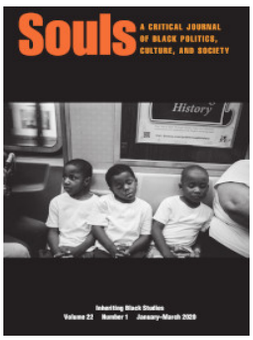

Souls

A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society

ISSN: 1099-9949 (Print) 1548-3843 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/usou20

Assata is Here: (Dis)Locating Gender in Black Studies

Patrice D. Douglass

To cite this article: Patrice D. Douglass (2020) Assata is Here: (Dis)Locating Gender in Black Studies, Souls, 22:1, 89-103

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2019.1711574

Published online: 08 Feb 2021.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=usou20

Souls
Vol. 22, No. 1, January–March 2020, pp. 89–103

Assata is Here: (Dis)Locating Gender in Black Studies

Patrice D. Douglass

This article employs the tools of Black Studies to critical engage Assata: An Autobiography, by Assata Shakur and aspects of Shakur's political legacy. Specifically, this article draws upon Black feminist critiques of gender theory to interrogate how Assata and the altering of Shakur's image elucidate the distinction between Human and Black gender. Thus, I argue the antiblack nature of the (un)gendering of Shakur, which extends from the text into the present, demonstrates the unrelenting hold of slavery on its after/life. In this respect, inheriting Black Studies must contend with the irreconcilability of antiblack (un)gendering violence as it expands beyond the individual into Blackness.

Keywords: Assata Shakur, Black feminism, Black Liberation Army, Black Studies, Gender theory

Black Studies is the rupture that has the potential to destabilize all subjective and objective modes of reason. As Jared Sexton has argued, "all researches, insofar as they are genuinely critical inquiries, aspire to black studies. Blackness is theory itself, anti-blackness the resistance to theory."[1] Given the emergence of the field out of the 1960s Black student struggles at San Francisco State University, and later at the University of California, Berkeley, Black Studies is an expressively political project.[2] Its politicality is bound by the conditions of its emergence, and the power it holds to pose the question, "What is the status of the Black in the world?"[3] As a field and mode of inquiry, it pushes against the conventions of modern political and social thought by centering the interrelations between ontology and sociogeny, that is, between being and how being is lived, imagined, and contested.[4] It is an interdisciplinary exploration into the violence of the Human vis-à-vis the Black. The fundamental contradictions of subject-making and object formation emerge through Black Studies and its theorizations of violence, suffering, and transcendence. Black Studies challenges the terms of engagement between

ISSN 1099-9949 print/1548-3843 online © 2021 University of Illinois at Chicago
DOI: 10.1080/10999949.2019.1711574

being, feeling, and knowing with respect to history, the conditions of the present, and the (im)possibilities of futures.

Many texts are written in the spirit of Black Studies, as inquiries into and theoretical ruminations on the status of the Black in the world. Arguably, Black Studies produces more texts that carry lasting impact and significance across shifts in political and social technologies than any other field. One such text is Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography*. Shakur was a member of the Black Liberation Army (BLA), a guerilla army formed at the height of the Black Power era, and is now a political exile in Cuba. Published in 1987, *Assata* employs personal narrative to document and theorize the protracted struggles Black people have faced and fought in the United States from slavery into the post-Civil Rights/Black Power era. Robyn Spencer describes the political moment of Black Power's founding as "a response to the crises and opportunities in working-class black America in the 1960s and 1970s. It was irreverent, bold, and brash. It was also organized, rooted in black political culture and deeply analytical. … And it faced almost unprecedent attack form the state."[5] Written in exile, *Assata* rejects autobiographical linearity by oscillating between adolescent stories, her coming into political consciousness, the conditions of her incarceration and trials after her capture by police on the New Jersey Turnpike, and her arrival in Cuba. The narrative weaves a story about the interlocking nature between the history of enslavement, the current conditions of Black life, and the call for Black Revolutionary politics and actions. The text disallows the reader to engage Shakur's personal experience as a singular story of her life potentials, possibilities, and downfalls. Instead, it tarries with representation and its modes of knowing. Here, autobiography becomes the tale of the collective, spoken through the lens of an individual, who is situated in intramural dialogue and community with other Black people.

