

DON'T ASK US ABOUT FREEDOM:
STORIES OF GENDER AND INJUSTICE IN THE CASES OF
AFENI SHAKUR, ANGELA DAVIS & ASSATA SHAKUR

A Thesis

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by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines issue of race, politics and gender through the dissection of the trials of three political activist women of the late 1960s and early 1970s: Afeni Shakur, Angela Davis and Assata Shakur. Each of them represents a different facet of the Black Power movements of this era, and each was arrested, imprisoned and tried for highly politicized charges. Afeni Shakur was a young grass roots activist, while Angela Davis personified the intellectual turned political activist, and Assata Shakur's activism turned her into a political prisoner leading to eventual exile in Cuba (where she resides to this day).

The examination of race, gender and politics is explored in three ways. The first method places these women and their trials in their historical context. By examining their treatment within the Black liberation movement and in contrast to that of their male comrades, we can see how their trials and treatment exemplified and perpetuated the racist and sexist oppression of Black women political activists in American society. This also illustrates the way that these women reflect the long history of Black women throughout the African Diaspora who fought for freedom, justice and equality alongside their male counterparts.

Next, these women's stories are explored through external contemporary commentary such as newspaper articles from the time of the trials, jurors' statements, government briefings, historical retrospectives, and socio-political anthologies. The exploration of these works illuminates the culture in which these women made their choices to become politically active and in which their trials took place. It also exposes the different biases and prejudices of those involved directly in the cases, whether the police, lawyers and judges, jurors, or journalists.

Finally, these women's experiences are examined through their own autobiographical writings, which give a first-hand perspective on the motivations and experiences of these Black female political activists. Each was written at a different stage of life. Afeni Shakur's recent autobiography is a work that revisits and reflects on her earlier life with the wisdom of hindsight. Angela Davis wrote her autobiography shortly after her trial ended. It captures the essence of the woman that she was during her trial, exposing her raw emotions and unresolved feelings surrounding the events leading up to and around her imprisonment and trial, alongside the analytic examination of the academic intellectual. The third autobiography was written by Assata Shakur once she was in exile. It embodies the experience of someone still living and dealing with the unresolved issues and difficult repercussions of having chosen to speak up and out about one's place in society. Together these memoirs create a multifaceted image of the political and personal challenges facing Black women determined to participate in social change on their own strength.

By examining the historical legacy of these women, the contemporary commentary about them, and the self-images presented in their own writings, we see the direct effect of racism and sexism on their treatment as politically active Black women in the criminal justice system. A dual form of sexism is apparent, in that Black women are denied the protection of female stereotypes when it would help them and are the victims of stereotypes when it would hurt them. Essentially, Black women are ascribed masculine, aggressive qualities to dehumanize their image, while conversely the most negative female stereotypes of romantic weakness and subservience are applied, further alienating them from receiving any sympathetic treatment and empathetic feelings from the larger society.

In conclusion, these women continue in the vein of many Black women before them in their efforts to build their own image while simultaneously the greater society tries to silence them.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Arielle G. Seaworthy was born in Seattle, Washington and raised in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a city rich in culture and history. When she was eight she and her mother lived and traveled in Oaxaca, Mexico for four months. This experience opened her eyes to other cultures, planting seeds of interests in cultural and socio-political issues. Arielle graduated from Santa Fe High School in 1996.

She attended the University of New Mexico and began taking classes in the intellectually nurturing environment of the African American Studies Department. Arielle was the student coordinator for the African American Studies Team of Excellence Mentorship Program, where she mentored a girl for two years and facilitated the growth of the program. After researching her subject in Oakland, California, she completed her undergraduate thesis: *The Backbone of the Panther: Black Women's Contributions and Role within the Black Panther Party for Self Defense*. In December 1999 Arielle graduated from the University of New Mexico with a Bachelor of Arts in African American Studies.

After graduation Arielle moved to Kumasi, Ghana, where she lived with a host family and traveled extensively throughout the country. This brought her full circle, enabling her to experience first hand the birthplace of the cultural roots of her studies.

In the fall of 2000 Arielle was awarded Cornell University's Sage Fellowship, and attended the graduate program at the Africana Studies & Research Center. During her second year she was a teacher's assistant to Dr. Ali Mazrui and a library assistant. While there she continued her research on Black women in liberation movements.

Arielle now resides in Harlem, New York City where she works as a website administrator and lives with her husband Clive C. Cribb and their two small children, Roshaun and Anisa.

To my children Roshaun and Anisa –
May you grow up in a free and just society.

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Last but in no way least, thank you to my husband Clive, my son Roshaun, and my daughter Anisa. If it wasn’t for this thesis, Clive, we might have never met; but if it weren’t for your love and support it would have never been completed. To my two babies Roshaun and Anisa, at your tender ages you don’t understand what is going on, but you have sacrificed time with me and shared mental and emotional space with this thesis since before both of you were born. Looking into your sweet faces was the best motivation of all. I love both of you so and am blessed to be your mother.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of Purpose

This thesis examines how and why between the years of 1968 and 1977 the United States federal law enforcement agencies were used as political tools to repress, oppress and silence black women revolutionaries. It examines specifically charges against three women who were jailed for their political beliefs and the way in which those experiences were portrayed on the one hand in the dominant culture and on the other hand by their own writing and reflections. In the era of Black Power, an effective tool of repression that was consistently used to dismantle Black liberation movements was again put to use: the arrest, trial, and subsequent imprisonment of its key leaders and organizers. As the Fred Hampton 20th Anniversary publication points out, “FBI headquarters directed its local offices to ‘prevent the rise of a messiah who could unify and electrify the militant Black Nationalist movement’.”¹ This was part of the Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), which was used to target and entrap Black activists, and which is discussed in greater detail in Chapters two and four. Women were not exempt from the same persecution their male comrades suffered at the hands of a government that intended to prevent a Black Power agenda. Three of the women who faced these trials for their political activities were Angela Davis, Afeni Shakur, and Assata Shakur. They were all targeted because of their affiliation with, and activities, in Black liberation groups, as serious threats to the

¹ The December 4th Committee. *Fred Hampton 20th Anniversary*. Special Thanks to Tim Cullver, Linda Turner, Peter Ruttner, Mariel Nanasi, Stacey Beckman, Jefferey Haas, Janine, Loren and Katie. Chicago: C and D Printers: Salsado Press, 1989.

established order of White supremacy that controls this country. Subsequently, they faced an assortment of charges that resulted in their arrests, detainments, and long drawn out trials, and (in the case of Assata Shakur) imprisonment and forced exile.

The perceptions of identity from both dominant culture and these women's self reflections is the focus of this thesis. Through these cases, the issues and historical context of Black women political activists and their experiences as women and people of color are explored:

- Afeni Shakur versus the State of New York for: 1) conspiracy to commit murder, 2) attempted murder, 3) conspiracy, 4) conspiracy to bomb several public locations in New York City.
- Angela Davis versus the State of California for her alleged participation in the attempted liberation of the Soledad Brothers; counts included 1) aggravated kidnapping and 2) murder.
- Assata Shakur versus the State of New York for robbery, two counts of bank robbery, kidnapping, murder, and attempted murder.
- Assata Shakur versus the State of New Jersey for murder.

These three women and their cases have been chosen because I believe that they accurately represent through three unique but intertwining experiences the repression that many Black women political activists experienced during the selected time period. Subsequently, during these trials, prosecutors and mainstream media projected negative images of these women and tried to shape their identities by portraying them as common criminals and terrorists. These identities were based on assumptions and interpretations of their gender, sex, femininity, and race.

Black women activists in the late nineteen-sixties and seventies became prime targets for the criminal justice system's continuing repression of Black people and movements. The "Criminal Justice System" refers to all the participants at local, state, and federal levels that work in collaboration to arrest, try, and detain peoples alleged to have broken state or federal laws. This includes police, sheriffs, state troopers; the

FBI, its agents and officials; prosecutors, district attorneys, judges; wardens, and jail or prison guards; in essence, all the individuals and agencies necessary to keep the courts, jails, and prisons operating in this country.

The participation of international American agencies, such as the Central Intelligence Agency, (CIA), was not a large factor in the cases of Afeni Shakur and Angela Davis. Although Angela Davis' case did garner extreme amounts of international support, it is not clear whether the CIA played an active role regarding her case. Assata Shakur was a major exception in this respect. Once she was liberated from federal prison and found refuge in Cuba, the branches of the United States government that handle international issues became involved in efforts to oppress her. These parties included the CIA and Committees on International Relations in the House of Representatives and the United States Senate. When the former New Jersey State Governor, Christine Todd Whitman, was appointed to George W. Bush's presidential cabinet in 2001, interest in Assata Shakur's case entered the executive branch of the federal government. With her appointment to the cabinet, Todd Whitman requested Bush's attention and action regarding efforts to extradite Assata Shakur.

This thesis contributes to the Africana discipline in several different ways. It illustrates the fact that the imprisonment of Black American people for their political beliefs and actions is a recurring force repressing their efforts to free themselves in this society. It is also important because most studies that look at this particular phenomenon in the Black Power movements up unto this point have focused on the experiences of Black men. These men include Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, Geronimo Pratt, Lumumba Shakur, etc. in such seminal works as *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (1996), *Rage* (1971), *Agony in New Haven: The Trial of Bobby Seale, Ericka Huggins and the Black Panther Party*

(1973), *Last Man Standing: The Tragedy and Triumph of Geronimo Pratt* (2001), and *The Briar Patch: The People of the State of New York vs. Lumumba Shakur et. al.* (1973). By no means is this thesis trying to diminish the importance of these men's political trials and imprisonments. Rather, it is trying to show a more complete picture, and in doing so, gives voice to stories that not only carry validity, but contribute greatly to the Africana discipline and the Black Diasporic community as a whole.

When mainstream media abstains from covering events that directly affect Black women activists, it is a clear example of dominant culture's refusal to validate experiences of people they regard as outside of the cultural norm. In this event we look to African-centered scholars to correct the misjudgments and fallacies regarding image building and representation of these women. Unfortunately what does one say when the Africana discipline itself follows closely in the footsteps of the dominant oppressive culture? This is not to imply that the Africana discipline actively attacks the Black woman's experience in the fashion that White academia and society do; but the discipline fails to give adequate dialogue in this area. Not discounting the works that have been and are continuing to be produced and are essential to the discipline, there is still a large gap in the academic work regarding Black women activists and the criminal justice system. The materials on Black men who have faced the criminal justice system and analysis of their work as political activists are far greater in number than those dealing with Black women.

In essence, the discipline sometimes plays the role of silencing Black women political activists' voices by merely failing to tell their stories. The discipline does not suppress their voice and invalidate their experiences, but the lack of information and attention given to these Black women's lives in essence make a value judgment regarding their experiences. This is damaging in a different, but just as destructive,

way as the more aggressive and negative steps taken to silence Black women in mainstream society. To be invalidated by one's own community is not only an injustice, but it can further erode a sense of self. If Africana scholars fail to examine the Black woman's experience, White mainstream scholars' interpretations become the only ones that are available. This gives them the power of defining people of a different gender and race than themselves; a group that is consistently misinterpreted through the Eurocentric lens mainstream scholars view history and politics through. It is therefore the responsibility of the Africana discipline to address Black women's issues and provide the space for their voices to be heard with the same importance as those of men in the Black community and academic world. Fortunately the discipline seems to be responding to the need, and there is an increased amount of work focusing on the political activity of women in the Black community.

Although it is hoped that this thesis falls into this category, it is intended as a contribution to the Black community as a whole. A complete and detailed history and discussion of these women's identities will not only instill pride in future generations, but within the intellectual world will counteract western assertions and presumptions about the Black Power movement and Black women's roles within it. In doing so it will build a more complete history. This thesis aims to follow in the steps of other works that are expanding the discourse to include women's stories and contributions to the Africana discipline. It does so by examining the phenomena in which mainstream culture attaches negative stereotypes and ideas of identity to discredit female Africana-centered activists. This phenomenon is only likely to increase in the suspicious atmosphere of law enforcement that has been suggested and applauded in the political climate of post September 11th America.

Methodology

The methodological approach used for this thesis is analysis and examination of published works in order to draw conclusions about the subject. The autobiography of each of the central women receives special attention in Chapter Four. It also focuses on the media's portrayal of Black women political activists on trial. This analysis not only focuses on these issues within the United States Justice System, but within the Black community itself, specifically the progressive and revolutionary community, and from these women themselves. This is done through contextual analysis of secondary sources.

Primary sources include autobiographies and essays written both by the women in question and other individuals who took part in the trials. In the cases of the New York Twenty-One trial (Afeni Shakur) and the trial of Angela Davis, accounts of the trials written by jury members are also available and are used for this thesis. Assata Shakur's aunt Evelyn Williams, who was her lawyer, also wrote a book in which she expressed her view of her niece's trial. The other major primary sources for this thesis were articles written about the trials in both mainstream and alternative papers. The main source of alternative articles is the Black Panther Newspaper.

Secondary sources are also used extensively throughout the thesis. These books and articles include second-hand accounts of the trials, along with books that analyze the criminal justice system in regard to political activists of African descent. Other books and articles are also essential in articulating the arguments about image building and portrayal of Black women both in the criminal justice system and within their revolutionary movements. These include works that explore the issues of gender and race and Black women's identities within the United States the Africana Diaspora.

Although the aforementioned works are all extremely useful, there are some limitations to the research process that need to be pointed out in order to explain the

absence of information that would have helped improve this thesis. Absent in this thesis are interviews with these three women about their individual experiences. It would have been very helpful to be able to interview them, but it was not possible for this given research project. Several factors contributed to the absence of interviews. The issues being discussed in this thesis include emotionally painful and intrusive incidents of each of these women, and access to the women to interview them. Because of this, building up a relationship that would have led to conversations would have required a period of time spent building trust with these women. In the case of Assata Shakur, the limitations were exacerbated by the fact that she is living in exile in Cuba, and under constant threat of being kidnapped by the United States government, which limits further possible contact. I did attempt to set up an interview with her, but was not successful, and therefore cancelled my plans to go to Cuba.

Despite initial obstacles, there were good prospects to collect some data through interviews at a conference on the Black Panther Party in Washington, D.C. in October 2001. However, the political climate after September 11th led to the cancellation of that conference. As discussed in the conclusion of this thesis, the current political climate is evolving towards heightened political suspicion and repression. This climate makes people once hunted by the government not feel comfortable or safe to express their political views as publicly as they had before September 11th. These limitations shaped this thesis into what it is, a contextual analysis of primary and secondary sources.

Literature Review

Assata: An Autobiography by Assata Shakur (1987) is the text that was the true inspiration for this project. Since the first time I read it, while an undergraduate, I knew I had to do more research. After reading the book, I knew exactly why I had been so drawn to it. This text filled a void, and, in doing so, left an indelible mark on

my brain. Her text widens the scope of understanding and perception of Black revolutionary movements of the nineteen sixties and seventies by including a woman's voice in the dialogue. It is not merely an account of one life, but an examination of the political climate of America, and how it shaped the life of a woman of African descent.

One of the other fundamental texts is *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974). Not only is it important because it is a personal account of Davis's experiences, it was published at a time when books detailing Black women revolutionaries' experiences were even harder to come by than they are today. Angela Davis' book sat alongside autobiographies of Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1970), Bobby Seale's *A Lonely Rage: The Autobiography of Bobby Seale* (1978), and George Jackson's *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1994), and was solitary in its exploration of gender and revolution from the female perspective. The book is also essential because it gives an in-depth account of Davis' experiences while being held in the New York City and Marin County jails and being tried in the American judicial system. Angela Davis also provides deeper insight by examining her situation in the context of the realities of being a Black woman activist in the era of Black empowerment. She reflects on the general conditions of women's jails and how this affects the mentalities of the prisoners, citing their eagerness to interact with her upon learning of her political activity. This work was not only valuable because it analyses her experiences, but also because she herself critically examines many of the issues and questions being asked in this thesis.

The third autobiography examined for this thesis is *Afeni Shakur: Evolution of a Revolutionary* (2005) by Jasmine Guy and interviews with Afeni Shakur. This autobiographical reflection is the most recently published of the three. It was written after the passage of more than twenty years, during which time Afeni Shakur had lived

through many emblematic and troubling experiences, including drug addiction, recovery, and the gang-style shooting death of her son, the rap artist Tupac Shakur. Afeni Shakur tells the story of her early life, her time in the Black Panthers, her persecution as part of the New York Twenty-one, and her reflections on her life from the mature vantage point allowed by this historical and personal perspective.

In the same vein of personal account is the compilation of writing of the New York Twenty-One entitled, *Look for Me in the Whirlwind: The Collective Autobiography of the New York 21* (1971). This is the only published personal account of Afeni Shakur from the time period of the trial itself. Although her total contribution to the book only consists of a few pages, it gives insight into her reflections on her life and situation at that time. It is the only book written while she was actually on trial, and for this reason has a perspective that is not affected by re-examination or analysis of past actions. Instead this book illustrates her story as it unfolded. The book is somewhat problematic, though, in that Afeni Shakur writes within its text that she is not pleased with the project: “First let me tell you that this book was not my idea at all (as a matter of fact I was hardly cooperative).”² This will be further discussed in Chapter Four of the thesis.

Videos also played an important role in the research process of this thesis. *Assata: Conversations with Youth in Havana at the World Youth Festival* (1998) was one such video. In it, Assata Shakur told her story and provided new insight on it and on the conditions in America. Videos are an important medium, because figuratively and literally they give voice to women who otherwise may not be heard, as they do not or cannot publish their experiences. The video, *Voices of Black Panther Women: A*

² Balgoon, Kuwasi, Joan Bird, Cetewayo, Robert Collier, Dharuba, Richard Harris, Ali Bay Hassan, Jamal, Abayama Katara, Kwando Kinshasa, Baba Odinga, Shaba Ogun Om, Curtis Powell, Afeni Shakur, Lumumba Shakur, and Clark Squire. *Look for Me in the Whirlwind: The Collective Autobiography of the New York 21*. New York: Random House, 1971, 360.

University of California in Berkeley Graduate Assembly (October, 1990), is a very useful resource on women's thoughts surrounding political activism. This video forum interviewed a panel of women who are less known, but just as important as the ones who have published and were in the media. Although none of the women in the video are the focus of this thesis, they addressed many of the issues being discussed and answered some of the questions being posed here.

Accounts of the trials written by lawyers, jurors, and outside observers are also very important works that help shape the thesis and more specifically provide valuable insight in Chapter Three. One of these fundamental works is *Inadmissible Evidence: The Story of the African American Trial Lawyer Who Defended the Black Liberation Army* (1993) by Evelyn Williams, aunt of Assata Shakur. Her book goes into details about the technicalities of the law surrounding the case and impediments put in her way by the prosecution. Her book is extremely important to this thesis' examination of image building that is used to discredit and persecute women such as herself in the mainstream media and American judicial system.

Perversions of Justice: The Prosecution and Acquittal of the Panther 21 (1974) by Peter L. Zimroth, is an important text, not because it gives agency or voice to the women, or for that matter gave much coverage to Joan Bird and Afeni Shakur's experiences in the trial at all. Instead, this book is written by and for mainstream America. The author asserted that he had no biases, but this is clearly false within even the first few pages. For this very reason the text has been essential to this thesis. It illustrates the mainstream intellectual world's eagerness to shape Black women's identity, while at the same time refusing to give any credit to Black women's acts of assertion or efforts to have their own voices heard.

The Black Panther Paper, in contrast, provided an alternative news source and outlet for these women's stories. The paper actively tried to alert the public,

especially the Black community, of their sisters' plight in their individual cases. Some of the women such as Ericka Huggins and Joan Bird were also able to print their own words within the pages of the paper. This gave them a voice that mainstream media never encouraged, let alone offered. This source lays the foundation for Chapter Four, which explores image building of Black women revolutionaries within the Black community and by Black women themselves.

All the previously mentioned sources have made this thesis possible, and helped to give voice to people not always heard in the discourse.

Structure of the Thesis

Chapter Two focuses on the historical legacy that these women were upholding. The phenomenon of being persecuted for political beliefs and actions is by no means a new experience for Black women throughout the African continent and its Diaspora. This chapter gives a short overview of the history of politically active Black women and their participation in the resistance struggle. It shows the correlations and interconnecting threads of Black women's resistance and persecution throughout the African world with a focus on the Diaspora. Whether it took place in the Caribbean or Angola, Ghana or Zimbabwe, during times of enslavement or colonization, United States segregation or Apartheid in South Africa, Black women have been fighting for freedom and standing trial for their beliefs alongside their Black brothers throughout annals of time.

Chapter Two also considers the political history of each woman who is a subject of this study: the organizations and activities they were involved in and how these led the government to target them for political persecution. Political affiliation and ideology are arguably the most important factors in the persecution of these women, and is also what defines them as political prisoners. Each woman was at one time or another affiliated with the Black Panther Party and for this reason they are all

somewhat interconnected. This is one of the major reasons why their cases were chosen for this thesis. At the time (the late sixties and early seventies), J. Edgar Hoover publicly declared that the Black Panther Party was Public Enemy Number One. The government perceived the Black Panthers to be a threat to America's safety, morals, and values, and for this reason determined that the party should be destroyed. Angela Davis and Assata Shakur were not active members of the Black Panther Party at the time of their trials, but nonetheless they were strongly affiliated with the organization. Moreover, they both were affiliated with, and members of, other organizations that the FBI felt were threats to America. Assata Shakur was labeled by the media as the head of the Black Liberation Army, and was indeed an active member, but she never referred to herself as its leader. Angela Davis was and still is an active member of the Communist Party.

