cuban government to lift the crippling forty-year embargo in exchange for the extradition of Shakur and ninety other US political exiles. This suggests no fixed sites for 'freedom'.

Shakur's political contributions to black liberation are enmeshed in high controversy and life-and-death crises. In 'Black Political Prisoners: The Case of Assata Shakur', Manning Marable writes:

There is no question that if Assata Shakur is involuntarily returned to

the US that 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 been lost and crucial evidence has 'disappeared'. (Marable, 1998)¹⁹

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 who calls herself 'slave' (and rejects here 'slave name', JoAnne Chesimard) and therefore sees the white-dominated, corporate society and state as 'slavemasters'. Aspects of her narrative (found in the memoirs, interviews, documentaries, and media reports) link her more to the underground Black Liberation Army (BLA) than to the Black Panther Party, which has become on some levels a cultural commodity. According to Shakur, she has never been 'free'; and even in Cuba, valorised as a 'black revolutionary', she remains a 'slave' because of her status as a black or African woman; a status which she sees as inseparable from the state of subaltern Africans throughout the diaspora.

Shakur functions less as a political celebrity and more as political embarrassment and irritation for the police and conservative politicians, or conversely as political inspiration for radicals and revolutionaries. (Just as those who worked above ground with the courts see in Davis's release a vindication of their political agency, those who worked underground through military operations — Shakur's escape entailed neither casualties nor hostages — see in Shakur's liberation an affirmation of their political efficacy.)

Before being forced by the New York Police Department and the FBI into the Black Liberation Army underground, Assata Shakur had been an activist in the US black liberation movement.²⁰ In the 1960s, she also organised in the student rights and anti-Vietnam war movements. Exiled in Cuba since 1984, her memoir, *Assata: An Autobiography*, depicts a political persona hardly compatible with commodification. 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. (Shakur, 1987, pp. 242–43)

The 'people's war', however, retained a military dimension for Shakur. She continues in the memoir:

I wasn't one who believed that we should wait until our political struggle had reached a high point before we began to organise the underground. I felt that it was important to start building underground structures as soon as possible. And although I felt that the major task of the underground should be organising and building, I didn't feel that armed acts of resistance should be ruled out. As long as they didn't impede our long-range plans, guerrilla units should be able to carry out a few well-planned, well-timed armed actions that were well-coordinated with above ground political objectives. Not any old kind of actions, but actions that Black people would clearly understand and support and actions that were well publicised in the Black community. (Shakur, 1987, p. 243)

Over a decade after her arrest, trial, and incarceration following the 1973 killing of New Jersey state trooper Werner Foerster (Shakur maintains her innocence in the shooting),²¹ Shakur's 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 travelled 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 which included 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. Alongside the Noble news interview and Rolando's film feature, other narratives have emerged that portray this black revolutionary as political icon.

Shakur's image in *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 filmmaker Lew-Lee has labelled 'death squads' — that operated against both the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement (AIM) in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Former New York Panther Safiya Bukhari is one of the few black women in the documentary who sheds some light on the emergence of 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 Newton had allegedly put out a death warrant on their lives; the NYPD, assisted by the FBI, had done likewise. The BLA formed against the background memories of Malcolm X's 1965 assassination tied to the Nation of Islam, its leader and Louis Farrakhan's rhetoric, and the 1969 killings of Hampton and Clark by the Chicago police (and FBI).

In *Still Black, Still Strong: Survivors of the War Against Black Revolutionaries* (Fletcher *et al.*, 1993), identifying Shakur as a member of the BLA, former Panther Dhoruba Bin Wahad offers insights into the underground organisation. Bin Wahad's interview reveals the complex gender and race dynamics surrounding her flight as a fugitive, being shot and then brutalised by police. Later, shackled and chained to a bed, arms paralysed and bullet wounds in her

chest, Shakur was reportedly assaulted by New Jersey State Troopers threatening to kill her. She recounts that after her capture medical staff kept her alive despite wounds and continuing trauma inflicted by her captors:

The one who gave me the call button was a German nurse; she had a German accent. Some of the Black nurses sent me a little package of books which really saved my life, because that was one of the most difficult times. One was a book of Black poetry, the other was *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse, then a book about Black women in white America. It was like the most wonderful selection that they could have possibly given me. 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. Those people in that hospital didn't know who I was, but they understood what was happening to me; and it makes you think that no matter how brutal the police, the courts are, the people fight to keep their humanity, and can really see beyond that. (Shakur, 1993, pp. 206–7)