Assata has been met with a strong affective tenor, required reading for radicals the world over. It has catalyzed political consciousness for many, from the time of its publication into the present. Why has what happened to Shakur in the 1970s, and how she narrativized it in the 1980s, remained relevant decades later? This continuity, I argue, is located more in the historical scope of Black suffering and struggle, rather than a naive relationship contemporary readers have with a bygone past. For Charlene A. Carruthers, founding National Director of the Black Youth Project 100, "Assata Shakur is a freedom fighter who teaches me how to fight. She is a living, breathing, and enduring testament to what is possible when Black people struggle for liberation."[6] While the emotional lure of the text is undeniable, its critical significance lies in the theory it produces. Though, emotion and theory need not be distinctive. With respective to Blackness, the various registers of emotion have the potential to animate theories that highlight the unknowable, unthinkable, and unsayable structural components of antiblackness. In David Marriott's recent *Whither Fanon?*, a book-length close reading of both Frantz Fanon's collected works and the larger field of Fanonism, Marriott describes Fanon's "object of knowledge" as "simply what it means to be black." This

exploration of what it means to "be black" is, for Marriott, "entirely distinct from an historical claim, both in its object and in its principles and methods, and it has nothing whatsoever in common with identity."[7] Likewise, the theoretical project of Shakur's autobiography is concerned with the ways that Black life is structurally bound to conditions that precede, anticipate, and exceed Shakur's individual life, and the individual lives of Black people more generally. To be clear, *Assata* is not a single story, nor is it a gesture toward inclusion in the Human.[8] *Assata* is a mode of Black theorizing, the antithesis of Enlightenment notions that human progress is the self-evident product of presence. It interrogates how the paradigm of antiblackness operates without recourse to the locations, performances, and identifications of individual black people. For Shakur, the conditions of black life made being a Black revolutionary less a *choice* than a necessity for survival, and her subjection through state violence was, likewise, not a result of her agency or will. In the same register, for Shakur, Black people who did not join the BLA were not, and are not, any more or less violated because of their choices.

While Blackness is figured centrally throughout *Assata*, gender is also a critical component of the story it tells. Conventionally, the autobiographical form invites forms of empathetic identification between the reader and the autobiographical subject. With *Assata*, the reader is confronted with the contradictions of experiencing empathy for Shakur as a Black woman subjected to unfathomable brutality, and reckoning with how the coordinates of gender are undone in the case of Blackness. Saidiya Hartman argues that, "the captive female does not possess gender as much as she is possessed by gender—that is, by way of particular investments in and use of the body."[9] The implications of Hartman's unveiling are not confined to the temporal limits of formal enslavement. Rather, Hartman directs thought to gleam the paradigmatic distinction between Human and Black gender. Gender for the Human can be performed as possession. However, gender for the Black exposes how Black bodies are possessed, not by their individual or collective (gender) identifications, but by the investments or valuations placed upon gender as a genre for designating Human distinction or "kind."[10] Which is to say, how gender, and its variations of terms, are made to mean (which shifts and is not static), *possesses* the Black, obscuring rather than clarifying where violence enters the condition. In this respect, *Assata* exposes an array of violence that seems shocking if one positions her gender as the first frame of thought, but is quite commonplace if slavery is positioned as the locus that makes the conditions of her captivity possible. The latter is critically relevant to recent shifts in Black Studies that consider how slavery and social death situate Blackness.[11] This is what Christina Sharpe terms, "Black studies in the wake": "a renewed call for black studies to be at the intellectual work of [a] continued reckoning [with] the longue durée of Atlantic chattel slavery, with black fungibility, antiblackness, and the gratuitous violence that structures black being, of accounting for the narrative, historical, structural, and other positions black people are forced to occupy."[12] *Assata* offers a narrative account and lens into the symbolic maneuvering of gender

through her Blackness. For Shakur, gendered subjectivity "in this manner [is] no less brutalizing than being an object of property."[13] Furthermore, I argue that investments in gender at the level of individual experiences—of privileges and protections, of particular scales of violence, of particular experiences of gendered subjectivity—are paradigmatically unavailable to the Black.

So where, in time and in theory, is Assata Shakur? In this article, I will explore this question by considering how Black gender is animated in *Assata* and by the ongoing United States government efforts to capture Shakur, who continues to live in exile in Cuba. Rather than assessing the totality of Shakur's life and legacy, this article mediates on how various moments in *Assata* challenge the reader to consider the availability of gender as a performative and identificatory structure for the Black. Furthermore, the arguments laid forth here grapple with the following: What is to be done about the fact that Shakur is still not free? This question must bear the symbolic weight of the war waged against Black liberation struggles, from the realm of police action to the terrain of the psyche. The United States government is now waging war on what they have termed "Black Identity Extremists," implying that *feeling* too Black is a form of terrorism.[14] Shakur's legacy, as well as that of many other 1970s Black revolutionaries who are now deceased, incarcerated, or in exile, plays a part in the extension and expansion of COINTELPRO.[15] The United States government is contending with the fact that we—the scholar, the politico, the everyday black person—*feel* a strong affection for Shakur and her comrades.