These women, like Harriet Tubman about a century earlier for her actions to free enslaved Africans, became "America's Most Wanted" because of association with organizations that actively condemned the policies and actions of the United States government towards American peoples of African descent. They were on trial because of their political beliefs and that is what defines them as political activists. Angela Davis was not an active member of the Black Panther Party, but she had regular contact with members and publicly stated that she was sympathetic to their cause and was a proud and active member of the communist party. Specifically, she was in contact with and supported George Jackson in his efforts to end his own imprisonment and that of his co-defendants known as the "Soledad Brothers." Assata Shakur was an active member of the Black Liberation Army when she was forced underground to escape persecution and subsequently shot, arrested, and held for trial. The Black Liberation Army was an organization that grew out of the Black Panther Party, and many members of the organization had been affiliated with, or previously

members of, the party, as was Assata. Afeni Shakur was an active member of the New York City Chapter of the Black Panther Party, involved in community projects ranging from rallies to breakfast programs. Thus, for these women, political activism ranges from sympathetic action to membership and participation to leadership in organizations fighting for the equality of people of African descent and oppressed people in general in the United States. Chapter Two also gives an account of each woman's imprisonment and trial(s). This provides an outline for events and issues that are discussed throughout the thesis.

Chapter Three focuses on the role that being Black and a woman plays in determining one's treatment during trial, and on how historical representation of Black women in the American mainstream society come into play in the courtrooms. Specifically, it analyzes the way that the government and the media constructed and determined the public image of each woman. Consistent in every case was an overwhelming media prosecution of each woman before she was officially tried for a crime, let alone convicted. In the cases of Angela Davis and Assata Shakur, close media attention to their large-scale "man" hunts portrayed each woman as guilty before arrest. It poisoned the public arena, making impartial jury selection and trials nearly impossible. There is a whole psychology behind persecuting and convicting Black women. This chapter also examines the common phenomenon of "de-feminizing" Black women when they appear in the court systems. People ranging from police officers to judges who instruct juries have repeatedly tried to portray Black women as angry, non-womanly people whom society is obliged to suppress with force and violence. This is in contrast to White female defendants who are often portrayed as being "victims" of circumstance and of the bad influences of deviant men around them. I believe that this psychology has helped to maintain a system which consistently treats Black women in an inferior and violent manner.

Inherent in the media's attempt to discredit and convict these women in the public arena were deep-seated stereotypes about Black women as a whole. The historical image comes into play here. For hundreds of years, Black women have been viewed in this country and in Western societies as a whole as outside societal norms and therefore unacceptable. Gender and gender politics directly affected the perception and treatment of each of these women. Gender and sex were often confused within these trials. In many instances, characteristics that are more correctly labeled as aspects of gender roles were attributed to the woman's sex. Whereas sex is a biological definition of a man or a woman, gender is a sociological interpretation of how individuals are supposed to act and relate in society. Gender roles define what is considered "womanly" or "manly" behavior, setting socially acceptable parameters for individuals to stay in, in order to fulfill these roles. Therefore, gender is a more fluid definition process, changing from one society/ethnic group/country to the next, or within the same society according to the norms of the mainstream and different social categories and at different historical stages.

Within these trials there was often an assumption that a woman acted in a certain manner because it was inherent to her sex – i.e. she couldn't help but be emotional because she was biologically incapable of acting any other way. These presumptions were perpetuated instead of acknowledging that the court was analyzing her through lenses tainted by western perceptions of gender roles and assumed behavior norms. To ignore these facts while examining these cases would be a major oversight. By looking at these factors one is given the proper tools with which to analyze the conditions and treatment that each of these women endured within court and during the days they spent behind bars. The imprisonment of all the women is central to this thesis. It is therefore necessary to establish a working definition of imprisonment.

Imprisonment for our purposes refers not only to time served in a prison after being tried and convicted (regardless of actual or only officially declared guilt), but also time served in jail while awaiting trial. Afeni Shakur and Angela Davis were never convicted of a crime in court and therefore were never sentenced to serve time in a prison. However each woman served nearly two years' time in jails awaiting their trials in the court system. Assata Shakur was never even let out on bail.

These women's experiences were no less oppressive or horrendous because they were in a county jail as opposed to a state or federal prison. The treatment and conditions the women endured were implemented in efforts to not only discourage other activists, but to break their spirits. They endured physical and emotional abuse and deprivation. All of them were subjected to unsanitary conditions that endangered their health, and in the cases of Afeni Shakur and Assata Shakur, the health of their unborn babies. The imprisonment and conditions these women were forced to live in without having even been convicted of a crime have just as many implications about the injustice in this country as do those cases where guilty verdicts were handed down and people served time in state or federal prison.

There is an attitude in this country that a Black woman does not have anything valuable to say or teach and therefore does not need to be documented. Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith dissect this phenomenon in their article entitled "The Politics of Black Women's Studies," that appears in their book, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave, Black Women's Studies*.

As Black women we belong to two groups that have been defined as congenitally inferior in intellect, that is, Black people and women. The paradox of Black women's position is well illustrated by the fact that white – male academics... are trying [to] prove "scientifically" our racial and sexual inferiority. Their overt or tacit question is, "How could a being who combines two mentally deficient biological identities do anything with her intellect, her nonexistent powers of mind?" ... Our credibility as autonomous beings and thinkers in the white-male-run intellectual establishment is constantly in question and rises and falls in direct proportion to the degree to which we

continue to act and think like our Black female selves, rejecting the modes of bankrupt white-male Western thought.³

The statement addresses the issue that it is the job of the Black women to make their own voices heard, and in doing so they will validate the experiences and contributions that they have to make to society and the academic world. If Black women let White society, specifically White male scholars, document their history and experience it will continue to be a scholarly legacy of racism, sexism, and misrepresentation.

The needs of Africana women are real, just as the needs of any other group are; however, the solutions for Africana people cannot be found or resolved within the context of an alien ideology. One must look from within the culture in order to decode the multifaceted issues before the dynamics of the problems can be properly addressed.⁴

Black womanist studies along with Africana studies therefore have to be at the forefront in shaping Black women political activists' identity and image in the judicial system. That is why the dissection of these women's words in their autobiographies and other writings is essential.

This concern and need is what shapes Chapter Four of the thesis. Through their own writings in autobiographies, newspapers, and collected works, this chapter explores the internal identity that each woman articulated, not only in reaction to the negative images portrayed in the courtroom and media, but as a way to assert revolutionary independence. Each woman gained power from self-definition and affirmation. As Clenora Hudson-Weems states "The Africana womanist... presents herself as a self-definer; she alone defines her reality."⁵ These women also defined themselves increasingly as agents of change and representatives of Black female strength.

³ Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott, & Barbara Smith. *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave, Black Women's Studies*. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1979, xxiv.

⁴ Hudson-Weems, Clenora. *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*. Troy, Michigan: Bedford Publishers, Inc., 1993, 143.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

Each woman's identity was not only affected by the criminal justice systems' portrayal of her, or the media's perception of her, but by the historical period in which all of them were living. Their historical moment followed the first era in the twentieth century during which major attempts were made to gain equal rights through the judicial system – the Civil Rights movement of the nineteen-fifties and sixties. At that time, the Cold War and the McCarthy Era bred suspicion and fear of anything different than the capitalist system of the United States. During the McCarthy Era, lives were destroyed by disregarding the civil and human rights of United States citizens who were suspected of being communists, a process known as “Blacklisting.” The same methods of turning colleagues against each other, planting evidence, and breeding suspicion and fear were also enlisted in the effort to destroy the Black Civil Rights and Revolutionary movements, the Vietnam anti-war movement, and anything else the government deemed as a threat to “democracy” and “national security.”

In the cases discussed, police took advantage of the limited rights the suspects enjoyed to suppress these women while building cases against them. This is clearly illustrated by the way in which law enforcement agencies conducted the arrest, questioning and detention of each woman, including such issues as where they were housed within the jails and prisons, which part of the inmate population (if any) they were allowed to associate with, and what kind of nutrition and health care they received during their incarceration. Also at issue was the access to counsel for these women while they were being held for trial or appeals.

The problem of being forcibly detained for one's political activities is again coming center stage in the post-September 11th politics of the United States. The government is again more than willing to forfeit peoples' rights of privacy, independent thought, and even lawyer-client privileges in order to ‘fight terrorism.’ And again racism is a central factor if with a slightly different focus. These

comparisons and the issues that arise from it are summarized within the conclusion of this thesis.

The period chosen extends to the end of the seventies because it was at this time that many of the laws that sanctioned invasions of privacy were revoked and laws were put into place to protect civil liberties and the rights of prisoners. In nineteen seventy-four the Privacy Act of 1974 was passed by the U.S. Congress and signed into effect. Nineteen eighty-one saw the biggest prison uprising in United States history at Attica Prison in upstate New York. As a result of widespread publicity, the eighties saw massive prison reforms that not only changed conditions within prisons but also altered many free citizens' perceptions of what prisons were and why they exist in this country. Prisoner's advocacy groups began to appear throughout the country, questioning, among other issues, the rehabilitative abilities of correctional facilities. Sadly as discussed in Angela Davis' *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003) (57-59), their skepticism was affirmed when even the modest formal and self-education programs were eliminated from prisons by the 1990s.

Nineteen sixty-nine was the year in which Afeni Shakur, the first of the women covered in this thesis, entered jail awaiting her trial. In nineteen seventy-seven Assata Shakur was tried and convicted in New Jersey, making her the last of our women remaining in the criminal justice system. Through an act of revolutionary solidarity, she escaped and went on to find political asylum in Cuba; therefore nineteen seventy-nine is the last year covered.

For a Criminal Justice System determined to destroy Black Power movements, the imprisonment of accused activists awaiting and during trial was just as important a strategy as their actual conviction and sentencing. Assata Shakur in the following statement explains how in the New York Panther Twenty-One case detainment was used as an effective means of destroying opposition to the United States government:

... most of them spent... more than two years in prison. Each was given a hundred thousand dollar bail... what that did was limit our effectiveness in organizing our community. And make us have to spend a lot of our time, energy, and resources, liberating our comrades instead of being able to effectively organize in our communities.⁶

Each of our women found the organizations they were affiliated with in tatters by the time their trials ended. Although some of them continued to be politically active, the government was successful in destroying the political groups they had fought so hard to build and maintain.

This tactic has been used time and again by this country to shut organizations down. It is in no way a new phenomenon that only Black women of the later twentieth century have experienced.

Chapter Five summarizes what is discussed and what conclusions can be drawn from these three women's experiences; how they have affected the legacy of Black female activism and feminism. It also gives an assessment of the present political climate of this country and how it mirrors the time period explored in this thesis. In doing so, it explores what are the ramifications of today's climate for politically progressive Black women in this country. In conclusion, Chapter Five examines how representations of Black feminism and activism are evolving within the Africana discipline.

⁶ Shakur, Assata. *Assata: A Conversation with Youth in Havana at the World Youth Festival Havana, Cuba*. Videotape. With Assata Shakur. Peoples Video Organization, Manhattan Video Network.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND LEGACY

The women discussed in this thesis were by no means unique in their actions. They followed in a long tradition of Black women who fought for the humanity, dignity, and freedom of their people alongside their male counterparts throughout enslavement, apartheid, segregation, and neocolonialism. Activism and resistance to oppression is an integral part of the African diasporic experience. As strong partners in African communities, resistors to the slave trade, abolitionists during enslavement, founders of Caribbean Maroon communities, anti-lynching activists, founders of national Negro associations, fighters against apartheid, organizers of civil rights organizations, and black nationalists, women served alongside men as agents of change and inspirations to their people.

African communities, throughout history, from the continent and across the Diaspora, often invested power in women in ways uncommon in the West. The colonial and slave trading periods offer many examples such as Queen Nzinga of the Mbundu (1581-1663), who fought the slave trade, Dona Beatrice of Congo, a.k.a. Kimpa Vita (1682-1706), Nehanda of Zimbabwe (about 1863-98) and Yaa Asantewa (1840/60-1921), mother of Ghana's Ashanti Empire, who led armed resistance against colonization of Ghana by the British Empire.⁷ "There is evidence...that the European white was confused and alarmed by the egalitarian system of these societies and did much to wreck it, creating wedges between the men and women."⁸ An example of this is the British Empire's refusal to acknowledge the political and spiritual power of Yaa

⁷ Sweetman, David. *Women Leaders in African History*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc, 1984, v.

⁸ Toni Cade, ed. *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. New York: Signet, 1970, 103.

Asantewa, only recognizing negotiations with male members of the monarchy. The white South Africans duly underestimated the organizing abilities and resistance to colonization of the Shona of Zimbabwe under the powerful guidance of a woman, their spiritual leader Nehanda, during the first occupation of Zimbabwe in the 1800s.⁹

In the Americas, enslaved women linked their struggle against slavery with a feminist/womanist consciousness. Faced with the inhuman treatment they received – from their capture on the continent, in the temporary slave houses awaiting shipment, in the Middle Passage, to the slave societies of the Western Hemisphere – and utter disregard and disrespect for their female identity, enslaved women felt compelled to fight for their people and shape their own image and in doing so asserted their femininity with a sense of communal responsibility:

African slave women were the initiators of feminism in America. It was their struggle for the humanity of womanhood that first made White women aware of the White male paternalism, which limited their development, but idolized their status.¹⁰

Unfortunately, this did not result in solidarity between Black and White women, because White women of the dominant class were unwilling to give up their restricted but privileged role in society to obtain gender equality. In a perverse way some of these women gained power through their weakness by exercising control over the even more marginalized enslaved woman's life.

The harsh reality of enslavement and the fight for abolition fueled the activist spirit of resistance in numerous women.

If Black women bore the terrible burden of equality in oppression, if they enjoyed equality with their men in their domestic environment, then they also

⁹ Sweetman, David. *Women Leaders in African History*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc, 1984, 91-97.

¹⁰ Gordon, Vivian Verdell. *Black Women, Feminism, and Black Liberation: Which Way?* Chicago: Third World Press, 1987, 30.

asserted their equality aggressively in challenging the inhuman institution of slavery.¹¹

Nanny Maroon, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth are some of the best-known female freedom fighters and served to inspire a tradition of resistance in plantations and maroon communities throughout the enslaved and colonized Diaspora. Drawing on her Ashanti heritage Nanny Maroon helped to establish an autonomous African community on the island of Jamaica, having formed her army composed of women leading fierce resistance against the British. In doing so she ensured the survival of indigenous African culture in the Americas and is revered and honored even today, being the only woman to hold the prestigious title of National Heroine in Jamaica.

In the historical perspective of Maroon oral tradition, she played the key role both in armed struggle against the colonial power and in founding the Maroon nation. In our time, however, her symbolic force covers a broader target group and reaches into social spheres that are directly linked in the confrontation between black and white.¹²

Harriet Tubman's work in the underground railroad was one of bravery and self-sacrifice; with every trip she took back to plantations to free her brothers and sisters she risked her own life, but she was never satisfied with her own freedom and felt that it was her duty and life's work to help others gain freedom. This sense of responsibility is the communal collective ethos that distinguishes the essence of the Africana womanist struggle. Even during the Civil War she worked on the front lines in dangerous acts of surveillance for the Union cause:

Working in South Carolina and other states, she organized slave intelligence networks behind enemy lines and led scouting raids. She also became the first and possibly the last woman to lead U.S. Army troops in battle.¹³

¹¹ Davis, Angela. *Women, Race and Class*. New York: Random House, 1981, 19.

¹² Zips, Werner. *Black Rebels: African Caribbean Freedom Fighters in Jamaica*. Jamaica: Randle Publishers Ltd., 2000, 154.

¹³ Bennett, Lerone. *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America, Sixth Edition*. New York: Penguin Press, 1993, 207.

Sojourner Truth was a northern enslaved woman who gained her freedom. Her dedication to the abolitionist movement led her to spend her life preaching her message of racial and sexual equality. Her experiences and her vivid oration were inspirational to audiences throughout the antebellum North, and she also participated in the Civil War effort supporting Union soldiers.¹⁴ Truth challenged the tradition of examining the plight of women only through the experience of White women and the tradition of viewing the oppression of the enslaved through the masculine model. In doing so she helped lay the groundwork for women such as Fannie Lou Hammer, Angela Davis and many more to follow.

During the course of Nat Turner's slave revolt, a revolutionary action that both captured the attention and simultaneously resulted in mass hysteria in the slave holding class, an enslaved woman by the name of Lucy Barrow was accused of conspiring to rebel and make insurrection. In court testimony it was revealed that her crime consisted of holding the hand of Mary T. Barrow (wife of the plantation owner) about one minute, which was interpreted by M. Barrow as an attempt to detain her during the revolt. After her conviction she was sentenced to death by hanging.¹⁵ Most of the women who participated in slave rebellions and abolition efforts will not be found named in history books, though there are accounts that they resisted and were even executed as early as 1708. Their acts of rebellion ranged from simple daily acts of sabotage on plantations¹⁶ to taking up arms alongside Black men in slave revolts, and there are several accounts of their execution alongside their men, occasionally

¹⁴ Gilbert, Olive. *Narrative of Sojourner Truth/Sojourner Truth*, unabridged. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1997, vi.

¹⁵ Greenberg, Kenneth ed. *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents*. Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 1996, 98-99.

¹⁶ Terborg-Penn, Rosalyn and Andrea Benton Rushing, eds. *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora: A Reader*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1997, 9.

more brutally.¹⁷ “On occasion, when men were hanged, the women were burned alive... terrorist methods designed to dissuade other black women from following the examples of their fighting sisters.”¹⁸ Beyond the abolitionist accomplishments, the Civil War effort had the ancillary effect of strengthening the nascent movement for women’s rights:

The demand for women’s rights had grown from the movement to abolish slavery; early white feminists had developed their program of full citizenship in concert with a vision of freedom for Afro-Americans, analogizing “the bonds of womanhood” to the bonds of slavery. Slavery’s defeat had encouraged hopes for momentous democratic change. “Out of this struggle we must come with higher ideas of liberty, the masses quickened with thought,” Elizabeth Stanton had exalted at the end of the war. “I have no misgivings as to the result.”¹⁹

However, later in the struggle for women’s suffrage the suffragettes abandoned solidarity with struggle for Black equality in their dedication to their own cause.²⁰

With the end of slavery came the possibility of new forms of activism, such as the formation of the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), and later Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).

...the National Association of Colored Women became the black woman’s primary vehicle for race leadership. Its members saw a set of interlocking problems involving race, gender, and poverty, not one of which could be dealt with independently. They believed that if they worked for the poor, they worked for black women, and if they worked for black women they worked for the race.²¹

¹⁷ Terborg-Penn, Rosalyn and Andrea Benton Rushing, eds. “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves” *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora: A Reader*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1997, 10-11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹ Morrison, Toni ed. *Race-ing Justice, Engendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the Construction of Social Reality*. Christine Tansell, contributor. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992, 252.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ White, Deborah Gray. *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves 1894-1994*. New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999, 24.

Issues such as repression of Black women by White society through sexual oppression became a focus of activists' efforts. During enslavement women had occasionally struck back with force at their White rapists such as the case of the enslaved woman Celia in Missouri, who, after years of molestation at the hands of her master, finally murdered him, choosing a definite death sentence over a lifetime riddled with sexual abuse.²² Ida B. Wells felt that in the post-enslavement era the discussion of sexual violence in this country must be redirected:

Wells, perhaps the first leader to broach the subject of black sexual oppression after slavery, and now completely challenged the periods' assumptions. Black men weren't rapists, white men were; black women weren't doing what nature prompted," white women were; Well's framework actually rescued both black and white women from their dehumanized objectification.²³

She not only fought for Black women, but for the community as a whole (upholding the tradition of the Africana communal ethos as discussed earlier) with her intensive work against lynching throughout the country after Reconstruction and into the early twentieth century. Many lynchings were executed under the guise of protecting White femininity from Black sexual violence. Ida B. Wells countered that "it was black women who needed protection"²⁴ as the denial of their sexual abuse was turning them into victims. Amy Jacques Garvey also worked within the UNIA for Black women's dignity and positive self-image, as she thought that "as long as sexual oppression hindered half the race, there could be no liberation for the race as a whole."²⁵ Anna Julia Cooper expounded on this reality in the broader societal context of the United States. She noted that for one race to hold itself superior to another in a country as

²² McLaurin, Melton A. *Celia A Slave: A True Story*. New York: Avon Books, 1991.

²³ Morrison, Toni ed. *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the Construction of Social Reality*. Christine Tansell, contributor. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992, 453.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁵ White, Deborah Gray. *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves 1894-1994*. New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999, 139.

diverse as the United States would be the downfall of the society, because the social equilibrium depends on a balance between “such conflicting forces and by so many and such strong fibred races as there are struggling in this soil.”²⁶

The Civil Rights era ushered in a new generation of female activists. These women ranged from young to old, affluent to poor, and college graduates to self-educated. They were active at every level of the movement, from leadership positions to protesters and to behind the scenes organizers who attended to the simple but vital aspects of campaigns and marches that made them possible:

... scan historical images of the most dramatic moments of the civil rights movement – protesters blasted by fire hoses and dogs lunging at blacks – and women and girls are everywhere.²⁷

Rosa Parks sparked what became known as the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's by initiating the Montgomery bus boycott, challenging segregation laws throughout the South. She was a longtime member of the Southern Christian Leadership Coalition (SCLC) and inspired Martin Luther King to become more active in the fight against segregation. She became affectionately known as the “mother of the Civil Rights Movement.” Ella Baker was well educated, well off, a member of the NAACP who worked in the background for voter registration, school integration, and electoral politics; she was a co-founder and mentor of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Fanny Lou Hamer, a poor Mississippi sharecropper's daughter, was an activist with a social vision, providing cross-generational inspiration. Like so many other women that came before her and who fought in the Civil Rights Movement, her sex afforded her no protection from police

²⁶ Cooper, Anna Julia. *A Voice from the South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, 167.