Confined in a men's prison, under 24-hour surveillance, without adequate intellectual, physical, or medical resources during the trial, she was later relocated to a women's correctional facility in Clinton, New Jersey. In 1977, convicted of killing State Trooper Werner Foerster by an all-white jury, Shakur was sentenced to life plus 33 years in prison, but escaped from prison in 1979. Housed in prison alongside women of the Aryan Nation sisterhood, the Manson family, and Squeaky Frohm 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 a 1978 petition concerning political prisoners, political persecution, and torture in the US, 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 states that:

The FBI and the New York Police Department in particular, charged and accused Assata Shakur of participating in attacks on law enforcement personnel and widely circulated such charges and accusations among police agencies and units. The FBI and the NYPD further charged her as being a leader of the Black Liberation Army which the government and its respective agencies described as an organisation engaged in the shooting of police officers. This description of the Black Liberation Army and the accusation of Assata Shakur's relationship to it was widely circulated by government agents among police agencies and units. As a result of these activities by the government, Ms. Shakur became a hunted person; posters in police precincts and banks described her as being involved in serious criminal activities; she was highlighted on the

FBI's most wanted list; and to police at all levels she became a 'shoot-to-kill' target.²²

Malfeasance was the norm during her 1973 trial in Middlesex County. The trial was discontinued because of the blatant racism expressed in the jury room. The court ruled that the entire jury panel had been contaminated by racist comments like, 'If she's black, she's guilty'. The New Jersey courts then ordered that a jury be selected from Morris County, one of the wealthiest counties in the country, where 97.5 per cent of potential jurors were white. Most in the jury pool believed the defendant guilty based on pretrial publicity. The trial was later moved back to Middlesex County, yet most whites continued to equate 'black militancy' or a 'black revolutionary' with criminality. Shakur's political affiliations as well as her race-ethnicity would mark her as criminally culpable.²³

In 1998, African-American activist-intellectuals, S.E. Anderson, Soffiyah Jill Elijah, Esq., Joan P. Gibbs, Esq., Rosemary Mealy, and Karen D. Taylor circulated, via e-mail, 'An Open Letter to New Jersey Governor Whitman'. This letter to Christine Todd Whitman protested the \$50,000 bounty she had placed on the head of political exile and fugitive Shakur.

In seeking her apprehension by methods that include '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 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.²⁴

In early 1998, an 'Open Letter From Assata Shakur' circulated on email concurrently with 'An Open Letter to New Jersey Governor Whitman'. Shakur's letter begins: 'My name is Assata Shakur, and I am a 20th century escaped slave'. Of herself and her co-defendant, Sundiata Acoli, Shakur writes that they were both convicted in pre-trial news media, and that the media was not allowed to interview them although the New Jersey police and FBI gave interviews and stories to the press daily.

Shakur's conflictual relationship with mainstream media would be

rekindled a decade later. On 24 December 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 back to the US. In response, Shakur wrote to the Pope explaining her story. Then in January 1998, during the Pope's visit to Cuba, she 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.²⁵

However, most striking in the context of the neoslave narratives explored here is the bizarre polarisation of female identity with images so antipodean that the only comparable extremes in American cultural iconography are that 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' and bounty hunters. Shakur responds in her 'Open Letter' that:

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 ...

Perhaps the most unsettling passage of the letter is where Shakur echoes Martin Luther King, Jr's eschatological vision on 3 April 1968 just prior to his assassination. King states that he does 'not mind' dying because he has been to the mountain top. Shakur observes:

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 ... [and the] one-third of young black [men who] are either in prison or under the jurisdiction of the 'criminal in-justice system'. I am more concerned 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.

Arguing for young people's right to 'live free from political repression', Shakur urges the readers of her letter to work to free all political prisoners and abolish the death penalty with 'a special, urgent appeal' for struggles for the life of Mumia Abu-Jamal, the only political prisoner on death row.²⁶

Conclusion

Historically, icons were objects of uncritical devotion, now in the computer age they also represent symbols displaying technical options. Icons, then, have both devotional and instrumental functions. Romanticised representations of 'respectable' political citizenry, racial and female identity contextualise political dissent in the racial state. On one level, revolutionary icons challenge conventional beliefs with an iconoclasm that disrupts the veneration of bourgeois political practice and symbolism. Paradoxically, iconoclasts who take the political risks to establish an alternative norm eventually become icons themselves. As revolutionary icons, they are presented as the new authoritative 'radicals' to be revered, transgressed, or transformed in struggles with the state.