Black Studies emerged through the same political struggles in which Shakur participated, and being attentive to their shared genealogies brings to the fore the captive hold placed upon Black gender. The implications of Shakur's work and legacy are not confined to the political iconography of the 1970s and 80s. Instead, Assata is here. By this I mean, Black Studies provides a set of strategies to read *Assata* for its political value and to hold space for Shakur in a manner that contends with the long durée of Black liberationist struggles against the violence inaugurated by modern enslavement. The inheritance of Black Studies is marked by the explanatory power encapsulated in its re-posing the question of how the Black suffers across modes of subjective difference. Black Studies brings into focus the ways that the systems of meaning through which gender makes sense fail to apprehend the specificities and fungible structure of antiblackness. Black Studies confronts this contradiction, demonstrating the multivalent ways articulations of the Black as a gendered subject are entrapped by the opacity of loss, dispossession, and (im)possibility.

II

A key moment in *Assata* introduces an uncharacteristic break in the narrative form of the text. "In September, i was moved from the workhouse and entombed in the basement of middlesex county jail, allegedly because of the jail's proximity

to the middlesex county courthouse where the new jersey trial was scheduled to begin October 1. I was the first, and last, woman ever imprisoned there. It has always been a men's jail."[16] This is how Shakur describes her arrival at the Middlesex county jail for men. Shakur was housed here in solitary confinement while awaiting and then standing trial in Middlesex County, New Jersey. Shakur proceeds by describing the unfathomable conditions she is confined within. "For me to sleep on that filthy thing with one sheet was out of the question."[17] She immediately demands to speak to her lawyer and begins documenting her conditions, which included: "There was no natural light … the average temperature was 95 degrees … it was infested with ants and centipedes … they crawled all over me."[18]

What follows this scene is the only footnote in the entire autobiography. It documents the various Human Rights violations sent to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights by Shakur's attorney, Lennox S. Hinds, on behalf of Shakur and other political prisoners being held at that time. Shakur goes on to write, "They considered my case in the section of their report dealing with solitary confinement: "One of the worse cases is that of ASSATA SHAKUR, who spent over twenty months in solitary confinement in two separate men's prisons subject to conditions totally unbefitting any prisoner."[19] The autobiography continues and Assata is subsequently subjected to many more instances of state-inflicted violence.

But it is this particular moment, when she is housed in a men's prison, that is given the most individualized focus of any instance of violence in the book. In his foreword to *Assata*, Hinds primes the reader for how to engage with this moment. Hinds writes, "In the history of New Jersey, no woman pretrial detainee or prisoner has ever been treated as she was, continuously confined in men's prisons, under twenty-four-hour surveillance of her most intimate functions … As you read her story, imagine the effect these conditions must have had on this proud and sensitive woman."[20] Hinds asks that the reader experience empathy for Shakur as an individual, not as a calculated politico. Pointing to her pride and sensitivity, Hinds suggests that the political framing that Shakur uses to foreground her narrative underscores, rather than deflects, the impact of her mistreatment, that her political calculation could not protect her from this violation.

However, given that the text is saturated with violence, why find focused empathy in this particular moment, when Shakur is assumedly denied the recognition of womanhood? What makes this violence different or distinct? How would imagining the effects of this violence impart meaning that could not be amassed from the totality of her story? The intent of posing these questions is not a critique of Hinds, who is a central figure in the fight against Black political repression. Instead, it is to pause on how the assumptive logic of gender creeps into the text by way of the perception of Black gendered intelligibility. By assumptive logic of gender, I mean the notion that gender is a structure carried out by the embrace and/or denial of various (dis)possessed identities and performances as opposed to a dictate of Human/Black distinction. Black feminists have argued that the particularities of Black gender make the question of violence more difficult to elaborate.

As Kimberlé Crenshaw has argued, "Existing within the overlapping margins of race and gender discourse and the empty spaces between, it is a location whose very nature resists telling."[21] Discourse grafts the surfaces of structure, as it is asymptotic and illusive. Mediations on the advancing and shifting identifications, performances, and relations of racialized gendered subjects is dishonest about the stasis of antiblackness, which "resists telling."