²⁷ “Women had key roles in civil rights movement: But few achieved prominence with public.” *Associated Press* October 29th, 2005. Online. www.msn.com.

violence. When arrested in Winona, Mississippi while she was traveling through on a voter freedom drive, Hamer joined countless Black women who had come before as she was brutally beaten and intimidated in prison both by White policemen and by Black prisoners who were intimidated and threatened into attacking her until she was black and blue and they were physically unable to continue.²⁸ She fought for Black representation at the 1964 Democratic Party convention, trying to get a vote for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Coretta Scott King, a Civil Rights activist before her marriage to Martin Luther King, became a leader in her own right after his assassination. She was an agent of cultural change, keeping his legacy alive through her efforts to have his birthday recognized as a national holiday and fighting for the recognition of Black culture in American history. She continued to advocate nonviolent revolution and spoke out strongly against unjust wars such as Vietnam and the second Iraq war. Betty Shabazz was another woman who was most prominently known for her marriage to another Black leader, Malcolm X. She carried his cause after his death and worked hard to mend the tear within the black community that resulted from his assassination. She also spoke throughout the country about the need for an educational system that truly cared about the educational success of young Black people. Betty Shabazz fought the stereotype of militancy that dogged the memory of her husband, instead advocating as he did self-respect, self-sufficiency and cultural pride within the Black community and internationally throughout the African Diaspora.

The record of activism among many women of the United States in the mid-twentieth century Black civil rights movement further challenges the

²⁸ Kai Lee, Chana. *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*. Chicago: University of Illinois, 1999, 51-52.

traditional Western position that only a few extraordinary women ever feel compelled to confront oppression directly.²⁹

Countless women, young and old, including many young members of SNCC, put their lives on the frontline in the fight against segregation, facing jail, fire hoses, beatings, and dogs alongside their male comrades.

While the proliferation of explicitly feminist organizations among White women cannot be denied, some of the earliest stirrings of an incipient gender consciousness can be found in the activities of Black women, especially those in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.³⁰

Meanwhile in South Africa, women were equally involved in the parallel battle against Apartheid. Winnie Mandela became a symbol of Black women's activism against this oppressive regime. Even White South Africans recognized her extraordinary heroism and power and tried to curtail her influence on her people. In telling of the events of her husband Nelson Mandela's trial resulting from his activism in the African National Congress (ANC), Winnie Mandela was quoted as saying

...I was banned from wearing my traditional dresses, it inspired people, it evoked militancy – but I was only allowed in court on condition that I never wore traditional dress. If I wanted to attend the trial, I had to conform.³¹

Even though she was banned from appearing in society for many years due to house arrest and imprisonment, she remained a source of inspiration and an illustration of Black female resistance to the Apartheid system.

Through the story of her own life we are able to read the story of many others. Her experience serves as a magnifying glass through which we are able to see important details of the experiences of others. She is a window through which even the most uninitiated eye is introduced to the obscure, twilight existence of

²⁹ Terborg-Penn, Rosalyn. "Black Women Freedom Fighters in South Africa and the United States: A comparative analysis." *Women and Revolution: Global Expressions*. Ed. M.J. Diamond. Norwell Massachusetts: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998, 173-174.

³⁰ Jones, Charles E., ed. *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]*. Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998, 273.

³¹ Benjamin, Anne. *Winnie Mandela: Part of My Soul Went With Him*. Adapted by Mary Benson. New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984, 87.

the banned and detained. Through her the invisible were made visible. She was the type of a personality whom the press and other publicity media could not afford to forget even in her many years of statutory silence and non-existence. That is why I say that she was a gift of God for us all. She was and is the incarnation of the black people's spirit.³²

Throughout the more than twenty-seven years that her husband was imprisoned, she remained politically active and prominent in the anti-Apartheid movement, rising to a leadership position within ANC. Winnie Mandela followed a long tradition of women's participation in the anti-Apartheid movement, which included such acts of resistance as refusing to carry the passbooks that the Apartheid government imposed upon all people of color within South Africa. To this day, she remains an influential figure within the African Diaspora.

These women clearly illustrate the truth that Black women as revolutionaries have been agents of change for hundreds of years, and are not merely the result of a modern White feminist movement. In fact, it can be argued that the suffrage and feminist movements of the last hundred and fifty years were directly inspired by the anti-slavery, civil rights, and Black Nationalist movements. Black women have always believed that their equality as women is inextricably intertwined with the fight for racial equality. The women we have discussed in this chapter, like the three women who are the focus of this thesis, carried on the tradition of resisting oppression and sacrificing self for the advancement of their people.

This thesis explores the theme of identity for Black women political activists on trial in the United States Criminal Justice System during the revolutionary era of Black empowerment in the late sixties and early nineteen seventies. Specifically, this thesis examines the trials of three Black women. For this reason it is important to

³² Benjamin, Anne. Winnie Mandela: *Part of My Soul Went With Him*. "A Tribute to Nomzamo Winnie Mandela." Adapted by Mary Benson. New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984, 21.

present and articulate the context that is necessary for a fundamental understanding of the organizations they were involved in and their historical context. This chapter also outlines the circumstances of their arrests, detainments, subsequent trials and/or time served because the following two chapters will refer frequently to these events.

The Black Panther Party and Historical Context

Afeni Shakur was the only woman who was an active member of the Black Panther Party at the time of her trial; this affiliation was directly tied to her arrest, trial and persecution that she endured. Although Angela Davis was not a member – for reasons to be discussed later – she was an active participant with the organization and was strongly affiliated with it during her trial. Assata Shakur joined the Panthers, was an active member prior to her trial, but at the time of her trial was a member of the Black Liberation Army. Because each one of these women is associated with the Party, a brief description of the organization is presented below.

The Black Panther Party for Self Defense was founded in the aftermath of the non-violent Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s. Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale of Oakland California founded it in September of 1966. The Panthers envisioned themselves as a nationalist community defense structure, to protect Oakland's Black communities from the frequent police brutality they endured. In the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Watts riots, this platform of self-defense gained large popularity among young Black urbanites who were looking for someone to carry on the revolutionary work of leaders such as Malcolm X. Ms. Evelyn Williams, Assata Shakur's aunt and lawyer, explains how she saw the feelings that had emerged from the younger African American community and resulted in the building of the Black Panther Party:

I understood when a new generation of African Americans grew impatient with years of theoretical progress, heralded when change occurred and discredited when no change resulted. I was not surprised when the Black Panther Party

rejected King's dream that guilt-ridden white Americans would share the benefits they had realized from institutional racism and when the party urged California Blacks to arm themselves for self-defense against continued police assault.³³

This generation of African Americans had grown up in cities that were supposedly integrated and still felt the sting of racism. They saw that the proclaimed desegregation did not help improve the situation, and lived with the realities of "northern" racism every day. They were tired of "turning the other cheek."

As the Black Panther Party grew it also began to adjust its scope and started to deal directly with issues of economic injustice in America. Panthers urged that a capitalistic government, such as that of the United States, would never feel a need to end racism. They articulated the Marxist theory of the ills of capitalism. This theory states that since the bourgeoisie benefits both politically and economically from the proletarians' unequal status, and since the bourgeoisie controls or has a strong influence on those in power, the government will not change policies that would benefit the proletarians at the economic detriment of the bourgeoisie, whose sole objective is accumulation of profit, no matter its destructive impact on the masses. Policy changes that would truly curtail racism in this country in turn would undermine the ruling class: in the case of the United States, the White majority and its oppressive and exploitative elite.

Black Panthers believed a more communal and socialist form of society would better benefit those oppressed by the White majority. In this spirit they offered a proactive alternative to the government that was not limited to the area of self-defense. The Party built community service programs that helped to educate communities about one of their best-known programs across the country that fed millions of children

³³ Williams, Evelyn. *Inadmissible Evidence: The Story of the African – American Trial Lawyer Who Defended the Black Liberation Army*. Brooklyn, New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1993, 73.

every day. Black Panther women became the driving force behind many of the movements social programs. To the women it was not just work; it was a position which directly gave back to the community. In the following excerpt from her autobiography, Assata Shakur describes how being involved in this work impacted her:

Working on the breakfast program turned out to be an absolute delight. The work was so fulfilling. The Harlem branch had breakfast programs in three different churches, and i rotated among all three. From the first day i saw those kids, my heart went out to them. They were such bright, open little people, each with his or her own personality.³⁴

The Black Panthers also supplied bags of groceries to single mothers and families in need. One of the other groundbreaking programs the Panthers set up was their medical cadre, which provided to the Black community and their own members health care services and education on health issues (such as sickle cell anemia), that strongly affect peoples of African descent. Afeni Shakur's co-defendant Joan Bird was one of the key people who ran the medical cadre in New York City. Huey Newton summed up the goals of the Black Panthers when he said the "purpose was to get Black people to organize their political strength in order to achieve their desires and needs."³⁵

Women in the Black Panther Party

This thesis deals with the portrayal of women and their experiences as revolutionary activists; because of this, it is important to give a critical look at the realities of women's roles and identities within the Black Panther Party. The Black Panther Party for Self Defense consisted of politically conscious people who ranged in age from teenagers to those in their early twenties; all of them were working toward improvement of their communities. The Party is often criticized in regard to gender

³⁴ Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, 219.

³⁵ Haskins, James. *Profiles in Black Power*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1972, 148-149.

issues and treatment of women within the party. From its inception, the Party decided women were going to be part of the movement, but ideas of what this role would be often differed from person to person and from the time when the Party was operational to critical assessment later. It is important to remember that although the doctrine or ideals of an organization may be one thing, ultimately the organization is made of people. In turn these people bring their own ideas, biases and values, and ultimately act upon them, although individuals' interpretation and positions must be distinguished from the institutional norms and ideals. Thus, in doing so they may project views that do not necessarily represent the ideals of their organization.

One also must take into account the time in which this movement evolved. Jim Haskin's book *Power to the People* described how issues of gender and sex were not isolated to the Black Panthers, and that these issues were prevalent throughout society and revolutionary movements of the 1960's:

The idea of women's equality was new in the radical movement, just as it was in other areas of the United States society. Among white radical groups, the top positions were also held by men. The Chicago Eight, a veritable Who's Who of radicals were all men.³⁶

Paradoxically some Black Panthers would define a woman's role as that of a confidant, a supporter, and a wife and mother, but not an assertive revolutionary, while many other Panthers believe that the Black Panthers should be a Party of comrades, and that sex and gender roles should not influence position. The later view more closely aligns itself ideologically with the ideals of a communal ethos that arises historically out of the Africana tradition discussed in the first section of this chapter. Women who participated in the movement consequently took different experiences

³⁶ Haskins, Jim. *Power to the People: The Rise and fall of the Black Panther Party*. New York: Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1997, 90.

with them. These experiences varied likewise amongst the women examined in this thesis, and will be further discussed in Chapter Four.

Women put their heart and soul into the movement, and just like the men in the party, they were persecuted for their dedication. From the beginning of the movement, police raids often involved the roughing up of Panther women and their arrest. The courts and government continued the process of oppression with unjust trials. One of the major propellers of these efforts was the head of the F.B.I., J. Edgar Hoover. Hoover was determined to undermine any group or person he believed could lead to Black people attaining equality and independence within this country, "... Hoover was engaged at least as early as 1918 in plans to destroy black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey under the guise of 'criminal proceedings'."³⁷ The Black Panther Party was his newest obsession in his effort to sabotage African American revolution. These efforts ranged in overt acts of oppression through arrests and detainments to more covert actions of infiltration, spying and campaigns to either discredit or neutralize the power of these movements with the Black community itself. In 1956 under Hoover's direction, COINTELPRO was instituted as a division of the F.B.I. Its sole mission was to investigate, discredit, disrupt, misdirect, and sabotage legitimate dissent by progressive political movements ranging from civil rights groups to Black power movements to anti-Vietnam War peace movements to the American Indian Movement and other groups viewed by mainstream governmental organizations as having a radical leftist agenda. The desired outcome was that these groups would become unable to function, thereby making them irrelevant and powerless. Hoover also hoped that this would carry over to the individual trials of Panthers and result in convictions and imprisonments of key members of the Party. These are the realities of

³⁷ Churchill, Ward and Jim Vander Wall. *The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars Against Domestic Dissent*. Boston: South End Press, 1990, 91.

all the three women whose experiences are analyzed in this thesis: Afeni Shakur, Angela Davis, and Assata Shakur. Now we will shift from the parties they were affiliated with and the historical context to the arrests, detainments, and trials of all three women.

Details of Arrest, Detainments, and Trials

1. Afeni Shakur

Afeni Shakur was the first of the three women to be taken into custody. On April 2, 1969 she was arrested along side her husband at their apartment in Harlem; Afeni was one of fifteen other “Panthers... arrested in a series of raids pursuant to a twelve-count indictment against a total of twenty-one members of the Black Panther Party. Bail was set for all defendants at \$100,000 [each].”³⁸

... the indictment declared, they had executed dynamite attacks on four police stations in the fall of 1968 and the winter of 1969 and had thereafter planned to bomb a commuter railroad’s Queen’s right-of-way, the Bronx Botanical Gardens, and the [Easter] shopping crowds in... Macy’s, Alexander’s, Bloomingdale’s, Abercrombie & Fitch, and Korvette’s...³⁹

After an extensive bail campaign headed by feminist activists, Afeni Shakur, along with her only other female co-defendant Joan Bird, was released on bail on January 31, 1970. By then she had been jailed for over nine months. The pre-trial hearings began in February:

After a series of courtroom disruptions and warnings to the defendants by State Supreme Court Judge John M. Murtagh, pretrial hearings were halted for an indefinite period, unprecedented in the history of the judicial system. After a

³⁸ Balgoon, Kuwasi, Joan Bird, Cetewayo, Robert Collier, Dharuba, Richard Harris, Ali Bay Hassan, Jamal, Abayama Katara, Kwando Kinshasa, Bab Odinga, Shaba Ogun Om, Curtis Powell, Afeni Shakur, Lumumba Shakur, and Clark Squire. *Look for Me in the Whirlwind: The Collective Autobiography of the New York 21*. New York: Random House, 1971, 363.

³⁹ Kempton, Murray. *The Briar Patch: The People of the Sate of New York v. Lumumba Shakur et. al.* New York: E.P. Dutton Co., 1973, 14.

one-month recess, Judge Murtagh received into the court's record a 24-page manifesto written by the defendants and pretrial hearings were resumed.⁴⁰

The actual trial, however, would not even begin jury selection until the 8th of September 1970. Collectively, the New York 21 faced thirty-two different criminal counts including conspiracy to commit murder, attempted murder, conspiracy, and conspiracy to bomb private, public and government buildings mentioned previously. Afeni Shakur opted to defend herself instead of being represented by counsel chosen by other members of the Party. On February 3, 1971 Joan Bird and Afeni's bail was revoked when their co-defendant's Jamal, Dharuba and Cetewayo failed to show up for court. "Afeni Shakur, who was now about five months' pregnant...remain[ed] in jail until shortly before the verdict."⁴¹ Throughout the trial the defense tried to get all of the charges dismissed, which the judge denied, but he did reduce the charges during the trial "... before the defense summations began on April 20, 1970, he did dismiss twelve out of the thirty charges."⁴² On May 13th, 1970 Judge Murtagh instructed the jury to deliberate and submit a verdict:

After nine months, the jury in the New York 21 Conspiracy case returned after ninety minutes of deliberation and acquitted all thirteen... defendants on all 156 remaining counts from the previous to indictments.⁴³

All in all, Afeni Shakur had been held in jail for two years of her life on unsubstantiated charges.

⁴⁰ Balgoon, Kuwasi, Joan Bird, Cetewayo, Robert Collier, Dharuba, Richard Harris, Ali Bay Hassan, Jamal, Abayama Katara, Kwando Kinshasa, Bab Odinga, Shaba Ogun Om, Curtis Powell, Afeni Shakur, Lumumba Shakur, and Clark Squire. *Look for Me in the Whirlwind: The Collective Autobiography of the New York 21*. New York: Random House, 1971, 363.

⁴¹ Zimroth, Peter L. *Perversion of Justice: The Prosecution and Acquittal of the Panther 21*. New York: Viking Press, 1974, 205.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 297.

⁴³ Balgoon, Kuwasi, Joan Bird, Cetewayo, Robert Collier, Dharuba, Richard Harris, Ali Bay Hassan, Jamal, Abayama Katara, Kwando Kinshasa, Bab Odinga, Shaba Ogun Om, Curtis Powell, Afeni Shakur, Lumumba Shakur, and Clark Squire. *Look for Me in the Whirlwind: The Collective Autobiography of the New York 21*. New York: Random House, 1971, 364.

2. Angela Davis

In the summer of 1970, Angela Davis joined in the ranks of Black women activists such as Afeni Shakur, Joan Bird and Erika Huggins determined to change the realities of racial status in America. On August 7th, Jonathan Jackson, the younger brother of Panther prison activist, George Jackson, attempted to take over the court room of Judge Haley at the Marin County Superior court. A shootout occurred and resulted in the deaths of Jonathan Jackson, Judge Haley, and several court officials, along with injuries to other officers of the court and the imprisoned Ruchell Magee.

George Jackson was serving a sentence of one year to life in prison at the Soledad Prison for stealing seventy dollars from a gas station. He was repeatedly denied parole and persecuted because of his political activism and involvement with the Black Panther Party, which he became involved with after being imprisoned. While serving his sentence he also authored the autobiography *Soledad Brothers*, which exposed the terrible conditions of imprisonment in this country and examined issues of race, class and oppression in American society.

Prior to the shootout Angela Davis had forged a strong friendship with George Jackson, supporting and encouraging his political activity. Angela Davis was immediately associated with the incident because of her political activity, association with the Communist Party and the Black Panther Party, and connection to George Jackson and his family. This was despite the fact that she was neither in the area during the incident nor part of the planning process and there was no evidence to indicate that she was. The state's only real evidence was that one of the guns used in the shootout was registered to Angela Davis who had purchased it a few years earlier. It was also clear that the weapon was not held in a secure place and anyone could have had access to it. "At 6:50pm on Friday August 14th a warrant was issued for the arrest

of Angela Yvonne Davis. She was charged with aggravated kidnapping and first degree murder in the death of Judge Harold Haley.⁴⁴

Angela Davis immediately went underground in August 1970. “Davis became a wanted fugitive in the aftermath of Jon Jackson’s failed Marin County Courtroom siege.”⁴⁵ After nearly two months on the run, in October of 1970 she was captured by the FBI in New York City and charged with conspiracy, accessory to Jonathan Jackson’s siege on the courthouse, kidnapping and murder. The State of California moved for the immediate extradition of Angela Davis from New York, but she fought this. While she awaited a decision by the courts, she was housed in the New York Women’s House of Detention.

On December 21, 1970 Angela Davis was extradited to California to face charges of murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy, as well as of fleeing to avoid prosecution. In the early morning of Tuesday, December 22nd, 1970, with no warning or information given to Angela Davis:

[She] was driven to an air force base in New Jersey. A National Guard plane sat on the runway. It was surrounded by soldiers with fixed bayonets. She was put on the plane. She was now in the custody of the Marin County Sheriff’s Department.⁴⁶

Davis would remain in their custody without the possibility of bail. On August 21st, 1971 George Jackson was shot in the back by prison guards in the yard of San Quentin Prison. Not only had Angela Davis lost another one of her comrades to government brutality, she lost a confidant and personal friend.

⁴⁴ Aptheker, Bettina. *The Morning Breaks: The Trial of Angela Davis, Second Edition*. Ithaca, New York/London: Cornell University Press, 1975/1997, 21.

⁴⁵ Perkins, Margo V. *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties*. Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2000, 2.

⁴⁶ Aptheker, Bettina. *The Morning Breaks: The Trial of Angela Davis, Second Edition*. Ithaca, New York/London: Cornell University Press, 1975/1997, 25.

In the fall of 1971 a change of venue was granted because it was determined that Angela Davis could not get a fair trial in Marin County. She was moved from the Marin County Jail to the Santa Clara Jail because the new venue was San Jose. It would be almost a year before her legal team would be successful in their fight to get bail set for her. On Wednesday, February 23rd, 1972, Angela Davis was set free on \$102,500 bail. On February 28th, 1972, over a year after her initial arrest, Angela Davis's trial began. After two years with Davis on the run, in jail, and on trial, the final arguments in the case were given, and on the morning of Friday, June 2nd, 1972, the case went to the jury. Within two days, the jury came back with a "not guilty" verdict on all counts.

3. Assata Shakur

Assata Shakur is the third selected woman from the ranks of liberation fighters within the Criminal Justice System to be discussed in this thesis. Assata Shakur was an active member of the Black Liberation Army (BLA). The Black Liberation Army was a political group whose members were comprised mostly of former Black Panthers. The group had formed after the East versus West Coast split that occurred within the Black Panther Party due to Huey Newton's mistrust of Eldridge Cleaver's power and status amongst the New York chapters of the party. The BLA formed on the belief that not only was the Panther Party falling apart, it had lost sight of its goals and put too much emphasis on alliances with White radicals, and was not an effective liberation organization any more. Although the mainstream media would claim Assata was the leader of the BLA at the time of her arrest, she never claimed this status.

Assata Shakur was forced underground in 1971 because of numerous allegations of criminal activity, which resulted in a government manhunt for her. It would be two years before her family or the nation would see her again.

While operating underground, Shakur first garnered national attention on May 2, 1973, when she and two other BLA activists, Zayd Shakur and Sundiata Acoli, were violently apprehended by the state troopers as they traveled on the New Jersey Turnpike. One state trooper, Werner Forester, and Zayd Shakur were killed in the incident; Shakur herself was seriously wounded.⁴⁷

Evelyn Williams, the aunt of Assata Shakur, describes how she heard of Assata's confrontation with the police and the subsequent arrest that would lead to her internationally known case:

... I heard the news flash at about 1:30 in the morning of May 2, 1973. There had been a shoot-out on the New Jersey Turnpike involving two state troopers and the three people traveling south in a white Pontiac. One passenger and one state trooper were dead. One had escaped and a woman was seriously wounded and captured. No names were given, but I knew it was Joey. [Assata Shakur, whose given name was JoAnne]⁴⁸

Assata Shakur had sustained life-threatening injuries that forensic scientists would later prove made it physically impossible for her to have shot the New Jersey State trooper that she was accused of killing. Subsequently the government denied her proper healthcare; for years afterwards she would not have full use of her arm due to the gunshot wounds.