One may contextualise the political appearances of black revolutionary icons, fugitives, prisoners, and insurrectionists in the dramatic polarities between black/white, slave/master, fugitive/hunter. In a larger framework, those increasingly targeted today for their political resistance by police, grand juries, and the FBI are white peace activists and environmental radicals. An estimated 90 activists from the Black Liberation, Puerto Rican Independence and the white American anti-imperialist movements exist in precarious Cuban exile while over one hundred of their counterparts remain incarcerated in US prisons. Most are anonymous to the general American populace in the 'Free World' and even to the progressive communities that revere the names of political prisoners and resisters, such as Abu-Jamal or Leonard Peltier, who have become icons.

Progressive icons are significant in that they function to popularise political movements and struggles. However, this popularising partly reflects selective political memory and a depoliticising of representations skewed toward elite leadership and symbolism. Selective memory, masked by an uncritical valorising of icons, shields the contradictions of black political leadership from scrutiny while it deflects attention from revolutionary politics and rank-and-file leadership. To revere the chiselling of a marble pantheon of (black) political celebrities likely constructs any chipping away at reification as iconic vandalism. Yet, that 'crime' is continuously perpetrated within a racial state indifferent or implicit in black impoverishment while it attempts to contain political 'resistance'.

Revolutionary icons challenge conventional beliefs with an iconoclasm that disrupts the veneration of bourgeois political practice and symbolism. Icons also promote important unpopular social issues, for instance, Angela Davis has

increased critical attention to prisoners' rights abuses and the 'prison-industrial-complex'.

Every neoslave narrative is a freedom story. The diversity of politics within such narratives — whose ideologies range from conservative through neoliberal to revolutionary — suggests that revolutionary personas are as mercurial as fixed sites for freedom.

Joy James teaches at the Department of Ethnic Studies, University of Colorado, Boulder CO 80309, USA and is author of Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in US Culture; Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals; and editor of the Angela Y. Davis Reader. Her forthcoming works include: Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics, from which this article is an excerpt, and the anthology, States of Confinement: Policing, Detention and Prisons. James is Colorado coordinator for 'JERICO: Amnesty for Political Prisoners'.

Notes

1. See Abu-Jamal (1995). Mumia Abu-Jamal was convicted in 1982 of killing Philadelphia police officer, Daniel Faulkner. The controversial nature under which he was tried (perjury by witnesses, police suppression of evidence that would assist the defence, inconsistencies in ballistics reports) has led to international calls for a new trial. Trial inconsistencies and prosecutorial misconduct are raised in the documentary, *Mumia Abu-Jamal: The Case for Reasonable Doubt*. Other documentation has noted that Philadelphia is the only city to be investigated by the Justice Department for widespread and rampant police corruption that included coerced testimony and falsification of evidence against defendants.
2. See Jacobs (1861) and Douglass (1845) and Davis's (1998) critique of Douglass's limited analysis of the use of incarceration in black oppression.
3. At a conference on 6–7 March 1998 — 'Unfinished Liberation Conference: Power, Caste and Culture' sponsored by the School of Justice Studies, Arizona State University — Davis remarked that she would have written her autobiography differently if she had thought about the consequences of the neoslave narrative. Yet a different narrative would presuppose a different form of radical politics.
4. That Soviet leaders took opportunities at summit meetings with then US President Richard Nixon's cabinet to inquire about Davis during her incarceration and trial, and consequently to rebuke or embarrass the Nixon Administration on its human rights abuses toward black Americans, also proved to differentiate her case sharply from Magee's.
5. In a 1993 interview, Geronimo ji Jaga, at that time imprisoned for 23 years, made the following observations: 'The Black bourgeoisie individualise a lot — they might take an Angela Davis because it is fashionable to get behind Angela Davis to help her get out of prison and then they feel as though they have contributed; but they turned away from Ruchell Magee, who was actually shot and almost killed. So, a few may get behind Geronimo

ji Jaga, because he knows Danny Glover or he has been to Vietnam, but they might oppose Sundiata Acoli, who is a very beautiful brother who should be supported a thousand per cent and should be freed. They might bet behind Dhoruba bin-Wahad and Mutulu Shakur and ignore Marilyn Buck and Laura Whitehorn. It is a matter of us trying to educate them to the reality, what is happening, so they could broaden their support and base their decisions on principles as opposed to personalities'. See Kleffner (1993); for additional information on political prisoners cited, see Churchill and Vander Wall (1998).