The moment she was arrested in New Jersey, a hailstorm of charges and indictments were brought before the courts. Apparently, all branches of the court system wanted to try her immediately and simultaneously for the crimes they accused her of committing. In New York State, she was accused of an armed bank robbery of the Hilton Hotel in New York City that took place April 5th, 1971, of a bank robbery in Queens on August 23rd, 1971 and one in the Bronx on September 1st, 1972, of kidnapping a drug dealer on December 28th, 1972, of the murder of a drug dealer on

⁴⁷ Perkins, Margo V. *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties*. Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2000.

⁴⁸ Williams, Evelyn. *Inadmissible Evidence: The Story of the African – American Trial Lawyer Who Defended the Black Liberation Army*. Brooklyn, New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1993, 74.

January 2nd, 1973, and of the attempted murder and ambush of policemen on January 23rd, 1973. In New Jersey she was accused of murdering a state trooper on the New Jersey Turnpike the night of May 2nd, 1973.⁴⁹

Every court system seemed to think it had more of a right to try her than the net one, and each wanted the opportunity to be the first to do so. What resulted was the following schedule: On July 20th, 1973, Assata Shakur was arraigned on the Queens bank robbery charges. (The actual trial would not begin until January 5th, 1976, and would last a mere 11 days, ending in acquittal on January 16th, 1976.) On August 1st, 1973, she was arraigned on the Bronx bank robbery charges, and this time the trial would actually get under way the year she was arraigned. This trial would again be a relatively brief one, dating from December 3rd to 14th, 1973, resulting in a hung jury; the prosecution insisted on an immediate retrial, which was held from December 19th to the 28th, 1973, and this trial resulted in an acquittal. On May 30th, 1974, Assata Shakur was arraigned on the charges of kidnapping a drug dealer. The subsequent trial would begin on September 6th, 1975 and end once again in acquittal on December 19th, 1975. Although she was arraigned on the charges of attempted murder of the policemen on May 11th, 1974, and the murder of the drug dealer on May 29th, 1974, these cases would be dismissed before they got to trial.

As it turned out, Assata Shakur's case involving that night on the turnpike would not truly begin until January 15th, 1977, nearly four years after she was first arrested by the New Jersey State Troopers. The original trial began on October 9th, 1973, but due to the fact that the jury was overwhelmingly sympathetic to the prosecution, it quickly came to a close when a defense request for a change of venue was granted on October 23rd, 1973. The trial resumed again on January 1st, 1974, and

⁴⁹ Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, xiv.

would continue for one month, until February 1st, 1974, when a mistrial was called in light of Assata's pregnancy. On January 1st, 1977, the trial began once again. This time, it ended in conviction on March 25th, 1977. Upon her conviction she was sent to Yardville Prison, "an all-male institution in which a female prisoner had never been incarcerated... On February 20th, 1979, Assata was returned to New Jersey and placed in the maximum-security unit at Clinton Correctional Institution for Women."⁵⁰ On November 2nd, 1979, Assata claimed her own independence: at 3:30 P.M. "[a] news flash crackled over the radio and interrupted TV programs; Assata had escaped from the Clinton Correctional Institution for Women and a nationwide hunt for her was under way."⁵¹ It would be nearly five years before either her family or the nation would hear from Assata Shakur. In August of 1984, Assata Shakur shared with the world that she had found political asylum in Cuba. To this day she lives there under constant threat of being kidnapped by the United States government, but nonetheless freer than she ever was in America.

All in all Assata Shakur spent nearly four years in and out of court and constantly in jail. In this time she experienced temporary loss of her arm and voice, severe beatings, sexual violence, and overall maltreatment. She also gave birth to a baby girl, whose presence would brighten her life; but she would be unable to spend more than a few days with her after her birth. After her unexpected conviction she endured two and a half more years of imprisonment before she could breathe free again. Of all the women discussed in this thesis, she would be the only one to receive a guilty verdict from one of the numerous charges brought against her, and is the only one who remains one of "America's Most Wanted" to this day.

⁵⁰ Williams, Evelyn. *Inadmissible Evidence: The Story of the African – American Trial Lawyer Who Defended the Black Liberation Army*. Brooklyn, New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1993, 163-165.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 166.

This chapter has helped to outline the events and timelines that shaped the political persecution of the women under consideration. It has also given a brief overview of the organizations that they were so dedicated to that they were treated as national threats. As the next two chapters explore the perception of these women's identities first by the courts and mainstream American society and next the ideas of self through analysis of the women's own writings, this chapter functions as a compass with which one can navigate the tale of each woman.

CHAPTER 3

OUTSIDE PERSPECTIVES

Black women face many difficulties and forms of discrimination when their political activity brings them into contact with the judicial system. Not only do they encounter the discrimination that all people of African descent face in the American court system, but they also experience a dual form of discrimination, based on race and gender, that is unique unto its self. It is directly related to the fact that not only are they Black and female, but they dare to oppose the system that oppresses them and their people by taking part in effective political action.

There are three aspects of this discrimination. One is the fact that as women, these political activists do not command the same level of attention and coverage as their male counterparts do in the media. The second and third aspects of this discrimination are intertwined: two contradictory but inseparable judgments of femininity dedicated to the denigration of Black women. One is based on Black women's perceived weakness and the other on their strength.

The White cultural arbiters – attorneys, reporters, politicians – shaped and built these Black women's identities/images during the arrest and trial process. This image-building touched on the cultural, political, and revolutionary identity of these women, and helped determine how they were dealt with during trial and (in some cases) subsequent imprisonment. Like many Eurocentric notions of identity regarding the “other,” (here Black women) image-building was used to persecute, oppress and suppress those with ideas contrary to the majority ethos, stability of the dominant White government and society in this country. As Patricia Hill Collins states,

Institutions, paradigms, and other elements of the knowledge validation procedure controlled by the elite white men constitute the Eurocentric

masculinist knowledge validation process. The purpose of this process is to represent a white male standpoint.⁵²

In these cases, the process of defining the other as outsider was used to further White society's standpoint regarding acceptable behavior for Black women. This view discounts the validity of those motivated by unacceptable circumstances that make it necessary for them to fight against the values, culture, and governmental systems of this country and society. The process of having the oppressor take part in the image building that exacerbates one's oppression is the focus of this chapter.

I referred earlier to one aspect of this discrimination in regard to the media's reporting and interpretation of court cases. Oftentimes when a case involves a Black woman and a Black man on trial for the same "crime," the male defendant(s) seem to garner much more attention in the news media than do the female co-defendant(s). Although this phenomenon is illustrated to the greatest extent in the media, it also affects the way in which and to what degree scholarly work is written about these women. Even though much of the mainstream work negatively portrays Black liberation fighters, it does bring attention to the men in the movements. In contrast, it is relatively difficult to find any information, outside of newspaper articles (which have already been discussed as problematic), that directly pertains to or documents the case of the women who were co-defendants with the men. If the articles do mention a woman, it is often to merely document her presence in the trial, not her political importance or any other relevant information that emphasizes her. This clearly illustrates the fact that mainstream media and society place much more importance on the experience of men, and how it affects society than on that of women. This is especially true when the women are of African descent.

⁵² Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Rutledge, 2000: 203.

Next, a dual attack on feminine weakness and unfeminine strength was used to shape the identity and image of these women. In order to be successful in oppressing the Black woman, and suppressing her voice, these forms of discrimination must be viewed in an interconnected manner. One of the first aspects of this type of sexism/racism is treating Black women as infantile or overly susceptible to emotions that are illogical or unworthy of respect. This is often applied to all women, regardless of race, when they are involved in situations that the larger society deems to be outside of the female paradigm. Political resistance, unless it is just passive, is one of these realms that are considered to be outside of the “boarders” of femininity.

An example of this image building around the “inherent” weakness of all women is provided in the way the prosecution shaped the image of Angela Y. Davis in her Marin County trial. She was alleged to have participated in the attempt to free George Jackson and the Soledad Brothers from prison. The prosecution claimed that Angela Davis was acting or reacting to her feelings for George Jackson when she was “convinced” to take part in this plan. In essence, they were arguing that Angela Davis would not have the intelligence to choose to partake in or abstain from events that involved someone they identified as her “lover.” They argued this point to imply that she would not be able to distinguish her emotional attachments and desire to help the one she loved from her sense of what was right and wrong. By advancing this argument, the prosecution shaped her image as that of an irrational and emotional woman. They argued that such a woman was unpredictable, emotionally unstable, and illogical, thereby portraying Angela Davis as a danger to society: she was apt to act on emotions whether or not this would result in harm to others, rather than going through a logical thought process. This is a dis-empowering view because it claims that it is her nature to be this way, i.e. that a woman cannot help but be overly emotional and have no real sense of right and wrong when making decisions that have monumental

consequences. The media implicitly denied that this was their gender perception of her, rather than a quality inherent to her sex and race, as they argued.

This image built by the prosecution also over-sexualizes Angela Davis' relationship with George Jackson, giving no value to the fact that they had a relationship based on equality of intellect, shared ideological positions, and political activism. Nonetheless, whether or not she was involved with him is of no relevance to how she would or did behave. If a man were charged with aiding and abetting the escape of a woman, it is unlikely that a prosecutor would argue that he was too emotional or illogical, or overwhelmed with sexual desire and therefore unable to make thoughtful decisions.

A man would most likely be charged as a militant and an overtly political individual. Although this is an insulting image, it validates that a man is capable of taking part in political activities on his own terms: not because someone he cares about is involved, or he has been convinced by others to take part in the execution of a plan that they designed, but because his own logical thought process led him to believe it was a viable and important action. The prosecution brought the relationship of Davis and Jackson to the forefront of their case by portraying it as her supposed motivation to break the law. They established an image of her as a woman controlled by lust or other "primitive" emotions, having no thought process of her own and susceptible to "radical" outside influences.

This completely contradicts the fact that even by mainstream standards, Angela Davis was an intelligent, educated woman who not only had attended college, but also had earned a Ph.D. in philosophy. She had traveled abroad in France, where her intellectual and political positions were reinforced, acknowledged, and admired across the globe; and prior to her trial was a professor within the University of California system. The prosecution ignored the fact that she had consistently believed in and

advocated the values and implications of George Jackson's political voice. This view degrades her not only as a woman, but also as a political activist and the scholar that she is and was at the time.

Toni Cade, in the book *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, discusses in the chapter "On the Issues of Roles," this concept of where women "belong" in our society:

Generally speaking, in a capitalist society a man is expected to be an aggressive, uncompromising, factual, lusty, intelligent provider of goods, and the woman, a retiring, gracious, emotional, intuitive, attractive consumer of goods. The move for centuries has been to render her a subordinate being, a background figure, to regard her as a self-sacrificing mother, a loving wife, a generous sex mate, a passive, retiring, physically delicate, not too bright but oft times devious and cunning member of the household, teaching profession, or secretary pool; one who needs constant protection and guidance, for she has a lascivious nature that must be curbed; one who is not capable of major economic, political, or social decisions other than choosing Del Monte over Brand X; one who is not capable of serious artistic or creative contributions other than blowing up like Moby Dick and dropping squalling babies; one who risks mental derangement or at least emotional imbalance or "unfemininity" should she elect a profession that puts her in competition with men or should she be crazy enough to fashion herself a life as something other than the appendage of some man. If the shamans of this culture, the writers and dramatists, are anything to go by – she is either a marketable virgin or a potential whore, but certainly the enemy of men.⁵³

In the context of the racist discrimination that was discussed before this excerpt, it is evident that Black women political activists are attributed to have many of these characteristics or properties, especially the more negative ones. Although it is extremely arguable whether any of these qualities could be viewed as positive, this aspect will be explored in a later part of the chapter. Those of being unintelligent and easily swayed are illustrated by White male society's depiction of Black Women as pawns in the Black revolution. This discounts the possibility that these women are participating to free their minds and lives from the repression of the state just as are

⁵³ Cade, Toni, ed. *The Black Women: An Anthology*. New York: Signet, A Mentor Book: New American Library, Inc., 1970, 102

their Black brothers. The image is painted that they are doing it for a man, e.g., Angela did it for George.

The voice of the dominant culture tries to destroy the image of woman's intelligent, assertive, autonomous, and involved role in the revolution and replace it with a fabricated and weak image. It paints half the participants (women) of the "threatening" Black revolutionary movements as unwitting members who would just as soon join a women's league if that would ensure their Black men's attention or close proximity to them. In other words, Black women will do just about anything, no matter what the consequences or implications, if that guarantees them intimate time with, and attention from, the opposite sex. Angela Davis directly confronted this process of negative image building at the end of her trial when she counteracted the prosecution's image of her in the following statement:

Now he will have you believe that I am a person who would commit the crimes of murder, kidnapping and conspiracy, having been motivated by pure passion. He would have you believe that lurking behind my external appearance are sinister and selfish emotions and passions, which, in his words, know no bounds. Members of the jury, this is utterly fantastic. It is utterly absurd. Yet it is understandable that Mr. Harris would like to take advantage of the fact that I am a woman, for in this society women are supposed to act only in accordance with the dictates of their emotions and passions. I might say that this is clearly a symptom of the male chauvinism which prevails in our society.⁵⁴

In other words patriarchal White society is based on an assumption that emotion is weakness and strength is devoid of feeling. Only in this context is it a problem to combine compassion and conviction.

The second half of the excerpt from Toni Cade's article in the book *The Black Woman: An Anthology* addresses the third aspect of discrimination that Black women face in the criminal justice system as political activists. This is the portrayal of Black

⁵⁴ Davis, Angela. *Women Race and Class*. New York: Random House, 1981: 363.

women as “unfeminine” and overly aggressive, therefore overstepping their boundaries of womanhood according to society’s limited view of women’s roles. The prosecution relied heavily on this image during the cases of Assata Shakur versus the State of New York (for bank robberies and acts of terrorism) and Assata Shakur versus the State of New Jersey (when she was accused of shooting a New Jersey State trooper). The prosecution framed her as a woman out of control. They claimed she was overly aggressive and violent and tried to instill fear of her in the jury. The criminal justice system began this campaign before Assata Shakur was even apprehended on the New Jersey Turnpike.

On August 23, 1971, a Queens, New York, bank was robbed. Joey and others were wanted for questioning, and the bank surveillance photo became a permanent fixture in every teller’s window in every bank in the city. It was enlarged and mounted on the walls of subway stations. The poster displayed three rows of alleged bank robbers, six photographs to a line. The only woman in the lineup wore thick-rimmed glasses beneath a high hairdo pulled tightly above her head, and held a firmly pointed gun. While the names of none of the others were given, this strange-looking person was identified in large print as JoAnne Chesimard. The same poster was used in full-page ads, prominently inserted between important newspaper stories and paid for by the New York Clearing house association, a bank conglomerate.⁵⁵

Not only was this aggressive campaign to paint her as an unsavory character, but also it clearly compromised the impartiality of a jury pool and her chances to receive a fair trial in the tri-state area under such conditions.

The criminal justice system also neglected to acknowledge many images of Assata that would make the jury realize that she was a woman like any other. Buy over-“masculinizing” her identity they distanced her from a standard of femininity defined by mainstream societal criteria. In doing so they portrayed her as a woman who was undeserving of the treatment that other women – White – women could

⁵⁵ Williams, Evelyn. *Inadmissible Evidence: The Story of the African – American Trial Lawyer Who Defended the Black Liberation Army*. New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1993, 4-5.

expect. In an effort to keep the negative image of her intact for the jury, the prosecution barely touched on the fact that she became a mother during the trial, as they were reluctant to have the jury view her as anything but a hard-core criminal. In fact, the trial during which she was pregnant was ruled a mistrial, and the prosecution didn't retry her for nearly three years. The image of expectant mother and new mother was one that they fought hard to distance from their created image of "JoAnne Chesimard." They insisted on calling her by her European name even though she had changed it. Treating her new name as insignificant was also important because it was yet another step in robbing her of her right to shape her own image and identity.

Ms. Evelyn Williams, J.D., in her book *Inadmissible Evidence: The Story of the African – American Trial Lawyer Who Defended the Black Liberation Army*, describes how even before Assata's arrest and trial the law enforcement agencies began building their image of Assata Shakur for the public. They painted her as a dangerous and threatening woman, and made sure that this image of her was not forgotten.

It was the spring of 1973 and for the last two years the nationwide dragnet for her capture had intensified each time a young African American identified as a member of the BLA was arrested or wounded or killed. The Joint Terrorist Task Force issued daily bulletins predicting her imminent apprehension each time another bank had been robbed or another cop had been killed. Whenever there was a lull in such occurrences, they leaked information, allegedly classified as "confidential," to the media, repeating past accusations and flashing her face across the television screens and newspapers with heartbeat regularity, lest the public forget.⁵⁶

This was an effective and necessary tactic in further oppressing Assata Shakur and guaranteeing that she would be seen not as a person or more specifically as a woman, but as a menacing danger to society who was likely to continue destroying the stability

⁵⁶ Williams, Evelyn. *Inadmissible Evidence: The Story of the African – American Trial Lawyer Who Defended the Black Liberation Army*. New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1993, 4-5.

of White American society. Later on in her trial, this same image would be called upon again to emphasize the “threat she posed.” The constructed image of Assata Shakur was one of an individual who deviated from the norm, someone whom society desperately needed protection from.

Similarly, women of the Black Panther Party were treated as menacing threats requiring a violent response. Being a woman affiliated with the Black Panthers did not make one any less of a target than a man for violent acts by the F.B.I., the local police, and prison administrations. The Criminal Justice System commonly abused female activists of African descent. One of the first cases of abuse to catch a considerable degree of attention was the case of Joan Bird who was Afeni Shakur’s co-defendant in the New York 21 trial. The following statement is an account of her treatment when she was taken into custody on the night of January 17th, 1969:

One of the police told me “to crawl out of the car, bitch” ... McKenzie and another dragged me by my arms, while on the ground on my back. McKenzie then with a short black club beat me across my face and head... I became dizzy... My mouth was bleeding... They put handcuffs on me and turned me over face down... my hands cuffed behind me... they began to kick me and walk on my back and legs.⁵⁷

As they detained her, they continued to abuse her and began to talk about killing her and dumping her body in the park. Once they were at the police station they verbally threatened her. One of the police officers told her, “I will throw you out the window and it will look like a suicide... [and] I will stick this size 10 up your cunt until it comes out of your throat if you don’t stop bullshitting.”⁵⁸ In efforts to make her plead guilty to conspiracy charges in a situation that was obviously under duress, they continued to beat her up. At one point, “The pigs dangled her by the ankles from a

⁵⁷ Seale, Bobby and Elaine Brown, eds. “Student Nurse Tortured” *The Black Panther Paper*, 17 February 1969. Oakland, California: Independently Published by the Black Panther Party for Self Defense of Oakland, California, 1967 – 1971, 9.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

third floor window, and told her she'd 'hit the pavement' if she didn't give the details of the 'conspiracy.' [As a result,] (Her ankle was sprained in the process.)”⁵⁹ The next day when she appeared in court, her friend said “that she was the victim of ‘one of the most brutal beatings imaginable.’”⁶⁰ It was said that you could see the severity of her bruises and cuts all the way from the back of the courtroom: she had a “swollen eye, severely bruised forehead, swollen lip, and numerous cuts and bruises.”⁶¹ Only after twenty-six hours of abusive treatment was she finally arraigned on any charges.

These two forms of racist and sexist constructed images contradict each other in ways, but both serve the purpose of “dis-empowering” Black women and oppressing them. In essence, it is the contradiction that makes this method most effective. The first form of the image building extrapolates all the negative characteristics associated in White dominant culture with women, such as weakness, emotional obsession and extremely illogical thought processes. It then combines these attributes with the second racist and sexist aspect of image building. This aspect further erodes the portrait of Black women by painting them as individuals who live outside of the culturally accepted borders of womanhood. It constructs an image of people whose behavior is not the behavior that society expects and accepts of women.

One may ask, how does an oppressive force use both characteristics together to persecute the Black woman, i.e. shaping the Black woman's identity around how female she is at the same time as building it around what an anomaly she is to the female gender? This is the plight of Black/African-American women. The White

⁵⁹ Seale, Bobby and Elaine Brown, eds. “Student Nurse Tortured” *The Black Panther Paper*, 17 February 1969. Oakland, California: Independently Published by the Black Panther Party for Self Defense of Oakland, California, 1967 – 1971, 9.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Seale, Bobby and Elaine Brown, eds. “Female Panther Tortured” *The Black Panther Paper*, 2 February 1969. Oakland, California: Independently Published by the Black Panther Party for Self Defense of Oakland, California, 1967 – 1971, 7.

male-dominant society does this by selecting the most negative qualities from womanhood and combining them with the least acceptable identities for a woman to take on. As a result, the image that is constructed is a paragon of what a woman should not be. This makes it easy for a jury or the judicial system as a whole to distance itself from these women and draw no correlation with themselves, their daughters, mothers, sisters, wives, etc. They do not have to identify with the women whose lives will be directly affected by the decisions they reach if they view them as this created image, rather than as human beings.

In essence, femininity is only applied to the Eurocentric image of Black women when it is conveniently devastating; and the protection of it is denied when it would be sympathetic and useful. Sojourner Truth eloquently illustrated this point in her historic speech “Aren’t I a Woman.”⁶² The image is applied when it signifies inability to make decisions in a logical framework and emphasizes emotional imbalance and irrational behavior. When the feminine image implies that society needs to protect women because they are mothers, daughters, etc. with an attendant emotional “instability” that makes them unable to endure the same treatment as men, the framework is ignored. Ironically, the whole framework is negative to women; but it has worked to the advantage of White women in many instances, and worked effectively for the destruction of Black women. In several legal matters regarding White women revolutionaries in the courts, the same images of irrational behavior and actions were portrayed to the criminal justice system. In the case of the Black women considered in this paper, these images were used to oppress them and paint them as criminals. But with White defendants, the tactics were used as a protective defense to

⁶² Gilbert, Olive. *Narrative of Sojourner Truth/Sojourner Truth*. Unabridged. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 1997, v-vi.

explain away and forgive political actions and involvement in areas of life deemed “undesirable” for White women in society.

Black women have been barred from using the defense of femininity because they have never been looked at as truly “feminine” in this culture. At the same time, these Black women have been persecuted through this same weak image of femininity. Patricia Hill Collins discusses this contradiction of available and unavailable weaknesses that can be used about Black women in society as a whole, and how they are not there for the use of anyone but those that construct them, in this case the White man. The contradictions are used only to protect his interests and to oppress anyone that questions or endangers the survival of a system that benefits him.

As members of a subordinate group, Black women cannot afford to be fools of any type, for our objectification as the Other denies us the protections that White skin, maleness, and wealth confer. This distinction between knowledge and wisdom, and the use of experience as the cutting edge dividing them, has been key to Black women’s survival. In the context of intersecting oppressions, the distinction is essential. Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate.⁶³

From this statement, it can be surmised that the use of any aspect of women’s image produced by the Eurocentric elite and dominate society has to be avoided when dealing with the situation of the Black woman in America as a whole, and arguably especially within the criminal justice system. To use a constructed image that comes from the oppressor, even when some aspects appear to have positive implications, is to set up a framework in which this image will be used to oppress the user who is a member of the “subordinate” group in this Eurocentric societal paradigm.

The issues of womanism in these cases are extremely important, but feminism, as constructed by White women, is not useful. Feminism does not acknowledge other

⁶³ Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2000, 257.

socially significant factors that define identity, such as race and class. Generally, Black women traditionally have rejected the concepts and ideals of White feminism.

Feminism, a term conceptualized and adopted by White women, involves an agenda that was designed to meet the needs and demands of that particular group. For this reason, it is quite plausible for White women to identify with feminism and the feminist movement. Having said that, the fact remains that placing all women's history under White women's history, thereby giving the latter a definitive position, is problematic. In fact, it demonstrates the ultimate of racist arrogance and domination, suggesting that authentic activity of women resides with White women.⁶⁴

As well, White women have refused to acknowledge that Black women have had different and additional battles to fight, and sometimes the most important ones are not fought against Black men. In fact, many Black women see no reason to align themselves with White women against their own men. White women represent more of an oppressive force for Black women and men, than does sexually based oppression that Black women face from Black men. This is because White women are themselves part of the power structure, and have helped to keep women of color oppressed throughout the ages. Black women fight not only sexism, but also a power system in America that does not recognize the Black woman as an American woman. The government has also seen the population of Black women as a threat in the United States. White women are not viewed as un-American or as a threat, and in fact are protected by this same power system.

White women are not just passively part of the power structure, they have actively engaged in processes of silencing Black women. The White feminist movement in America "came of age in a way that alienated Black Women..."⁶⁵ And in the case of Angela Davis, the movement denied that her issues were even relevant

⁶⁴ Hudson-Weems, Clenora. *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*. Troy, Michigan: Bedford Publishers, Inc., 1993, 21.

⁶⁵ Giddings, Paula. *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1984, 305.

to the feminist fight for equality. A Black woman wishing to show solidarity with the NOW (National Organization of Women) movement describes how this was clearly illustrated during the Liberation Day March on August 26th, 1970.

We had signs reading “Hands Off Angela Davis,” Frances Beale recalled, “and one of the leaders of NOW ran up to us and said angrily, “Angela Davis has nothing to do with the women’s liberation.” “It has nothing to do with the kind of liberation you’re talking about,” retorted Beal, “but it has everything to do with the kind of liberation we’re talking about.”⁶⁶

It is through negative actions such as these that many Black women have been in essence told that they are on their own when it comes to defending their freedom and womanhood to the larger dominant society.

The idea that a woman could be a revolutionary seemed to shock mainstream America, including mainstream feminists. They seemed unable to understand why a woman would put herself in that role that is clearly marked as a gendered and male role in this society. This was a question that the mainstream media would not let go. “Kathleen Cleaver was asked by a reporter from the Women’s page of the Washington Post, what was a woman’s role [was] in the revolution. ‘No one ever asks what a man’s place in the Revolution is,’ she replied.”⁶⁷ In another interview with Kathleen Cleaver on the Today Show, Barbara Walters seemed uncomfortable with Cleaver’s willingness to participate in a revolutionary movement:

... Last year we interviewed Mrs. Eldridge Cleaver, Kathleen Cleaver, and it was not an edited report or anything of the sort. She had a chance to say whatever she wanted, and this is a very knowledgeable, very bright, very articulate woman... And I asked her, I said, “I have a child, and you have a child,” and I said, “Do you see any possibility that our children will be able to grow up and live side by side in peace and harmony?” and she said, “Not with the conditions that prevail in this society today, not without the overthrow of the system.” So I asked her, “How do you feel as a mother, about the prospect of your child being in that kind of confrontation, a nation in flames?” and she

⁶⁶ Giddings, Paula. *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. New York: William Marrow and Company, Inc., 1984, 305.

⁶⁷ Foner, Philip S. ed. *The Black Panthers Speak*. New York: DaCapo Press, 1995, 145.

said, “Let it burn!” And I said, “What about your own child?” and she said, “May he light the first match!”⁶⁸

From this statement, we see that Walters, a self-professed feminist and “groundbreaker” in the area of media, is unable to even begin to understand how a mother could take this stance. She does not seem willing to entertain the idea that this might be the strongest illustration of motherhood one could imagine. In essence, Cleaver was stating her willingness to sacrifice herself and a “safe” life if it would mean that her son could have true freedom. Furthermore, she was willing to put her own fears aside and recognize that to support her own child in a revolution would be to support his role in manifesting a better reality for himself and Black people as a whole.

At the same party in which Walters related this story, a fundraiser being held to raise money for the court costs of the New York 21, one of the wives of the Panthers spoke about her husband:

Mrs. Lee Berry rose and delivered a moving account of how her husband had been seized by police in his hospital room and removed summarily to jail. To tell the truth, some of the matrons were disappointed when she first opened her mouth. She had such a small quiet voice. “I am a Panther wife,” she said. I am a Panther Wife? But her story was moving.⁶⁹

Women of the Black liberation movements were receiving two different messages on what was deemed appropriate behavior for a Black revolutionary woman. Barbara Walters was shocked by Kathleen Cleaver’s active aggressive revolutionary role but at the same time White women listening to Mrs. Lee Berry speak were disappointed at what they viewed as her lack of assertiveness. In other words, a woman who spoke out was viewed as having no regard for her role in society; while

⁶⁸ Wolfe, Tom. *Radical Chic and Mau – Mauing the Flack Catchers*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1970, 72.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

on the other hand, those who did not speak out were viewed as being subservient and not living up to the image of what a modern woman should be.

The inability to understand the greater picture of liberation and freedom with regard to children born to women in the movement was a common theme in press treatment of Afeni Shakur and Assata Shakur, who became mothers during their trials. Mainstream media and society seemed to think that there was a direct contradiction between being a revolutionary woman and being a mother. They were unable to see that the two were connected by the vision of a better existence for future generations. But it was not just a lack of understanding; it was also a lack of respect for these women as mothers. In the cases of Assata Shakur and Ericka Huggins (who stood trial in New Haven, CT because of her involvement with the Black Panthers), there were real threats and actions that endangered their children. Hours after Jon Huggins was killed by a member of Maulana Karenga's US Organization on the University of California in Los Angeles' (U.C.L.A.) campus, the home which he shared with his wife Ericka Huggins and their baby daughter was raided by the police.

Geronimo Pratt informed the police "there ain't nothing but women in there man!"⁷⁰ This did not stop the police. They came into the house yelling. "You mother fuckin' bitches, get up!"⁷¹ Then the "Los Angeles police arrested her [Ericka Huggins] and put a gun to [the] baby's head, laughed and said, 'You're next.'"⁷² After these traumatic events, Ericka Huggins was forced to separate from her infant daughter for two years, while she awaited trial in New Haven, Connecticut. Luckily the baby's paternal grandparents took custody of her, because originally the State of

⁷⁰ Brown, Elaine. *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*. New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1992, 169.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Churchill, Ward and Jim Vander Wall. *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret War Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement*. Boston: South End Press, 1990, 405.

Connecticut wanted to take her into the custody of Social Services, where there was no guarantee that Ericka Huggins would ever see her daughter again. One must remember that Social Service was just as much a part of the government as any other organization and the forced removal of a child of a liberation leader would be one less child reared in a revolutionary environment. The government feared that Black women would birth a new generation of revolutionaries who would grow into a group that the patriarchal and racist system within the United States was not willing or prepared to deal with.

Abuse and infringement of human rights of pregnant Panther women in jails was common. Three out of the six women arrested in the New Haven 14 were pregnant. They were refused a choice of doctors and told that they would have to give birth to their children with guards in attendance. One of the women to give birth in jail during the New Haven 14 case was Frances Carter. After giving birth to her child she did not receive adequate health care. Complications arose because the jail's nurse "Mrs. Bierdurka... refused sanitary quarters and regular nurse's care to Frances Carter after she had undergone a Caesarean section following 23 hours of labor... Frances contracted an infection [from] which she suffered unchecked for a period of time."⁷³ The fate of their children was also decided by a government that already labeled the Panthers as one of the greatest threats to American security. "These same oppressors, fearful of the revolutionary spirit born in these black infants, are going to rip them from their mothers' arms – mothers whom the ruling class deems 'unfit'."⁷⁴ A

⁷³ Seale, Bobby and Elaine Brown, eds. "Medical Malpractice as Methods of Torture at the Niantic State Farm for Women" *The Black Panther Paper*. 21 November 1970. Darryl, Contributor. Independently Published by the Black Panther Party for Self Defense of Oakland, California, 1967-1971, 17.

⁷⁴ Seale, Bobby and Elaine Brown, eds. "Repression: The Torture of Panther Women" *The Black Panther Paper*. 22 November 1969. Emily Tarasov, Contributor. Oakland, California: Independently Published by the Black Panther Party for Self Defense of Oakland, California, 1967-1971, 13.

government so consumed with fear had decided that it was better to be inhumane and cruel, rather than take the chance that a new generation would fight for the principles their parents believed in. A women's group known as the New York Women's Liberation joined together with the Black Panthers to condemn the treatment of the New Haven 14 pregnant women:

The Black Panther Party and the N.Y. Women's Liberation said in a recent leaflet. "We reject the State's definition of a 'fit' mother, family unit and 'suitable' home. The State, by its torturous treatment of our Panther sisters has proven itself to be an 'unfit' guardian for these children. The state is making sure that these children will be born into a hostile, brutal and racist environment. The State is making sure that the Black Panther Party will not produce another generation of Panthers."⁷⁵

Assata Shakur also became pregnant during her trial and received brutal treatment during her pregnancy and delivery of her infant daughter. Assata and her co-defendant Kamau conceived a child in the courthouse during her trial. As improbably as this might seem, conceiving the child would be the easiest part of bringing the child into the world. Prison officials took this as an opportunity to heap more violent, vindictive, and psychological forms of abuse upon Assata Shakur. During her pregnancy, Assata had some complications that suggested she might miscarry. On several occasions she was refused medical care, or her medical care was cut short so that she could return to prison.

Dr. Garrett had established that i was one month pregnant. When he visited me he demanded that the shackles be removed at once (based on the elementary principle that proper treatment, both mental and physical, of a woman threatening miscarriage would not seem to include being chained to a bedpost.)⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Seale, Bobby and Elaine Brown, eds. "Repression: The Torture of Panther Women" *The Black Panther Paper*. 22 November 1969. Emily Tarasov, Contributor. Oakland, California: Independently Published by the Black Panther Party for Self Defense of Oakland, California, 1967-1971, 13.

⁷⁶ Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, 141.

She was also deprived of nutritional sustenance and basic medicine that was needed during her pregnancy.

At first, they wouldn't even give me milk. ... They did everything they could to thwart the care Dr. Garret was trying to give me. They hired their own doctor who insisted that whenever my doctor saw me, their man had to be present. This meant a severe limitation on the number of visits Dr. Garret could arrange. ... I also had monilia, a vaginal discharge, which worsened because the Montefiore Hospital doctors assigned to Riker's could not agree about how it should be treated. ... By the time they managed to get the culture back, the whole inside of my thigh was chapped raw from the discharge, and i could barely walk.⁷⁷

In efforts to further intimidate Assata Shakur, the corrections officers set up a hostile and armed delivery room when she went into labor. Not only were armed guards present, they handcuffed her to the bed, and when this was not practical, pointed guns at her pregnant belly swearing they would shoot her without hesitation should she move without their permission.

I woke up about 3:30 A.M. and i could feel the baby lowering and thought i could feel the baby's head. I called the nurse. She said, without looking, that i wasn't "ready" yet. When i insisted, she looked and went running for Dr. Garrett. ... Later that day, September 11, they still hadn't brought me the baby. He reminded them that i was supposed to breast feed her. They told him he hadn't "written a prescription" for breast feeding.⁷⁸

Assata was able to spend little time with her daughter after delivery, and was rushed away as soon as the correctional officers could find a way to get her back in prison. For the next four years she would watch her daughter grow up through prison bars, while she served criminal time for political activism, nothing else.

Although the government saw Black women as just as great a threat as Black men, the mainstream media did little recognize the contributions of women to the

⁷⁷ Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, 141-142.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 143-144.

movement within a historical perspective. Artie McMillian, ex-wife of the Black Panther Party's co-founder Bobby Seale, said that:

Over the years I observed the news media concentrate on the male role which depicted the leaders in a negative way and basically ignore the strength that the Black woman brought to this organization. We have always been the backbone without the acknowledgment.⁷⁹

Black women have become a forgotten piece of a movement that survived because Black men and women came together to start a revolution. Not recognizing the women in the Black liberation movements of the late nineteen sixties and seventies is a grave injustice not only to Black women, but to all peoples of African descent that have ever stood up and fought against oppression in any way. Even worse, however is the negative image building that takes place when these women are talked about and defined in the dominant media. It is therefore crucial that Black women continue to struggle to be the griots of their own stories, and to build an image that is a true reflection of the Black liberation fighters they are. This process of reflecting on their own reality building is the focus of Chapter Four.

⁷⁹ *Voices of Black Panther Women: Graduate Colloquium Series of 1992*. Videotape. Speaker, Artie McMillan. University of California in Berkeley Videos, 1992. (120 min.)

CHAPTER 4

IN HER OWN WORDS

Contradictory to mainstream beliefs, perceptions and assumptions, Black women activists have always been revolutionaries. They do this not to follow the lead of their men, or because they lack reasoning powers of their own, but because they know that to fight for their people is one of the noblest things they can do in life.

These desires to help one's community encouraged the women discussed to actively go out every day and work with their communities. By doing this, these women rejected the images pushed on them by prosecutors and "sympathetic jurors," who often viewed them as easily influenced females unable to choose their own direction in life and manipulated due to their emotion and irrationality. By their own life's testimony it could clearly be seen that they were not simply following their libido; they were thinking, intelligent, politically passionate people.

Liberation from sexism requires liberation from Eurocentric images not only of Black women, but also of gender roles. A female member of the Black Panther Party expounded on this concept when she discussed the dynamics of gender conflicts within the Party:

Black women have always from day one been involved in the struggle for Black liberation... We have had to struggle against the European power structure. Our men became chauvinists as they encountered and assimilated the values of the European power structure.⁸⁰

Angela Davis eloquently states how not only is women's participation in the revolution essential, but that in reality, their presence enriches all revolutionary causes:

⁸⁰ *Voices of Black Panther Women: Graduate Colloquium Series of 1992*. Videotape. Speaker. Shebba Haven, University of California in Berkeley Videos, 1992. (120 min.)

When we as Afro-American women, when we as women of color, proceed to ascend toward empowerment, we lift up with us our brothers of color, our white sisters and brothers in the working class, and indeed, all women who experience the effects of sexist oppression.⁸¹

In essence, a Black woman builds a strong identity for herself and her community when she embraces a revolutionary struggle and image not just as a woman, but as a Black woman working for the greater good of her community.

Afeni Shakur

Afeni Shakur published her autobiography, *Afeni Shakur: Evolution of a Revolutionary*, in 2004, reflecting on her activities with the Black Panther Party more than a quarter century after the events unraveled. Born in Lumberton, NC, on January 10, 1947, Afeni Shakur credits her childhood experiences as shaping her perception of racism, classism, and social injustice in the United States:

I've been what you might call "race conscious" for a long time, because I came from North Carolina, you know... I used to be walking down the ...street and white people would ride down the highway or the road and then we would become a bunch of motherfuckers...a bunch of the filthiest names that you could say, and I was from five and six and seven years old, I guess. I was very young at that time and they didn't give a damn what they were doing.⁸²

Her home life was difficult – her father drank and abused her mother, and for years her mother lacked the courage to stand up to him or leave him – and this situation left Afeni conflicted. She resented her father, and by extension most men, but she had a fighting spirit unlike her mother and felt her mother was weak. After the family left him and moved to the Bronx, Afeni had a rough time in school. Although her intelligence was recognized by her teachers who recommended her for the High School for Performing Arts, she had trouble fitting in and adjusting to the new formal

⁸¹ Davis, Angela. *Women, Culture, and Politics*. New York: Random House, 1981, 13.

⁸² Balgoon, Kuwasi, Joan Bird, Cetewayo, Robert Collier, Dharuba, Richard Harris, Ali Bay Hassan, Jamal, Abayama Katara, Kwando Kinshasa, Baba Odinga, Shaba Ogun Om, Curtis Powell, Afeni Shakur, Lumumba Shakur, and Clark Squire. *Look for Me in the Whirlwind: The Collective Autobiography of the New York 21*. New York: Random House, 1971, 49.

educational setting. She found life on the streets more tempting and became a self-described street fighter and member of the Harlem gang the Disciple Debs.

It was out of this background that Afeni came to the Black Panther Party, which became for her a surrogate family, as the gang had been. But this time it was a self-affirming and positive experience. She heard leaders speak of Black pride and self-sufficiency and met young people who believed in their ability to be agents of social change.

“So, the Panther Party for me, at the time, clarified my situation,” she says. “They took my rage and channeled it against them [she points outside], instead of us [she holds her heart]. They educated my mind and gave me direction. With that direction came hope, and I loved them for giving me that. Because I never had hope in my life.”⁸³

This experience also led her to a new appreciation for male camaraderie. In remembering when she met two of the leaders of the Harlem chapter of the Black Panther Party, Lumumba and Sekou Shakur, Afeni Shakur states that:

When I met Sekou and Lumumba it was the first time in my life that I ever met men who didn't abuse women. As simple as that. It had nothing to do with anything about political movements.⁸⁴

Afeni agreed to become Lumumba's second wife and became a Muslim. She describes him as her comrade and her “king;” she did not mind that he had another wife and children. Only later did she reflect on the difficulty this must have caused on his first wife.

At the time, Afeni's energy was entirely wrapped up in her activities within the Black Panther Party, where she identified with the men more than the women. She

⁸³ Guy, Jasmine. *Afeni Shakur: Evolution of a Revolutionary*. New York: Atria Books, 2004, 62.

⁸⁴ Balgoon, Kuwasi, Joan Bird, Cetewayo, Robert Collier, Dharuba, Richard Harris, Ali Bay Hassan, Jamal, Abayama Katara, Kwando Kinshasa, Baba Odinga, Shaba Ogun Om, Curtis Powell, Afeni Shakur, Lumumba Shakur, and Clark Squire. *Look for Me in the Whirlwind: The Collective Autobiography of the New York 21*. New York: Random House, 1971, 292.

felt that women who walked away from the organization feeling sexually exploited or relegated to sexist gender roles played a role in their own subordination, passively relying on sexual games or their feminine attraction to gain importance. Through her affiliation as an equal comrade with her husband she gained a leadership role in the Harlem chapter. She saw herself as a “fighter,” learned self-defense and how to shoot a gun, and undertook acts of rebellion for the training value, attempting to rob a New York tollbooth at gunpoint to prove she could. For her the Black Panther movement symbolized real power and was a viable agent of change. Images of Huey Newton bearing arms on the steps of the California Supreme Court made a special impression on her: “that was the first time ever I had seen a black man exert his strength, defend his right in the white man’s face, and not get beat down, killed or destroyed.”⁸⁵

Over time, her perception of her role in the party began to evolve into an independent role and not just as an extension of Lumumba. Afeni resisted Lumumba’s and the party’s attempts to portray them “as a super Panther power couple.”⁸⁶ Through her new found sense of self she gained confidence in herself and her abilities to lead and began to advocate for self-defense and arms training for the female members of the Party. She felt that women needed to be on equal footing with the men in the Party, not only ideologically, but in their ability to physically fight for the cause and defend themselves if need be.

It was at this time that she was arrested as part of the New York Twenty-One (which she assumed was because of the tollbooth incident, as she couldn’t think of any

⁸⁵ Balgoon, Kuwasi, Joan Bird, Cetewayo, Robert Collier, Dharuba, Richard Harris, Ali Bay Hassan, Jamal, Abayama Katara, Kwando Kinshasa, Baba Odinga, Shaba Ogun Om, Curtis Powell, Afeni Shakur, Lumumba Shakur, and Clark Squire. *Look for Me in the Whirlwind: The Collective Autobiography of the New York 21*. New York: Random House, 1971, 76.