6. Geronimo ji Jaga (Elmer Pratt) was incarcerated after being charged and convicted for the killing of Caroline Olson. He was released in June 1997 on \$25,000 bail when a California court ruled that his incarceration was based on perjured testimony by a felon, FBI and Los Angeles Police Department informant Julio Butler, and that the District Attorney's office had withheld information from the jury concerning Pratt's innocence. Pratt maintains that he was in northern California at the time of the southern California shootings; FBI wire taps that could place him at a BPP meeting in northern California mysteriously disappeared when they were requested by his defence team. See Terry (1997).
7. George Jackson's 17-year-old brother, Jonathan, had become one of Angela Davis's bodyguards because the activist-academic was daily receiving multiple death threats. Campus police provided protection only when she taught classes and met with students; friends and co-activists provided off-campus security, often with guns legally purchased by the 26-year-old assistant professor and kept in her apartment. Attempting to publicise state abuses against the Soledad Brothers and dehumanising prison conditions, Jonathan Jackson carried the guns into a courtroom in Northern California's Marin County. With the pronouncement, 'Excuse me, gentlemen, the revolution has begun', he and three prisoners, James McClain, William Christmas, and Ruchell Magee, 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, and seriously wounding the District Attorney, several jurors, and prisoner McGee who later became Davis's co-defendant. Although she was not in Northern California at the time, because the guns were registered in her name Davis was designated by police as an accomplice. In that era of COINTELPRO and police killings of black revolutionaries, rather than turn herself into the authorities, Davis went underground and for two months was on the Federal Bureau of Investigation's 'Ten Most Wanted List'. She was captured in Manhattan on 13 October 1970, and spent the next 16 months in jail, mostly in solitary confinement, before being released on bail during her trial.

On 5 January 1971, Davis was arraigned in a Marin County Courtroom on charges of murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy. Although all deaths and injuries were the result of police or guard fire (standard policy was

that prison guards prevent escapes even if it meant killing hostages), under US law the defendants were charged with the killings. The following year she was acquitted of all charges.

According to Ward Churchill, the Black Panther Party was not involved in the hostage-taking, partly because Geronimo ji Jaga (Pratt), allegedly upon hearing of the plans, ordered Panthers not to participate. Pratt allegedly feared that a police infiltrator had convinced Jonathan Jackson of the feasibility of a strategy that could lead to — as Huey Newton stated in Jonathan's eulogy — 'revolutionary suicide'.

8. In the PBS Frontline documentary, *The Two Nations of Black America*, Gates lampoons the Panthers and their confrontations with police surrounding the New Haven 14, in which Ericka Huggins and Bobby Seale were on trial for murder. Both were eventually acquitted in what proved to be charges based on COINTELPRO malfeasance. The documentary, which aired during Black History Month, made no mention of COINTELPRO; but a discussion of the FBI's violent campaign against black revolutionaries appears in the on-line discussion which most viewers did not see.
9. The film also features the photograph of Huey Newton posing in the rattan chair with a carbine. That the 'poster' people of the black revolution were young, beautiful, and generally 'light skin' (a key marker in their conventional allure) suggests a transgender, sexual appeal of the desirable black American as racial hybrid.
10. *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]*' 'Gender Dynamics' section features autobiographical and historical essays respectively by the following: former Panther Regina Jennings' 'Why I Joined the Party: An Africana Womanist Reflection'; and scholars Tracey Matthews, 'No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Role in the Revolution Is': Gender and the Politics of The Black Panther Party, 1966–1971' and Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest, 'The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job': Black Panther Party Women, 1966–1982'. Ernest-LeBlanc — director of the Black Panther Party Research Project at Stanford University which reportedly purchased the Panther papers from Brown, David Hilliard, and Huey Newton's estate for over one million dollars — offers an uncritical perspective that promotes Brown's iconic status as *feminist* and *revolutionary*.
11. Elaine Brown's long-term affair with a CIA operative and COINTELPRO architect (disclosed in her 1992 autobiography) surfaced in the documentary *All Power to the People!* in a male Panther's unsubstantiated allegation that Brown herself was an 'agent'. This information has been either roundly criticised or generally ignored by black feminists addressing women's roles in this tumultuous organisation and era. Brown provides complex images of female leadership for radical black feminists to consider and critique.
12. The memoir's depiction of black feminism seems strongly compatible with the cultural feminism of bourgeois white women described by Alice Echols (1989).
13. According to JoAnne Grant, 'By 1974 the Panther Party had little influence, having been greatly weakened by internal splits and by government efforts