⁸⁶ Guy, Jasmine. *Afeni Shakur: Evolution of a Revolutionary*. New York: Atria Books, 2004, 102.

other illegal acts she had committed).⁸⁷ Her co-defendant in the New York 21 Trial, Joan Bird, suffered at the hands of racist cops and ruthless torture. As indicated earlier, she was hung out a window and told they would drop her, beaten, placed in a rat-infested jail cell and denied medical attention. As a witness to this oppression, Afeni Shakur's pride and dedication to the movement became more personalized. She made a series of resolutions to take her destiny into her own hands, refusing strip searches in the jail with the consequences of extended solitary confinement. In addition, like Angela Davis, she remained an activist whilst awaiting trial in jail. Because of her notoriety as a member of the New York 21 she garnered a great deal of attention from White female activists who felt that in reaching out to her they could prove that they were committed to all women regardless of color. Many of these women asked Afeni what they could do to help, many offering to raise her bail. She knew that her bail, a sum of \$100,000, would be nearly impossible to raise, and therefore petitioned these women to help in ways they had not considered:

... there were all these women inside who only needed fifty dollars to get out of jail. So, I asked these women to form a bail fund for women in jail who needed less than five hundred dollars for bail. I figured I might as well get them out since my bail was impossible to raise. Nobody had ever done anything for these women before.⁸⁸

In the long run, Afeni's call to activism not only led these women to establish the bail fund, but to combine their efforts with women from churches and Shakur's own family to raise her own bail, resulting in her release in March 1970. This combined effort and affirmation of her and the cause she stood for was a deeply moving experience that has stayed with her:

⁸⁷ Guy, Jasmine. *Afeni Shakur: Evolution of a Revolutionary*. New York: Atria Books, 2004, 79.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

It was amazing... They had to go to court and sit on the stand and justify every single dime before the court.⁸⁹

The experience of incarceration also led Afeni to question some of the decisions made by the male leaders of the group, Lumumba and Sekou, at the same time still staying loyal to the principles of the movement. As the womanist association, the Combahee River Collective, outlined in their manifesto:

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.⁹⁰

Afeni was not afraid to conduct such a struggle with the male leaders of the New York 21. When the men claimed the authority to divide the legal team representing the co-defendants, the women were assigned to the one female lawyer on the team. Afeni could not accept this lawyer who she thought embodied feminine weakness in her tiny voice which, considering social expectations and stereotypes, could “command no respect,”⁹¹ and she took over her own defense, despite Lumumba’s protests that she was legally incompetent and too emotional to defend herself. She did not want to defer to the rest of the group when she felt that this would be her last chance to have a voice in a public forum:

Hey, I’m facing the same three hundred and fifty years everyone else is facing, and I am not going out like that... I was young. I was arrogant. And I was brilliant in court... I wouldn’t have been able to be brilliant if I thought I was going to get out of jail... I thought this was the last time I could speak before

⁸⁹ Guy, Jasmine. *Afeni Shakur: Evolution of a Revolutionary*. New York: Atria Books, 2004, 106-107.

⁹⁰ Smith, Barbara. “All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men...” *Freedom Organizing Pamphlet Series. The Combahee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties*, held in April of 1977. New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1986, 16.

⁹¹ Guy, Jasmine. *Afeni Shakur: Evolution of a Revolutionary*. New York: Atria Books, 2004, 106-107.

they locked me up forever. I had to make a record... I thought I was writing my own obituary...⁹²

Afeni's freedom was short-lived because while out on bail, appearing in court for review as scheduled, she and Joan Bird adhered to the terms of their bail while three of their male co-defendants skipped town, prompting the judge to order the women's re-incarceration. She was especially upset not that the men had fled so much as that they had broken an agreement among all the Twenty-One that no one would undertake such an action without at least notifying the others:

...not only did they not tell me or Joan, they left the country under the pretext of supporting Eldridge [Cleaver] in Algeria. Talkin' about they had to take care of some party business with all that was going on. Bullshit!...Punks!⁹³

By the time she returned to prison, Afeni was pregnant with her first child (her son Tupac). This situation led to a break with Lumumba, and subsequent divorce, as the child was not his. Also, they had the history that during their earlier incarceration Afeni had refused to have sex with him in prison as she pointed out that this would be too close to the situation of slaves breeding under their master's domination, and she would not perpetuate this legacy of degradation.

Her pregnancy posed new and challenging difficulties during her incarceration and again Afeni credits the support of women for getting her through it. With their support, she was able to get a court order for better food, and she also drew strength from the informal network of advice and physical assistance that women pass along to others: help with her emotional ups and downs, with the physical challenges of stretch marks and hormonal changes, and encouragement to carry on during the upcoming trial.⁹⁴

⁹² Guy, Jasmine. *Afeni Shakur: Evolution of a Revolutionary*. New York: Atria Books, 2004, 97-98.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 109-110.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 111-112.

She was angry that Lumumba and Sekou sent a letter of protest to Judge Murtagh in her name along the rest of the New York 21 yet did not allow her to participate in its writing. When it was included in the “collective autobiography” *Look for Me in the Whirlwind*, she agreed to write of her experiences under protest and also only on the condition that the following letter be included:

A letter to Jamala, Lil Afeni, Sekyiwa, and the unborn baby (babies) within my womb.

First let me tell you that this book was not my idea at all (as a matter of fact I was hardly cooperative). But I suppose that one day you’re going to wonder about all this mess that is going on now and I just had to make sure you understand a few things.

I’ve learned a lot in two years about being a woman and it’s for that reason that I want to talk to you. Joan and I, and all the brothers in jail, are caught up in this funny situation where everyone seems to be attacking everyone else and we’re sort of in the middle looking dumb. I’ve seen a lot of people I knew and loved die in the past year or so and it’s really been a struggle to remain unbitter.

February 8th when Joan and I came back to jail I was full of distrust, disappointment and disillusionment. But now the edges are rounded off a bit and I think I can understand why some things happened. I don’t like most of it but I *do* understand. I’ve discovered what I should have know a long time ago – that change has to begin within ourselves – whether there is a revolution today or tomorrow – we still must face the problems of purging ourselves of the larceny that we have all inherited, I hope we do not pass it on to you because you are our only hope.

You must weigh our actions and decide for yourselves what was good and what was bad. It is obvious that somewhere we failed but know it will not – it cannot end here. There is too much evilness left. I cannot get off my dream of peace and harmony. It is for that dream that most of us have fought – some bravely, some as cowards, some as heroes, and some as plain old crooks. Forgive us our mistakes because mostly they were mistakes which were made out of blind ignorance (sometimes arrogance). Judge us with empathy for we were (are) idealists and sometimes we’re young and foolish.

I do not regret any of it – for it taught me to be something that some people will never learn – for the first time in my life I feel like a woman – beaten, battered, and scarred maybe, but isn’t that what wisdom is truly made of. Help me to continue to learn – only this time with a bit more grace for I am a poor example for anyone to follow because I have deviated from the

revolutionary principles which I know to be correct. I wish you love.

Afeni Shakur⁹⁵

Her imprisonment and the trial began a process of self-evaluation and critique not only of her own actions but also of the movement. Looking back with hindsight and maturity in her autobiographical collaboration with Jasmine Guy, she expounds on some of her ambivalent feelings about this period and defines what she considers the strengths and weaknesses of the party. She recognized that unlike liberation movements of the past, the Black Panther Party was unique in its exclusively youth-oriented membership and ideals, without cross-generational unity and wisdom:

We didn't know what we were dealing with. We were in over our heads. And, worst of all, we were not listening. We were not listening to old people. We had removed any semblance of spirituality from our movement...we turned against God, and how you gonna win like that? You have to have a moral imperative to win... We drew violence to ourselves. We drew bitterness to ourselves. That's my opinion.⁹⁶

Afeni Shakur's experience with the Black Panthers was a transformative one. She went from not knowing where to direct her rage to exhilaration and certainty as a young revolutionary, channeling the rage into political activism. In turn this young revolutionary spirit was transformed through life and wisdom into a reflective and introspective awareness of both the positive and negative lessons she drew from this period in her life.

Angela Davis

Angela Davis published her autobiography when she was thirty years old, just two years after the end of highly publicized trial. In it she describes the development

⁹⁵ Balgoon, Kuwasi, Joan Bird, Cetewayo, Robert Collier, Dharuba, Richard Harris, Ali Bay Hassan, Jamal, Abayama Katara, Kwando Kinshasa, Baba Odinga, Shaba Ogun Om, Curtis Powell, Afeni Shakur, Lumumba Shakur, and Clark Squire. *Look for Me in the Whirlwind: The Collective Autobiography of the New York 21*. New York: Random House, 1971, 360-361.

⁹⁶ Guy, Jasmine. *Afeni Shakur: Evolution of a Revolutionary*. New York: Atria Books, 2004, 67-68.

of her philosophy of activism, beginning in her childhood. She was born into a middle-class family that was the first to begin integrating a neighborhood of Birmingham that became notoriously known as Dynamite Hill for the bombings the Ku Klux Klan used to terrorize the Blacks moving in. Her mother was a teacher and an activist who had been working for racial harmony since her college years and who tried to pass this awareness on to her children; her father was a businessman who had also had a college education.

Angela attended a segregated all-Black public school that may have had inferior school supplies and accommodations, but instilled in her a sense of self and affirmed the importance of the Black experience from a very early age. She describes one of her early experiments with the segregationist mentality in Birmingham. With her younger sister Fania, the teenage Angela entered a shoe store and pretended to be French. The two girls spoke French and Fania provided broken translations in halting English. Having these two “exotic foreigners” in their store, the staff gave them full attention and seated them in a “white” section, fawning to understand their desires. Eventually the girls called it off and laughed at the manager saying, “All Black people have to do is pretend they come from another country, and you treat us like dignitaries.”⁹⁷ By the time she got to high school, she realized her educational opportunities in Birmingham were limited, and she decided with her father’s encouragement to take the risk of accepting a scholarship from the American Friends Service Committee and leaving home to attend a liberal private school in New York.

This began an educational path that took her out of the Black community, on to Brandeis University near Boston, the Sorbonne in Paris, and Goethe University in Frankfurt. Her first exposure to socialism came in high school where many of her

⁹⁷ Davis, Angela. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. New York: A Bernhard Geis Associated Book: Random House, 1974, 86-87.

teachers were political dissidents blacklisted during the McCarthy era. At Brandeis she was introduced to the work, and later the person, of the Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse who would become her intellectual mentor during her graduate studies. After two years in Frankfurt she felt that she had to return to the United States so that she could join in the struggle for Black liberation:

I was advancing my studies, deepening my understanding of philosophy, but I felt more and more isolated. I was so far away from the terrain of the fight that I could not even analyze the episodes of the struggle. ... each day it was becoming clearer to me that my ability to accomplish anything was directly dependent on my ability to contribute something concrete to the struggle.⁹⁸

On her return to the United States she picked up her graduate work at the University of California at San Diego with Marcuse, and became an instructor at the University. She felt a strong pull to be part of a revolutionary movement, and observed many different kinds of organizations. Within a short time she joined the Che-Lumumba Collective, a Black chapter of the Communist Party. In 1968 Angela Davis would officially join the Black Panther Party as a communist, trying to help the movement:

I felt that it would be important for some of us to assist in the work of the Black Panther Party which, at the time, was like a magnet drawing large numbers of young Black people, all over the country, into its ranks.⁹⁹

Davis had looked at the US Organization for a short period of time, but, “she felt strongly that... it treated women as ‘servants’ to men, and this was something that Angela would not tolerate, regardless of ideology and other considerations.”¹⁰⁰

One matter that concerned her during this time and during the hearings that were held at the University of California over her membership in the Communist Party

⁹⁸ Davis, Angela. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. New York: A Bernhard Geis Associated Book: Random House, 1974, 144-145.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁰⁰ Parker, J.A. *The Making of a Revolutionary*. New Rochelle, New York: Arlington House, 1973, 95.

was the effect the publicity surrounding her would have on her family. She did not doubt the support of her parents, sister, and brothers, but she did not want any of them to suffer socially or especially physically because of their association with her. Both of these fears were realistic, of course, as we have seen in the last chapter.

Through her activism with the Black Panther Party, she became acquainted with George Jackson, an inmate at Soledad Prison who had used his time in prison to develop a clear vision of Black liberation and the relationship between racism and economic oppression. His transformation was communicated through letters to friends, family and acquaintances. They developed a close friendship through correspondence; even before they met in person, she became dedicated to the cause to free him, working with his family and supporters, including his younger brother Jonathan. The relationship between them was not only an intellectual meeting of minds but developed into an intense, soulful love. This was almost all through letters, as they only visited in person once when she was working on his legal defense. In June of 1970, on the same day that she lost her job at the University of California (on a pretext, but essentially for being a Communist), she helped organized a large rally in L.A. in defense of the Soledad Brothers, which Jonathan also attended. Not two months later occurred the events at the Marin County Courthouse where Jonathan and so many others died. Even though she was in Los Angeles at the time, within two days Angela Davis was being sought by the FBI for the murder of Judge Haley and the others.

One thing that distinguishes the imprisonment of Angela Davis is that she entered jail as a celebrity. During her two years on the run from California to New York, a wave of sympathy spread through the Black liberation community and around the world. Black women donned Afros in solidarity with Angela. On her first night in the New York Women's House of Detention, she was surprised that one of the

matrons, a young Black woman, confided, “A lot of officers here – the Black officers – have been pulling for you. We’ve been hoping all along that you would get to someplace that was safe.”¹⁰¹ Within hours, demonstrators calling for her freedom surrounded the jail; one of the other prisoners encouraged her:

The sister told us to be quiet... we might be able to hear some of the chants. Sure enough, muffled rhythms were penetrating these massive walls. Just outside the building... they were chanting, “Free Angela Davis.” ... With an expression of triumph on her face, she assured me that I was going to win.¹⁰²

During her time in the New York jail, Angela Davis forged a bond with many of the women there, both inmates and jailers. While she was on a hunger strike to protest being held in the section for mentally ill prisoners (“for her own protection”), other prisoners also held a hunger strike, in solidarity, until she was moved to the general population.¹⁰³ They were receptive to her cause, raising their fists when they saw her pass by, and helped her answer some of the many letters of support she received in jail.

She in turn through her contacts with the world outside brought attention to the conditions the inmates faced and tried to improve them where she could. She advocated for their healthcare and conducted calisthenics sessions. She noticed that there were no books addressing Black concerns in the prison library, and few in Spanish and was able to distribute among them books which she ordered from the publisher. She held study sessions on Marxism and Black liberation with the sisters, at their request. Their status and intellect were marginalized by the system, which assumed no curiosity on their part and provided no stimulation; conversely, these

¹⁰¹ Davis, Angela. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. New York: A Bernhard Geis Associated Book: Random House, 1974, 20.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰³ Davis, Angela. *If They Come in the Morning: Voice of Resistance*. New York: The Third Press: A Joseph Okapu Book, 1971, 188.

women were actually quite interested in subject matter that was demonized by mainstream culture, often assuming if it was relegated to this status by those that oppressed them, it must have some positive value or relation to their condition. Davis had encountered this attitude before among working class Black people; for example, a man in her California neighborhood had said to her “There must be something good about [communism] because the man is always trying to convince us that it is bad.”¹⁰⁴ She appreciated the women’s enthusiastic response and ordered them ten copies of George Jackson’s book, *Soledad Brothers*, although subsequently the wardens would not allow the books to leave her possession. In response, some of the guards smuggled individual copies in for her to distribute.¹⁰⁵

The guards were often sympathetic to her, and she appreciated the difficulties of their situation: accepting a job policing women much like themselves for a paycheck, they often made the effort to offer subtle assistance with communications or relaxation of the rules. Yet there were limits they could not cross and she saw in the moral ambiguity of their position a parallel to the slave overseers.¹⁰⁶ After she left New York and was awaiting trial in California, she continued to receive support from these guards, one such example was the following letter that she received from one of the matrons:

December 26, 1970

My dear Angela,

My thoughts and heart have been with you ever since that sorrowful night.

We miss you, gloom settled over the jail, because our light and inspiration have gone.

If you found us beautiful, it was because you made us that way. We related to you and your struggle in so many ways.

¹⁰⁴ Davis, Angela. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. New York: A Bernhard Geis Associated Book: Random House, 1974, 222.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 62.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 43-44.

What little I could do to bring you a bit of comfort was nothing compared to what you gave us.

I miss you, and miss worrying and fussing at you about little things.

I listen and read everything about you and your struggle. Knowing you is the greatest pleasure any one person could derive. You're beautiful. You touched many of our hearts and lives.

When I feel cross or impatient with my brothers and sisters, I remember all the things you taught me and tears come to my eyes for the struggle you are going through.

Keep your head up and remember you're always in my thoughts and heart.

All power to you Angela...

Love always,

[Name withheld in the original text to protect the woman's identity.]¹⁰⁷

As a middle-class woman, Angela's time in jail brought home the reality of experiences she had only heard of in third person accounts. The physical and health conditions of the jail horrified and appalled her. At times she refused to eat because of the roaches invading her plate. In an interview when asked to describe how she was being treated, she took the opportunity to critique the environment of the detention center and its effect on all the women there:

This is a prison and the atrocious conditions that characterize virtually every American prisons are present in this place...the prison is filthy. It is infested with roaches and mice...a sister found a mouse tail in her soup. A few days ago I was drinking a cup of coffee and I was forced to spit out a roach...[they] literally cover the walls of our cells at night, crawling across our bodies as we sleep...The medical conditions here are abominable. The doctors are racist and entirely insensitive to the needs of the women...¹⁰⁸

This focus on the effect of jail conditions on all the prisoners is typical of Angela Davis' interest in collective political action and struggle.

Since Angela was fighting extradition to California during the entire time she was detained in New York City, she enjoyed the privilege of frequent visits with friends and lawyers who comprised her legal team, Margaret Burnham and John Apt.

¹⁰⁷ Davis, Angela. *If They Come in the Morning: Voice of Resistance*. New York: The Third Press: A Joseph Okapu Book, 1971, 281.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 186-187.

She also received frequent, if brief, visits from a large number of friends and family members. Several of her visitors were intellectual and political comrades who were able to inspire and sustain her spirit. She was continually encouraged by popular support for her cause as shown by mail and demonstrations in the street. She received letters from around the world and from prominent Black American activists. James Baldwin wrote her in November of 1970 to relate to her not only his continued support for her and belief in her cause, but to tell her about his own efforts to bring her plight to the attention of progressive communities in Europe:

Since we live an age in which silence is not only criminal but suicidal, I have been making as much noise as I can... I was asked to speak on the case of Miss Angela Davis, and did so. Very probably an exercise in futility, but one must let no opportunity slide.¹⁰⁹

The secretariat of the African National Congress also wrote her comparing the situation of the Black South African woman's experience and Angela Davis' imprisonment. It was recognition of parallels that existed throughout the African Diaspora under colonialism, neo-colonialism and glaringly in Apartheid and United States segregation, both de jure and de facto.

The oppressed and fighting women of South Africa, who have been, and still are victims of racial oppression perpetuated by a clique of white racists, have every thing in common with you and the just struggle of your people against racism and all the unjust deeds that go with it.

We admire your courage, self sacrifice and determination to free a lot of your oppressed and exploited population, faced with a ruthless enemy which claims to be the most developed militarily, economically, culturally and otherwise, yet its own Afro Asian Citizens suffer from want of everything necessary for nature's human development. We are proud and inspired to have a young woman of your caliber.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Davis, Angela. *If They Come in the Morning: Voice of Resistance*. New York: The Third Press: A Joseph Okapu Book, 1971, 13.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 277.

In these ways she was able to transcend some of the morally degrading effects of the jail experience, as bad as it was.

When Angela Davis was extradited to Marin County, California, she found herself in a very different environment – none of the physical horrors of the New York detention center but none of the warmth and social support either. And while she knew that support for her continued to be strong outside the prison, she was facing the daunting awareness that within the prison walls many of the employees were the personal friends of Judge Haley and the other officials who had been killed. As a person of color she was suddenly a minority within the jail, the staff and county as a whole was predominately White. Inside the jail she was regarded as a dangerous criminal and no longer was supervised by matrons who recognized her political status, and instead viewed her with suspicion and fear. Again she was held in solitary confinement “for her own good,” and shackled whenever she was taken out of her own cell; but without the community of guards and prisoners supporting her, making this isolation all the more intense. She wrote to Erika Huggins, awaiting trial in a Connecticut jail for her Black Panther activities:

I miss the sisters in New York a great deal – the discussions, the clandestinely organized demonstrations, their warmth, their instinctive grasp of the concrete realities of oppression. I miss the pictures of you and other revolutionary heroes and heroines torn from contraband newspapers and pasted on cell walls...¹¹¹

She did have some contact with her co-defendant Ruchell Magee in court for their first arraignment, but again was struck by the disparity between her treatment as an intellectual political dissident and his as a jailhouse activist: while she was greeted with a shower of camera flashes and cheers, he was bent in shackles at a distant table,

¹¹¹ Davis, Angela. *If They Come in the Morning: Voice of Resistance*. New York: The Third Press: A Joseph Okapu Book, 1971, 109.

almost ignored. Angela Davis wanted to show her solidarity with him and felt sadness that the structure of their court appearances seemed to pit them against each other.¹¹² In this instance the issue of class was used to drive a perceptual wedge between the co-defendants.

Now that the charges were so serious and imminent Angela felt compelled to participate in the work of the legal team even though she still had her good lawyer friends working with her as well as Terrence Hallinan and Howard Moore. Since it was her political beliefs that were directly on trial she had to have an active voice and role in shaping her own defense. Lacking the opportunity for collective political teaching and consciousness-raising within this jail, she threw herself into her legal work and her political writings. She renewed her longtime friendship with Bettina Aptheker, Free Speech Movement veteran and feminist, and worked intensively on a collection of writings about her case and the general cause of political prisoners and racism in the justice system: this was published in 1971 as *If They Come in the Morning*.

She maintained an extensive correspondence with other prisoners around the country as well as her friends and supporters in America and abroad. It was not only the outside support that nourished her through this difficult time, but even more the sense of solidarity with the millions of imprisoned Blacks throughout the country whose longtime oppression she was getting a taste of even though her own treatment was not nearly as harsh as theirs:

I tried to assuage some of my pain by establishing contact with sisters and brothers all over the country...More than ever before I felt a need to cement my links to every other prisoner. My very existence, it seemed, was dependent on my ability to reach out to them. I decided then and there that if I was ever

¹¹² Davis, Angela. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. New York: A Bernhard Geis Associated Book: Random House, 1974, 291-293.

free, I would use my life to uphold the cause of my sisters and brothers behind walls.¹¹³

Davis' spirits were severely shaken by the killing of George Jackson in San Quentin Prison almost exactly one year after the events at the Marin County Courthouse. The situation of her internment made it hard for her to properly grieve. Her need to keep this man's vision became even more crucial in the wake of his death. She channeled her grief into a letter in memoriam and directly addressed his family, reaching to them through the prison walls even though she would be unable to attend his funeral.

George was dead, and the deeply personal pain I felt would have strangled me had I not turned it into a proper and properly placed rage... It would give me the courage and energy I needed for a sustained war against the malevolent racism that had killed him. He was gone, but I was here. His dreams were mine now.¹¹⁴

As her trial drew near and she was moved to the San Jose jail to be closer to its changed venue, the continued intense scrutiny on her case kept her own jail conditions relatively tolerable. As before, much of her time was spent preparing her case. By the time the trial started Angela was finally allowed out on bail. The trial proceeded despite the acquittal of the Soledad Brothers, removing much of the legal grounds for prosecution. After hearing the prosecutor's opening remarks with their baseless and absurd charges, Davis felt a renewed sense of confidence and affirmation that her legal team was well suited to prove her innocence. In the end his case was so weak that many of her most political arguments were superfluous. She was fully acquitted following a brief factual defense.

But even after her acquittal, Angela Davis did not lose her sense of the urgency of her struggle:

¹¹³ Davis, Angela. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. New York: A Bernhard Geis Associated Book: Random House, 1974, 327-328.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 319.

An enormous political responsibility had been thrust upon me – and I was more frightened than I had ever been in my life because I knew that human lives were at stake. Our ability to keep the movement alive offered the only hope to our sisters and brothers behind walls. In the mass meetings, attended by predominantly Black people, I explained that my presence before them signified nothing more and nothing less than the tremendous power of united, organized people to transform their will into reality. Many others also deserved to be the beneficiaries of their power.¹¹⁵

In fact, Angela Davis has dedicated her life to this cause. Throughout her academic career and political activism she has continued to draw attention to the plight of political prisoners and show the correlations between modern day jailing of Black people, and the enslavement of their ancestors in this country. Her 2003 book *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Provides a critical view of the history of incarceration as punishment, focusing on its disproportionate use when dealing with people of color, immigrants and the economically disadvantaged. Davis illustrates the failings of the system which has become increasingly corporate with the development of the “prison industrial complex” and offers salient alternative models for justice and reparation.

Assata Shakur

Assata Shakur’s experiences as a political prisoner are perhaps the most horrific and long-lived of the three women under consideration. They began with a gun battle in which she was severely injured, included imprisonment under the most stringent restrictions in isolation in the basement of a men’s prison, involved an armed breakout that sent her underground and into exile, where to this day she lives in Cuba with a million-dollar bounty on her head (just increased in May 2005 to this level, the highest ever offered for a New Jersey fugitive).¹¹⁶ Her autobiography was published in 1987, eight years after her escape, as she looked back on her experiences from the

¹¹⁵ Davis, Angela. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. New York: A Bernhard Geis Associated Book: Random House, 1974, 398.

¹¹⁶ Hepp, Rick. “Raising the stakes to bring in a cop-killer,” *The Star Ledger*. May 2, 2005. Online. www.nj.com.

vantage point of an exile, a mother deprived of contact with her child, and a political refugee separated from the community she invested her revolutionary actions to change.

Assata Shakur was born Joanne Deborah Byron in the summer of 1947 in New York City. She lived in Jamaica, Queens, with her mother, aunt, and grandparents; at the age of three her grandparents decide to move back to Wilmington, North Carolina where their family owned property and took Assata with them. Her grandparents instilled in her the importance of self-respect and reminded her often that even if they were living in the segregated South and in a country where the dominant culture always tried to relegate African Americans to a second-class status, she should always remember that she was second-class to no one. Her grandmother would often state, “Don’t you respect nobody that don’t respect you, you hear me?”¹¹⁷ Her grandparents also opened up a shop on their family’s beachfront property so that Blacks throughout the region could enjoy the beach since all the other beaches in the area were segregated and for Whites only. Her grandparent’s act of assertion was met with anger from the White community who tried to intimidate them into shutting down and Assata witnessed her grandparents refusing to submit to these actions.

One summer after she and her sister had begged her mother many times to take them to the all White county fair she had an experience that paralleled Angela Davis’s childhood experience at the Birmingham shoe store:

My mother went over to the ticket booth and began talking. I didn’t understand a word she was saying... The manager came over and told my mother she couldn’t buy any tickets and that we couldn’t go into the park... My mother kept talking and waving her hands and soon she was screaming in this foreign language... Several other men came over... After the men went to one side and had a conference, they returned and told the ticket seller to give my mother the tickets... When we got home my mother explained that she had been speaking Spanish and had told the managers that she was from a Spanish

¹¹⁷ Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, 20.

country and that if he didn't let us in she would call the embassy and United Nations...¹¹⁸

She reflected on what this told her about race in America even at a young age. It was a lesson she would never forget and showed her that Black Americans were afforded less rights than everyone else in this country, including Black foreigners.

Another lesson she learned during her time with her grandparents was that of class division within the Black community. Her grandmother wished for Assata to make friends with the children of the Black bourgeoisie and often tried to discourage her from making friends with children she deemed to be of a lower class. Assata did not conform to this, as she stated: "I didn't care what kind of house my friends had or whether or not they lived in alleys. All that mattered was whether i liked them."¹¹⁹ This refusal to separate her race by class was reflected in her activism. She knew that for true liberation of her people, African Americans would have to disregard the type of ideas of class that are imbedded in Eurocentric cultures and build bonds across all classes in the Black community.

In third grade Assata moved back to New York City with her mother; while she was a teenager she ran away multiple times and eventually moved in with her aunt Evelyn who was a lawyer. Under her guidance Assata attended high school, earned her GED and began to take some college classes at Manhattan Community College where she interacted with the Black student activists:

I was gradually becoming more active. I began to control my life... The major way i got hip to things was by listening to people. The Black students... belonged to every type of organization. There were Black Muslims, Garveyites, Malcolm X's Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), members of various community and cultural organizations, and a few who were young turks of the NAACP... One of the first organizations I checked out was a Garveyite group...¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, 28.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.

The exposure to these organizations gave her a renewed sense of self and a new found pride in her African roots. She began to question the history lessons she had been taught in public school and sought out history that reflected the African Diaspora. She began to explore ideas of socialism but could not relate to many of the student groups, which were often dominated by White students who thought it was their job to “teach” Black people that their oppression was rooted in capitalism. She felt they often negated the importance of socialist revolutionaries from developing countries such as Fidel Castro and Patrice Lumumba. Assata thought it was essential that Black people fight their oppression together and that they would only gain true freedom by analyzing oppression through an Afrocentric lens that recognized their unique history and position in this country.¹²¹

After Assata graduated from Manhattan Community College she began to attend the City College of New York. During this time she married a fellow activist, taking his last name Chesimard, but realized after an unsuccessful year of marriage that they were better suited to be friends:

My husband was politically conscious, intelligent, and decent, and our affair was frantic, high-pitched, and charged with emotion. Somehow, i believed that our shared commitment to the Black Liberation struggle would result in a “marriage made in heaven.”¹²²

During this time period, she changed her name to reflect her new sense of self, taking on the African name of Assata Olugbala Shakur. “I wanted a name that had to do with struggle, something to do with the liberation of our people... Assata means “She who struggles,” Olugbala means “Love for the people...”¹²³ She also decided that she

¹²¹ Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, 191-192.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 196.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 186.

wanted to move to the Bay Area because she felt it was the hot bed of activism and wanted to be part of it.

Assata checked out many political organizations, but was the most interested in the Black Panther Party of Oakland. Like Afeni Shakur, she was struck by the strength and assertion of the Black Panther Party:

The sheer audacity of walking onto the California senate floor with rifles, demanding that Black people have the right to bear arms and the right to self-defense, made me sit back and take a long look at them.¹²⁴

Assata felt that the Party clearly identified capitalism and imperialism as the true oppressive forces facing Black people and respected the fact that they drew international connections between the experience of Black Americans and other oppressed peoples of the world. During her time in California she was also deeply affected by the murder of Jonathan Jackson and the persecution of Angela Davis whom she deeply respected. She decided that she could not watch these things happen and stand on the sidelines:

I wanted to struggle on a full-time basis... Of all the things i wanted to be when i was a little girl, a revolutionary certainly wasn't one of them... now it was the only ting i wanted to do. Everything else was secondary... [but] i still didn't have the slightest idea what i would have to do to become one.¹²⁵

This desire led her to join the Black Panther Party upon her return to New York, although she did have some reservations about certain aspects of the Party.

Assata felt that the personal attitudes of many Black Panthers was uninviting and although they had a great platform and clearly cared about the Black community, she felt that they alienated themselves from people who might otherwise support them:

... I had been turned off by the way spokesmen for the Party talked to people, that their attitude had often been arrogant, flippant, and disrespectful... I

¹²⁴ Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, 203.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 207.

preferred the polite and respectful manner in which civil rights workers and Black Muslims talked to the people rather than the arrogant, fuck-you style that used to be popular in New York... they cursed too much and turned off a lot of Black people who would otherwise be responsive to what the Party was saying.¹²⁶

Being part of the Party enriched Assata's life and she threw herself into the work. But she had joined when the Party was under a great deal of stress caused by the New York 21 trial, infiltration of the Party by undercover police, and the rift between the East and West Coast chapters of the Party. Assata worked on a medical cadre with Joan Bird and was impressed at her strength and commitment to the Party and the Black community in the shadow of the New York 21 Trial. She also witnessed other members of the Party begin to crack under the pressure and she was worried about the Party's ability to maintain its mission and be a positive place of activism. Some members of the leadership were getting too obsessed with power and were wielding it carelessly. At one point she was even temporarily expelled because of one leader's efforts to assert his power. She knew this was the cause, because the following day he apologized and reinstated her. Nevertheless, Assata threw herself into her assignments and felt a great sense of pride and dedication in programs such as the Breakfast Program. This work was especially important to her because it gave her a chance to interact in the community; she enjoyed contact with the children, and watching them learn and grow.

Assata continued to have grave concerns about the direction the Black Panthers were going in. She believed the educational platform of the Party was severely lacking in respect for Afro-centric education and awareness:

The basic problem stemmed from the fact that the BPP had no systematic approach to political education. They were reading the *Red Book* but didn't know who Harriet Tubman, Marcus Garvey, and Nat Turner were. They talked about intercommunalism but still really believed that the Civil war was

¹²⁶ Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, 204.

fought to free the slaves. A whole lot of them barely understood any kind of history, Black, African or otherwise.¹²⁷

Assata felt it was a detriment to the Party that it did not value or recognize the importance of forming coalitions with other Black organizations. One day an African man from a liberation group came into one of the offices and gave her a calendar featuring African freedom fighters. She proudly displayed it, only to see it taken down the next day:

They repeated slogans and phrases without understanding their complete meaning, often resulting in dogmatic and shortsighted practices... When I asked what had happened to [the calendar], they said, "The calendar said 'international' and were not internationalists, we're intercommunalists."¹²⁸

Although many of the leaders were incredible organizers, they were so overworked and consumed with trials, that there was a breakdown in spreading any real sense of consciousness throughout the ranks of the organization. Two such leaders were Zayd Shakur and Afeni Shakur: she admired their strength in the face of oppression. She formed a strong friendship with Zayd respecting the fact that he treated her as a true comrade and equal, not devaluing her as some leaders did because she was a woman:

Becoming Zayd's friend was something really important... he was the only leader up at the Bronx Ministry, with the exception of Afeni Shakur, i had any respect for... I also respected him because he refused to become part of the macho cult that was an official body in the BPP. He never voted on issues or took a position just to be one of the boys... Zayd always treated me and all the other sisters with respect.¹²⁹

Assata recognized that the greatest threat to the integrity of the Party was the conscious effort on the part of mainstream media and law enforcement to undermine the Party. Repeatedly the strongest members of the Panthers were arrested and

¹²⁷ Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, 221.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 223.

harassed, causing extreme chaos and redirecting much of the BPP's work from community programs in efforts to keep their members free and ensure legal representation for those facing persecution for their political activity.

Assata's own work was redirected during this time to help raise bail funds for the New York 21. She did not find it rewarding. It often involved being the token Black person at a liberal White event to raise money. She was annoyed by inane comments and questions and missed working within her own community. These individuals seemed determined to narrowly define her identity as an activist, reducing and sexualizing her role in the Party and often associating her as the "Panther wife" of Zayd:

I couldn't get over how personal some of those people tried to get even though i'd never seen them before. One came over and asked if Zayd was my Panther husband. When i looked at her as if she was crazy for asking me a question like that, she said, giggling all over herself, "I mean, I mean is he your cat."¹³⁰

This attempt to sexualize her activism is a recurring theme not only in mainstream culture, but in White counter culture as well. Just as the prosecutor tried to reduce Angela Davis' activism to an act of an impassioned lover, White radicals tried to impose ideas of Black male repression of women involved in Black liberation movements, failing to recognize women like Assata as true revolutionary counterparts. In doing so, these groups also failed to recognize that the main battle in the Black community was not between men and women, but a collective struggle against the dominant culture's oppression of their race as a whole:

Contemporary White feminists often attempt to impose upon Black women a definition for Black male/female relationships based upon their perspectives which identify all men as the enemy... and call to Black women for

¹³⁰ Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, 224.

disassociation with Black males as if such men were in the same position of power as White males.¹³¹

In addition to the trials the Party was facing, Assata began to suspect a full forced effort by police to infiltrate the Black Panthers. One such person was a man named Cotton. Although many Panther member liked him, Assata would have her fears confirmed later when through the Freedom Act it was revealed that he had been working undercover for the police.¹³² Party leadership was becoming increasingly ruled by fear and paranoia and expulsions of Party members who were dedicated to the cause on accusations of betrayals became an everyday practice. She realized the Party was incapable of taking constructive criticism and when she voiced any, the main responses she got were accusations of trying to undermine the movement. This disturbed her; Assata felt that as a dedicated activist it was her duty to raise her concerns:

That was one of the big problems in the Party. Criticism and self-criticism were not encouraged, and the little that was given often was not taken seriously. Constructive criticism and self-criticism are extremely important for any revolutionary organization. Without them, people tend to drown in their mistakes, not learn from them.¹³³

Issues such as these made Assata began to question her membership in the Party. After falling out with Zayd and witnessing the Party being torn apart by programs such as COINTELPRO and becoming ineffective, she chose to leave the Black Panther Party, but was able to stay on good terms with most members.

Assata's break with the Party did not reduce the intensity of police intimidation she was subject to; in fact, she stated that her life seemed to be under even more scrutiny. She caught undercover policemen staking out where she lived and often got

¹³¹ Gordon, Vivian Verdell. *Black Women, Feminism, and Black Liberation: Which Way?* Chicago: Third World Press, 1987, 31.

¹³² Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, 230.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 226.

the sense she was being followed. Because of this she felt that she needed to become more inconspicuous. She had witnessed what had happened to the New York 21, and knew it was a very real possibility that she too could be framed for crimes she did not commit in an effort to curtail her effectiveness as an activist.¹³⁴ Eventually her fears would come true when she was wanted for questioning in the gunning down of two cops on Riverside Drive in Manhattan: a crime she had read about herself, but knew nothing about more than what was in the papers. Immediately the City was plastered with her image on the front page of the *Daily News* and she had no choice but to go underground. It was a hard and painful experience for her. Not only did she have to break ties with her friends and family with not so much as a goodbye, she had to completely transform herself so that she could not be identified. In doing so she felt she was giving up much of what made her Assata:

It feels so spooky. I am hiding my beautiful, nappy hair under this wig and hating it, hiding my stuff to save my life. I, who have had to give up my headwraps and my big beaded earrings, my dungaree jackets, my red, black and green poncho, and my long African dresses in order to struggle on another level, look out from under my wig at my sisters... Maybe we are all running from something, all living in clandestine existence... I pray and struggle for the day when we can all come out from under these wigs.¹³⁵

For the next few years she would stay underground working with a diverse array of underground organizations that were all working towards revolution and empowerment of the Black community. One such group was the Black Liberation Army, which was not headed by a specific leadership, but rather a loose knit group of revolutionary activists:

¹³⁴ Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, 232-233.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 239.

Sisters and brothers joined these groups because they were committed to revolutionary struggle in general and armed struggle in particular and wanted to help build the armed movement in amerika.¹³⁶

Assata did not know exactly what the best way of going about an armed revolution would be, but felt that it was now an integral part of the struggle. As Angela Davis points out, sometimes one must break the laws of an unjust land to affect positive revolutionary change:

There is a distinct and qualitative difference between one breaking a law for one's own individual self-interest and violating it in the interest of a class or a people whose oppression is expressed either directly or indirectly through that particular law. The former might be called a criminal (though in many cases he is a victim), but the latter, as a reformist or revolutionary, is interested in universal social change. Captured, he or she is a political prisoner.¹³⁷

It was during her time working with this organization and living underground that she was arrested during the shootout on the New Jersey turnpike and her life was changed irrevocably.

While in the hospital suffering from severe injuries, she started to feel extreme fear and despair. She was unable to make contact with any family or friends, let alone a lawyer. She was pretty sure no one knew where she was, whether she was dead or alive, or whether anyone knew about the events that landed her there. Police surrounded her bed, shackled her legs until they were raw, poked her wounds, rubbed a burning substance in her eyes, and taunted and threatened her. In her critical state they wheeled her to the morgue on a stretcher and placed her next to the body of her dead comrade Zayd to threaten her with the same fate if she didn't talk. Despite her injuries and the severity of her condition, she was arraigned chained to her hospital bed with no legal representation. Only a few of the nurses gave her any sense of

¹³⁶ Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, 241.

¹³⁷ Davis, Angela. *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance*. New York: The Third Press: A Joseph Okapu Book, 1971, 22.

humanity and hope by connecting her with the lifeline of a call button and slipping her some poetry and books. On the outside, her family was having a parallel experience, unable to learn anything about her condition, trying to decipher from radio reports whether she was dead or alive, not allowed to meet with the authorities in charge of her custody, and able to obtain clearance to see her only by court order after three days had passed. Finally her aunt Evelyn, her mother and her sister were able to see her, bringing a huge sense of relief and comfort, but they were only able to meet with her for ten minutes.

From the hospital Assata was transferred in a wheelchair to the Women's Workhouse of Middlesex County where she was initially kept in isolation. Like Angela Davis, she found sisterhood with her fellow female inmates, most of whom were Latinas and Blacks doing time for shoplifting and running numbers, with sentences far exceeding the usual punishments for these minor crimes.

Gradually, I began to know the women. They were all very kind to me and treated me like a sister... they did whatever they could to make things easier for me.¹³⁸

In addition, she received many letters of support and solidarity from people on the outside, but she also received a few hate letters that even went as far as death threats. Because she realized that a slanted image of her was circulating in the press and in wanted posters, she secretly made a tape for radio broadcast to introduce herself to the public and present her views on the Black condition.

I am a Black revolutionary woman, and because of this I have been charged with and accused of every alleged crime in which a woman was believed to have participated... They call us murderers, but we did not murder Martin Luther King, Jr., Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, George Jackson, Nat Turner, James Chaney, and countless others... Black revolutionaries do not drop from the moon. We are created by our conditions. Shaped by our

¹³⁸ Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, 53.

oppression. We are being manufactured in droves in the ghetto streets, places like attica, san quentin, bedford hills, leavenworth, and sing sing...

It is our duty to fight for our freedom.
It is our duty to win.
We must love each other and support each other.
We have nothing to loose but our chains...¹³⁹

Even though Assata had solidarity with the other female prisoners, she still found jail terrifying. As an accused cop-killer she was hated by the guards, especially the male ones on the other side of the jail. She developed the precaution of barricading herself in her cell at night in such a way that no one could enter unnoticed without knocking over a pile of cups she placed before her door, and in fact one night this saved her from an intrusion by some male guards she found lurking by her cell door.