- to suppress it. Many Panthers were killed in gun battles with police, and scores were involved in long legal battles on various charges, including murder. Significantly, the government was unable to obtain convictions in most Panther trials as well as in other political trials of blacks in the early 1970s. Partly this was because more blacks were serving on juries, and partly because jurors seemed to hold the view that many political trials had come about through the activities of agents provocateurs and police spies' (Grant, 1968, p. 513).
14. Brown's leadership occurred after the 'split' and Oakland's expulsion of female leaders Kathleen Cleaver and Ericka Huggins; male leaders Eldridge Cleaver and Geronimo ji Jaga (Pratt); and the entire New York Chapter of the BPP (which at one time included Assata Shakur). Newton, by then suffering from advanced drug addiction and paranoia, was in exile in Cuba, as Brown ran a centralised, violent-prone elite mainstreaming itself through electoral politics, and encouraging Panthers to register to vote as 'Democrats'.
 15. For instance, Alice Walker's book 'blurb' for Brown's memoir reads: 'What Elaine Brown writes is so astonishing, at times it is even difficult to believe she survived it. And yet she did, bringing us that amazing light of the black woman's magical resilience, in the gloominess of our bitter despair'.
 16. *LIFE Magazine* (1970). The quote stems from a speech Davis made for the Soledad Brothers and is taken from a 27 June 1970 interview with Maeland Productions which was producing a documentary on Davis.
 17. The roll call is extensive. According to Amnesty International, there are over 100 political prisoners in the US. Black revolutionaries incarcerated through COINTELPRO include Herman Bell, Albert Wood, Ed Poindexter, Mondo we Langa (David Rice), Mutulu Shakur, Veronza Bowers, Marshall Eddie Conway and Sundiata Acoli.
 18. Joanne Grant refers to Black Panther attorney Charles Garry's assertion that local police working in coordination with the FBI had executed 28 Party members. COINTELPRO extended to the American Indian Movement, and it is currently most active against the environmental movement. See Grant (1968); Churchill and Vander Wall (1990); and Bari (1994).
 19. 'Along the Colour Line', Marable's column, appears in scores of progressive publications. *The New York Times* ran an article the following month, markedly opposite in tone to Marable's April commentary. See James Dao (1998).
 20. One of the few accounts of the Black Liberation Army that does not rely for its analysis on police or mainstream media is presented by Shakur's attorney and aunt Evelyn Williams. For divergent views on the Black Liberation Army, see Williams (1993), and former police officer John Castelucci (1986).
 21. On 2 May 1973, a shoot-out on the New Jersey Turnpike left Zayd Shakur and State Trooper Werner Foerster dead and Assata Shakur and her codefendant Sundiata Acoli wounded. That day, driving a car with Vermont licence plates on the New Jersey turnpike, Shakur and her companions, Zayd Malik and Sundiata Acoli, were stopped for a 'faulty tail light'.

According to Shakur, Acoli got out of the car to speak with the troopers. State trooper Harper approached the car, opened the door to question Zayd Shakur and Assata Shakur, then drew his gun and pointed it at the car's occupants, telling them to raise their hands in front of them. Assata Shakur describes what followed: 'I complied and in a split second, there was a sound that came from outside the car, there was a sudden movement, and I was shot once with my arms held up in the air, and then once again from the back. Zayd Malik Shakur was later killed, trooper Werner Foerster was killed, and even though trooper Harper admitted that he shot and killed Zayd Malik Shakur, under the New Jersey felony murder law, I was charged with killing both Zayd Malik Shakur, who was my closest friend and comrade, and charged in the death of trooper Foerster. Never in my life have I felt such grief. Zayd had vowed to protect me, and to help me to get to a safe place, and it was clear that he had lost his life, trying to protect both me and Sundiata. Although he was also unarmed, and the gun that killed trooper Foerster was found under Zayd's leg, Sundiata Acoli, who was captured later, was also charged with both deaths'.