Before Assata Shakur would ever go to trial in New Jersey she was transferred to Riker's Island so that she could go to trial for the bank robbery, drug dealing, kidnapping and attempted murder charges she faced in New York. Although every one of these cases resulted in an acquittal, dismissal or hung jury, they took years to resolve. During this time Assata was not jailed in isolation as she was in New Jersey and was able to make contact with one of her former comrades in the Black Panther Party, a woman named Simba. She also had regular contact with her co-defendant in one of her bank robbery trials, Kamau, when the judge ordered them to be removed from the courtroom and isolated in a room within the courthouse together during all court proceedings. (Judge Gagliardi did this because Assata and Kamau made continued efforts to inform the jury of the fact that they were being charged with criminal acts solely as a means by the government to suppress their political activism.) For the first time since her arrest on the New Jersey Turnpike she was able to have consistent contact with other inmates and conversations with fellow comrades. This

¹³⁹ Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, 50-52.

was of vital importance to her and helped her to feel like a living breathing person again who was no longer living only inside her own head:

Talking to Kamau was so good for me. Solitary had affected me really badly. I had closed up inside myself and had forgotten how to relate in an open way with people. We spent whole days laughing and talking and listening to the courtroom madness in between.¹⁴⁰

They discussed the religion of Islam and its permeating effects within the Black revolutionary movement. They also discussed the possibility of bringing a child into the world. These conversations with Kamau and ones she had had with Simba regarding the impending birth of Simba's own child lead Assata to reconsider her commitment to life and the prospect of bringing new life into the world. Assata reflected that the following comment Shiba had made stayed with her for years:

These people can lock us up, but they can't stop life, just like they can't stop freedom. This baby was meant to be born, to carry on... this baby like all of our children is going to be the hope for our future.¹⁴¹

As early as her teenage years Assata had begun to question whether it was a good idea to bring a Black child into a world that held so much hatred for them and was set up to oppress and kill them.

Since i was a teenager i had always said that the world was too horrible to bring another human being into. And a Black child. We see our children frustrated at best. ... And at worst we see them die from drugs or oppression, shot down by police, or wasted away in jail.¹⁴²

Assata went from despair to reclaiming her right to have children, and threw out the guilt and doubt of bringing a new Black life into the United States.

"I am about life," i said to myself. "I'm gonna live as hard as i can and as full as i can until i die. And i'm not letting these parasites, these oppressors, these greedy racist swine make me kill my children in my mind, before they are even

¹⁴⁰ Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, 92.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 92-93.

born. ... Because our children are our future and i believe in the future and in the strength and righteousness of our struggle.”¹⁴³

Shortly after this decision, Kamau and Assata conceived a child while sequestered in the defendants’ room of the courthouse during their trial. Conceiving the child would be the easiest part of bringing that child into the world. Her pregnancy and birthing experience became an excuse for the further maltreatment and harassment by the guards and state authorities. After only two weeks her daughter Kakuya was taken from her to live with Assata’s mother, Doris. For years Assata and Kakuya’s mother-daughter relationship would exist solely within the confines of prison visiting rooms.

Assata shared a commonality with Black women revolutionaries throughout the Diaspora who struggle to maintain active roles as mothers under constant pressures, constraints and interference by the governments trying to silence their political voices. Winnie Mandela reflected on this in her own autobiography when discussing her imprisonment and political activity arising out of her resistance against Apartheid through her involvement with the National African Congress (A.N.C.):

It was not by choice that I spend so much time in prison but that did not stop me from having this enormous guilt that I had not played my role as mother. You can’t stop asking yourself what comes first, the nation or your children. We had chosen the nation.¹⁴⁴

While Assata shared these feelings, it was also a different experience for her because she became a mother during her repression for her political activity, whereas Winnie Mandela was a mother prior to and during her political activity and subsequent repression. Assata Shakur never had a chance to be a full time mother or experience a mother-child relationship that was not within the confines of her life as a political prisoner.

¹⁴³ Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, 93.

¹⁴⁴ Benjamin, Anne. *Winnie Mandela: Part of My Soul Went With Him*. Adapted by Mary Benson. New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984, 90.

During one of the visits her mother and daughter made to see her in Clinton Correctional Facility her daughter's actions clearly illustrated the negative effect that Assata's imprisonment was having on Kakuya. Assata realized that if she did not take immediate action, this would be the constant context for her relationship with her daughter. She describes the contrast between her own excitement to see her daughter and the child's aloofness and unwillingness to risk engagement.

I run up to kiss her. She barely responds. She is distant and stand-offish. Pangs of guilt and sorrow fill my chest. I can see that my child is suffering. It is stupid to ask what is wrong. She is four years old, and except for these pitiful little visits... she has never been with her mother.

Not until the little girl breaks down in sobs and blows of anger will she even speak:

"You're not my mother," she screams, the tears rolling down her face. "You're not my mother and I hate you." I feel like crying too...

I try to pick her up. She knocks my hand away. "You can get out of here, if you want to," she screams. "You just don't want to." (...) "I can't open the door," i tell my daughter. "I can't get through the bars. You try and open the bars."

My daughter goes over to the barred door that leads to the visiting room. She pulls and she pushes. She yanks and she hits and she kicks the bars until she falls on the floor, a heap of exhaustion. I go over and pick her up. I hold and rock and kiss her. There is a look of resignation on her face that i can't stand. We spend the rest of the visit talking and playing quietly on the floor. When the guard says the visit is over, i cling to her for dear life. She holds her head high, and her back straight as she walks out of the prison. She waves good-bye to me, her face clouded and worried, looking like a little adult. I go back to my cage and cry until i vomit. I decide that it is time to leave.¹⁴⁵

Inspired by this visit, Assata planned her escape. As discussed in Chapter Two, she successfully escaped from prison with the help of fellow activists. This time in exile finally gave her the opportunity to reflect on and absorb the impact of her prison experiences. While she was in prison she was too close to the situation to sit back and

¹⁴⁵ Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, 257-258.

reflect on it's effects, and instead built up defenses to merely get through the days, months and years. For the first time in years she was among peers.

My comrades helped a lot. They were so beautiful, natural, and healthy. I loved them for their kindness to me. It had been years since i had communicated with anyone intensely, and i talked to them almost compulsively. They were like medicine, helping me to ease back into myself again.¹⁴⁶

Although she still believed in a need for social change, she had lost some of her idealism about revolution based in ideas of nationalism. Rather than nationalism, she felt a need for an emphasis to be based on cooperation and unity within the Black community. She felt that a successful revolution would be international, involving all oppressed peoples.

Assata was able to successfully remain underground, although some of her liberators were not so lucky. After three and a half years she surfaced in Cuba. Life in Cuba granted her freedom from a life in the American Penal system, but it also came with its' own set of restrictions. Upon her arrival in Cuba, Assata did not speak Spanish, was not familiar with the country and had no family there. Assata would not see her daughter Kakuya again until 1985, when she was granted political asylum by the Cuban government and was finally able to make contact with her family and let them know where she was. Shortly thereafter Kakuya, accompanied by Assata's mother Doris and Aunt Evelyn came to visit her. Kakuya stayed on in Cuba to finally live with Assata for the first time since she was two weeks old.

On the other hand, Cuba offered a lifestyle that had never seemed attainable to her in the U.S., in an interview with Essence magazine writer Evelyn C. Wright she was quoted as saying:

¹⁴⁶ Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, 266.

Another thing I've been able to do in Cuba is rest. You live such an intense life in the States. And my life has been more intense than most [laughs]. Being in Cuba has allowed me to live in a society that is not at war with itself. There is a sense of community. It is a given in Cuba that if you fall down, the person next to you is going to help you get up.¹⁴⁷

These differences in community and culture led her to become interested, like many other African-Americans who came to the island, in analyzing the race relations in Cuba. She found it to be less segregated and more inclusive of Afrocentric culture, but she still missed her uniquely African American roots and traditions. For the first time in years she had physical freedom, but she felt that she would never truly be free. As a political exile, she knew she would never be able to return to the U.S., whether it was for a funeral of a loved one, the birth of a grandchild, or simply to reconnect with her roots and feel freedom in the country within which she was born. Addressing this in the 1997 article shortly after her mother's passing, she said:

The hardest part about exile is not being able to be there for people when you feel you are needed. On the day my mother died, a film crew headed by a Cuban friend of mine was here working on a documentary about my life. So on that day when I found out my mother had died, and I was so filled with grief and there was nothing I could do about it, I decided to go ahead with the filming. But I insisted on talking about my mother and her life. I talked about all the ways she struggled for dignity and her little acts of resistance. I talked about how she refused to be insulted, violated or deceived by the sickness of American society. I talked about her vulnerability and loneliness as they reflect on my own, and that of all the sisters who refuse to be dominated.¹⁴⁸

In ways such as this, she has been able to use even the most difficult parts of her circumstances to continue to be a revolutionary voice in the African diaspora. She has taken part in youth conferences, spoken out against political repression and human rights-violations perpetrated by the U.S. government, and works as a sort of cultural ambassador for African Americans visiting Cuba and Cubans interested in learning

¹⁴⁷ White, Evelyn C. "Prisoner in Paradise," *Essence*. June 1997.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

about the Afro-American reality. She states that it is through the continued interactions with African Americans visiting the Island that she is able to stay grounded:

I miss African-Americans. But not the U.S. government or all the things they put me through. I miss African-American culture, our speech dance and cooking. I miss friends and family. If it weren't for visits for friends and other African-Americans I meet who come to Cuba, I'd probably be in some kind of time warp. I learn so much from my sisters and brothers who come here. I get recharged and energized and reminded of how beautiful we are as a people. African people just shine. And people come telling the truth. When I ask how things are in the States, they don't give me the okeydoke they say, "Honey, things are hard." It reminds me I have to keep struggling.¹⁴⁹

Assata has lived up to the meaning of her chosen name – which is “she who struggles” and through her struggles she has shaped her own identity. She has not let an oppressive government dictate her legacy; she has affirmed her rights as a Black woman, revolutionary, and mother.

¹⁴⁹ White, Evelyn C. “Prisoner in Paradise,” *Essence*. June 1997.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This thesis has discussed the political activism of Afeni Shakur, Angela Davis, and Assata Shakur during the Black Liberation struggles of the nineteen-sixties and seventies. To lay the foundation that these cases rest on, Chapter Two discussed the strong historical precedence of women of African descent standing up as revolutionaries and activists. In every instance of resistance, although often not as well documented, there were female freedom fighters, resisters, and agents of change who struggled alongside the men. This holds true whether one is examining enslavement in the Caribbean where Nanny Maroon helped to preserve her culture and establish a sovereign African community within the slave holding colony of Jamaica, or if one looks to the recent struggle in South Africa to abolish apartheid where Winnie Mandela worked alongside her husband, Nelson Mandela, leader of the African National Congress (ANC), and other activists. She herself also served prison time for her resistance against the repressive Apartheid state.

Within the United States there is a strong tradition of Black women revolutionaries and civil rights activists who inspired our three women of interest. Such inspirations and found mothers include women such as Sojourner Truth who spoke out against the injustices of a society that preached democracy while maintaining a slave state, revolutionary women who fought alongside men during Nat Turner's rebellion, and Fannie Lou Hamer who risked life and limb to see her fellow citizens gain the right to vote, own property and live in safe and self-sufficient communities in the Mississippi Delta during the civil rights era of the 1950's and 60's.

Chapter Two also gives a brief history of the political organization that the women were affiliated with, helping to construct the historical context within which

these women's choices were made and the subsequent environment within which their cases were tried. When the Black liberation movement of the late nineteen sixties began women were once again on the front lines of the battle for equality, freedom and change. The Black Panther Party from its very inception included women in all facets – from running breakfast programs to leading classes that educated Black communities about self defense and their rights within the legal system. All three of the women in this thesis had a connection to this organization and felt strongly that it was under attack by the United States government because it was promoting revolutionary change and growth within African-American communities. One of the key ways that the government tried to undermine the strength of revolutionary groups such as the Panthers was to arrest, detain, and imprison key leaders and members of the party. This tactic is a common one practiced by the U.S. government and George Jackson, himself a political activist who lived out his life inside a prison, reflected on this fact:

Imprisonment is an aspect of class struggle from the outset. It is a creation of a closed society which attempts to isolate those individuals who disregard the structures of a hypocritical establishment as well as those who attempt to challenge it on a mass basis.¹⁵⁰

Jackson went on to explore how this concept plays out within America when he wrote about the real implications of the legal system and how it helped to maintain the status quo and eradicate challenges to its domination.

The ultimate expression of law is not order – it's prison. There are hundreds upon hundreds of prisons, and thousands and thousands of laws yet there is no social order, no social peace. Anglo-Saxon bourgeois law is tied firmly into economics... Bourgeois law protects property relations and not social relationships... The law and everything that interlocks with it was constructed for poor, desperate people like me.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Jackson, George. *Blood in My Eye*. Baltimore: Black Classics Press, 1980, 106-107.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

The political activity of Angela Davis, Afeni Shakur and Assata Shakur represented such challenges and like Jackson they also were confronted with legal repression and imprisonment.

Through the review of these cases there has been an examination of how the U.S. government perceives the political activity of African-American woman and how their role as political activists and revolutionaries play out in the media. The joint “liability” of being Black and being female that combined to prejudice their cases in the public eye was explored in Chapter Three. First of all, as women their cases were ignored or considered to be secondary to the activities of the more publicized Black male revolutionaries. Then, when they were considered, their activities were belittled as those of weak females who were following or pursuing or currying favor of the true male leaders:

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. 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 initiative and endeavors; and so their very appearance commingles in the conventional mind with that of the male revolutionary.¹⁵²

Conversely and paradoxically, their activities were deemed too bold and “unfeminine” to grant them the protections and allowances usually granted to this “weaker” sex: “Deviance is defined as different from normal, and normal is defined by stereotypes. Thus, if a normal woman is virtuous, passive, and maternal, then a woman who is not all of these things is by definition deviant.”¹⁵³

¹⁵² James, Joy. *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999, 98-99.

¹⁵³ Merlo, Alida V. and Joycelyn M. Pollock. *Women Law and Social Control*. Boston: Allyn Bacon, 1994, 4.

In addition to facing three separate forms of indifference and sexual discrimination, Black women were not included in the fold of the growing women's movement that was predominantly led by White women. The feminist movement often ignored the needs and issues that were most important to women of color and in doing so neglected to address the fact that for true feminism to be successful it had to dismantle not only issues of sexism, but those of race and class:

The reason racism is a feminist issue is easily explained by the inherent definition of feminism. Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women – as well as white economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.¹⁵⁴

Thus all three women discussed in this thesis felt disenfranchised from the mainstream women's movement choosing instead to ally themselves with Black men in the Black liberation movement even though issues of sexual equality sometimes went unaddressed.

In Chapter Four the thesis examined how each woman became politically conscious. It explored their reflections about the events, actions, and meaning of this period as well as the repercussions of these actions upon their lives today. Each woman fulfilled a unique role within the historical legacy of this era. Afeni Shakur represents the mass appeal of the Black Panthers among young urban disenfranchised African-Americans of the nineteen sixties. The organization provided a disciplined group that had positive goals and offered an alternative to gangs such as the Disciples, which she was briefly affiliated with. After her much publicized role in the New York 21 trial she struggled as a young woman and mother to find her footing in life. She

¹⁵⁴ Hull, Gloria T., 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: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1980, 49.

fell victim to many of the maladies, such as poverty and drug use that infested the Black community after the systematic destruction of the revolutionary movements by the American government, which left a void in the community's identity. She resurfaced in the American psyche with the rise and fall of her son Tupac Shakur. After his death she used his celebrity to try once again to affect positive change within her community by sponsoring youth programs and creative arts centers.

Angela Davis personified the role of the academically trained intellectual activist. Her widely publicized membership with the Communist party made her an instant celebrity and a worldwide example of the injustices perpetrated by the American government on the Black and progressive communities. Her experiences as a young activist continue to influence and shape the work she does to this day. Davis uses her role as a professor and intellectual celebrity to bring to light the discriminatory practices of the legal and prison system within this country, showing the indelible mark her own political imprisonment has had on her psyche.

Assata Shakur has become the archetype of the political prisoner in exile. More than either Afeni Shakur or Angela Davis, Assata's political actions of forty years ago continue to define and limit her life. She is the only one who was actually convicted of any of the charges brought against her, and had to seek alternatives outside the unjust law to reclaim her freedom. This freedom is not a complete one, since it resulted in her exile and she cannot return to her own community or directly be an agent of change within the African-American experience. Assata said herself:

Freedom! You askin me about freedom. Askin me about freedom? I'll be honest with you. I know a whole lot more about what freedom isn't than about what it is, cause I've never been free. I can only share my vision with you of the future, about what freedom is. Uhh, the way I see it, freedom is – is the right to grow, is the right to blossom.

Freedom is – is the right to be yourself, to be who you are, to be who you wanna be, to do what you wanna do.¹⁵⁵

Because of her unique status, she has become a symbol of resistance against a government that continues to actively repress and suppress Black revolutionary efforts. Celebrities and websites have taken up her cause, dedicated to making her story known and keeping her in the public's consciousness. Rapper Common and lyricist Cee-Lo composed a song that spread her story to a new generation entitled, "A Song for Assata." In it they narrate the events of the night that led to her arrest and subsequent trial and conviction and reflect on how her story impacts their political awareness:

I read this sister's story, know this it deserved a verse
I wondered what would happen if that woulda been me?
All this shit so we could be free, so dig it, y'all.
I'm thinkin' of Assata, yes.
Listen to my Love, Assata, yes.
Your Power and Pride is beautiful.
May God bless your Soul.¹⁵⁶

On the other hand, she is still an object of search and persecution by the U.S. government. New York City Councilman Charles Barron along with rap artists Mos Def and Talib Kweli have brought this fact to the public's attention when they took up her cause in 2005, gathering in front of City Hall to bring attention to the government increasing the bounty on her head to \$1 million dollars and including her on its domestic terrorist watch list.¹⁵⁷ Reflecting on New Jersey State Police Superintendent Rick Fuente's comment that "She is now 120 pounds of money... and we're going to follow up and make sure everybody is aware of this both inside and outside of

¹⁵⁵ Common & Cee-Lo. "A Song for Assata." *Like Water for Chocolate*. Album. MCA, 2000.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Crosley, Hillary. "Mos Def, Talib Kweli Fight for Exiled Political Activist," *MTV Think News*. May 25, 2005. Online. www.mtv.com/news/articles.

Cuba,”¹⁵⁸ Mos Def said: “It’s a very dangerous time for all Americans when any voice of dissent is this hotly hunted down, and when anyone’s life is reduced to 125 [sic] pounds of money and they’re trying to stand up for us and our people. Everybody needs to be concerned.”¹⁵⁹ Mos Def brings to light the problematic status of a government that reduces humans to a monetary value, with all of the connotations of chattel slavery. Assata figuratively becomes a fugitive slave on the run in spite of her inner freedom and it garners her both negative and positive attention spanning diverse communities:

Standing as a fugitive “slave” for twenty years, Shakur represents the unembraceable: The state exercises severe punitive sanctions against anyone who offers her refuge. Nevertheless, Shakur’s case has received support from ideologically disparate African Americans, ranging from incarcerated revolutionaries and prison intellectuals through political icons to neoliberal black studies professors.¹⁶⁰

In short Assata has become a symbol – for the left a symbol of resistance and revolution – for the right a symbol of terrorism and threat to the stability of the status quo.

Thus we can see that the story of these women has a frightening resonance with the political climate today, a climate in which free speech is under attack and surveillance of civilians’ private lives has become the “price we pay for freedom.” The media has once again become a tool of indoctrination by the government.

Conservatives, it is often argued, have come to understand the media better than liberals... the media industries are owned by certain corporate interest, and... they are structurally organized in such a way as to generate consent for the political and economic interests of business and government elites... currently existing media, both popular and elite, understand conservatives and

¹⁵⁸ Hepp, Rick. “Raising the stakes to bring in a cop-killer,” *The Star Ledger*. May 2, 2005. Online. www.nj.com.

¹⁵⁹ Crosley, Hillary. “Mos Def, Talib Kweli Fight for Exiled Political Activist,” *MTV Think News*. May 25, 2005. Online. www.mtv.com/news/articles.

¹⁶⁰ James, Joy. *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999, 113.

conservatism better, and they work to preserve established interests, their own included.¹⁶¹

Just as the government waged campaigns in the media to paint Angela Davis as a threat a national security because she was a communist, and portray Afeni Shakur and the New York 21 as terrorists, George W. Bush's administration campaigned to paint all those that questioned it's agenda as treasonous, unpatriotic threats to the state. His administration also became increasingly comfortable employing racial profiling as a way to generate a fear of the other through all aspects of our society. This results in a blind allegiance to those that promise to protect "the American dream," which does not acknowledge and often actively excludes people of color, immigrants, or religious minorities.

The conservative climate of Bush's government waged a winning battle in the media to focus the fears of the American people on the supposed threat of terrorism, and away from ever-present social maladies and a collapsing infrastructure that led to such tragedies as the destruction of the Gulf Coast during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. It clearly illustrated that the same problems that these women were fighting to bring to light and change were never resolved, proving that the government successfully dismantled political dissidence and agents for social change over forty years ago.

Equally ominous is the attack on freedom of thought and political expression. At a youth conference in Cuba, which took place before September 11th, Assata Shakur discussed her beliefs that this government has never ceased trying to suppress a leftist consciousness through surveillance and intimidation:

¹⁶¹ Morrison, Toni ed. *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the Construction of Social Reality*. Christine Tansell, contributor. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992, 45.

I believe personally that COINTELPRO is still going on under another name and a much more sophisticated, much more dangerous type of COINTELPRO. So we can never think that was an era that was in history. The United States government has not changed; in fact, I think it has become more repressive. The number of people in prison backs me up, the number of people that are killed by police backs me up, the number of names on computers backs me up, and the fact that Jesse Helms is on the senate floor talking about arresting people for coming to a youth festival backs me up. So I think that as time goes on it's more obvious that oppression is one of the most frequent tools to smash anybody that is fighting for real justice and real freedom in the United States.¹⁶²

Assata's beliefs have been validated by the formation of Homeland Security Department – the newest rendition of COINTELPRO, which among other things has increased surveillance on American's choices in reading materials, travel, charitable donations and political associations. Today, arguably more than ever we have something to learn from the life experiences of Afeni Shakur, Angela Davis, and Assata Shakur in their efforts to liberate themselves and their people from the shackles of political and ideological repression.

¹⁶² Shakur, Assata. *Assata: A Conversation with Youth in Havana at the World Youth Festival Havana, Cuba*. Videotape. With Assata Shakur. Peoples Video Organization, Manhattan Video Network.

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