22. This quote appears in Shakur's letter.
23. In Mumia Abu-Jamal's 1982 trial in Philadelphia, his former membership in the Black Panther Party was represented as an indication of his guilt in the killing of white police officer Daniel Faulkner.
24. 'An Open Letter to New Jersey Governor Whitman' (author's papers). The writers continue by asking whether Whitman's actions are motivated by a desire for 'national prominence or to retain' the governorship — Whitman at one time was considered by the Republican National Committee as an ideal candidate for national office yet has won state elections only by slight margins.
25. The 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 and run in January 1999, hostile to calls for a new trial for Mumia Abu-Jamal). No references were made to the slain Zayd Shakur, Sundiata Acoli (imprisoned for 25 years), or their families. Images are of course the dominant factor for creating icons, particularly demonised 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 publicised 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.
26. Shakur's message was sent by the Strategic Pastoral Action (SPAN), Wes Rehberg, with the web site listing: <http://www.spanweb.org/>.

References

- Bari, J. (1996) *Timber Wars*, Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press.
- Brown (1992) *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*, New York: Pantheon Books.
- Castelucci, J. (1986) *The Big Dance: The Untold Story of Kathy Boudin and the Terrorist Family that Committed the Brink's Robbery Murders*, New York: Dodd, Mead & Company.
- Churchill, W. and J. Vander Wall (eds) (1992) *Can't Jail the Spirit: Political Prisoners in the US*, Chicago: Committee to End the Marion Lockdown.
- (1988) *Agents of Repression: the FBI's Secret War against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement*, Boston: South End Press, 1988.
- Cleaver, K.N. (1998) 'Back to Africa', in Charles E. Jones (ed.) *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)*, Baltimore: Black Classic Press.
- Davis, A. (1998) 'From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison: Frederick Douglass and the Convict Prison Lease System', in J. James (ed.) *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Denean Sharpley-Whiting, T. (1997) 'Pitfalls, Postmodern Academic Feminist Consciousness, and US Social Crises', in *Fanon: Conflicts & Feminisms*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Dao, J. (1998) 'Fugitive in Cuba Still Wounds Trenton: Chesimard Unrepentant at Trooper's '73 Killing; Whitman is Irate', *The New York Times*, 1 May.
- Douglass, F. (1982[1845]) *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, New York: Penguin Books.
- Echols, A. (1989) *Daring to Be Bad*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fletcher, J., T. Jones and S. Lotringer (1993) *Still Black, Still Strong: Survivors of the War Against Black Revolutionaries*, New York: Semiotext(e).
- Grant, J. (1968) *Black Protest: History, Documents and Analyses 1619 to Present*, New York: Ballantine.
- Jackson, G. (1972) *Blood in My Eye*, New York: Random House.
- (1974) *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*, New York: Random House.
- Jacobs, H. (1988[1861]) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- James, J. (forthcoming) *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics*, New York: St Martin's Press.
- Jennings, R. (1998) 'Why I Joined the Party: An Africana Womanist Reflection', in Charles E. Jones (ed.) *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)*, Baltimore: Black Classic Press.
- Kleffner, H. (1993) 'The Black Panthers: Interviews with Geronimo ji Jaga Pratt and Mumia Abu-Jamal', *Race & Class*, 35 (1).
- LeBlanc-Ernest, A.D. (1998) 'The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job: Black Panther Party Women, 1966–1982', in Charles E. Jones (ed.) *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)*, Baltimore: Black Classic Press.
- LIFE Magazine* (1970) 11 September, 69 (11): 26.
- Malcolm X (1965) *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, New York: Ballantine.

- Marable, M. (1998) 'Black Political Prisoners: The Case of Assata Shakur', 'Along the Colour Line', 22 April.
- Matthews, T. (1998) 'No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Role in the Revolution Is': Gender and the Politics of the Black Panther Party, 1966–1971', in Charles E. Jones (ed.) *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)*, Baltimore: Black Classic Press.
- Morrison, T. (1977) *Song of Solomon*, New York: Random House.
- Shakur, A. (1984) *Assata: an Autobiography*.
- (1993) 'Prisoner in the United States', in J. Fletcher, T. Jones and S. Lotringer (eds) *Still Black, Still Strong: Survivors of the War Against Black Revolutionaries*, New York: Semiotext(e).
- Terry, D. (1998) 'Los Angeles Confronts Bitter Racial Legacy', *New York Times*, 20 July, A1, A10.
- Walker, A. (1991) 'Black Panthers or Black Punks?', *New York Times*, 5 May, A23.
- Wideman, J.E. (1995) 'Introduction', to M. Abu-Jamal, *Live from Death Row: This is Mumia Abu-Jamal*, Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.
- Williams, E. (1993) *Inadmissible Evidence*, Brooklyn: Lawrence Hill.