Empathy, for Shakur as an individual, throws the irreconcilable tension between the distillation of Human and Black gender into relief, and suggests that a slight structural adjustment could remedy the violation Shakur experienced in the Middlesex County Jail. Simply placing Shakur in a women's prison, as she was at other times during her incarceration, does not unhinge the problem. It does not make her kin to women more generally. Though undoubtedly Assata should not have been placed in a men's facility, it is also clear what provided the conditions of possibility for this to occur. Black Studies literature if rife with examples of Black bodies existing in spaces where their gender is assumed not to exist.[22] An empathetic identification with Shakur would indicate that Black gender can possess a form of "symbolic integrity," and that the symbolic integrity of her gender is betrayed by placing Shakur in the Middlesex County Jail.[23] Under these terms, misgendering becomes read as a grand scale harm. But the symbolic integrity of gender is lost, a priori, for Shakur and other Black people, at the ontological level, as represented throughout the text. That is to say, throughout the text, the privileges and limit-point of violence assumed to accompany her gender are missing. The structure of Black (un)gendering reveals itself in a moment of crude honesty in her placement in the Middlesex County Jail. Gendered specificity and integrity are lost for the Black. As I have argued elsewhere, "black gender disallows political orientation to unthink the stasis of its conditions of violence, whether 'real' or 'imagined.'"[24] The instability of gender for the Black demonstrates how deeply entrenched in violence the paradigm of antiblackness is and, thus, is not inseparable from the totality of Shakur's narrative. At the very least, empathy should rest on the overwhelming nature of violence that sutures the totality of her life.

Unlike gendered Human subjectivity, the (un)gendering of Blackness is tethered by Black subjection. But the deracinating violence of Black gender is much more challenging to discern. There is no central grammar of suffering that can be called upon. Hence the paradox of the Black feminist: to make theoretically legible *a problem with no name*. Rather than suggest that this problem is Black womanhood, I would suggest, by way of the work of Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, that this analysis does not call for the heralding of a particular standpoint as much as a theorization of "a matter of history and proximity" to the black *mater*(nal).[25] For Jackson, the black mater(nal), "rather than index[ing] an identity category or fixed embodiment, the black mater(nal) at once marks the antiblack, sexuating logics of trace and its effects (probabilities, proximities, and intensities) as well as gestures toward said logics' point of rupture."[26] Thus, the problematic of Black gender is not about gender identity, as identity is always changing and vexed by

preconscious desires, unconscious associations, and structural violence that presents itself as truth. "I am … " is never a complete statement. Although "I am" is about a structure that conceals and veils the truth of paradigmatic essence.

In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman poses the question, "What would be made possible if, rather than assuming the subject, we began our inquiry with a description of subjectification that did not attempt to name or interpret anything but to simply describe its surfaces?"[27] In this respect, my method of reading *Assata* suggests that the category of woman is made unavailable to Shakur through the paradigmatic arrangements of enslavement, which constitute the Human/Black divide. Although she and others may use pronouns gendered female to describe her condition, the particularities of Blackness circumscribe how those pronouns can be employed to make sense of her experiences. What is assumed as a profound misgendering of Shakur as an individual, when placed in conversation with the conditions of all Black people – as she intends for the book to be read – demonstrates that this misgendering is not unique to Black women, but a condition of Black gender, writ large. Thus, *Assata* offers to the reader, the theorist, and the politico chapter upon chapter of descriptive antiblack (gendered) violence, without offering recourse or redress through an analysis of what it means or what should be done about what occurs. It is left to the reader to decide what use-value these scenes have, if any. Is the role of the reader to tell Assata how and under what conditions she suffered? Or is it more fruitful to use these materials to unearth, or war with, a consciousness of the assumptive logic of gender and how Black gender is understood to produce suffering?

At the level of narrative maneuver and association, *Assata* is acutely aware of gender violence. "I am a Black revolutionary woman," Shakur writers, "and because of this I have been charged with and accused of every alleged crime in which a woman was believed to have participate."[28] Rather than resting on the experience of gender as the endpoint of politics, the texts pushes to theorize gender in conversation with the structure of antiblack violence. This is not to say that the transition between the experiential register and structural analysis is always so succinctly performed. I also cannot say if this was a conscious maneuver by Shakur. But this, I argue, is how the text *labors*. Often, antiblackness is not the primary modality that Shakur associates with Black subjection, the text centers capital as that which conditions Black suffering. But there are moments that fall outside the logic of capital, that trouble the logics of gender theory, and that bring Blackness as an object of knowledge into focus. Employing *Assata* as a methodological tool reveals that Black gender is always in flux, never fixed or stable, and, further, rendered formless by its fungible status. The text provides a critical lens to theorize how Black gender is constitutive of the paradigm of enslavement. *Assata* advances a model for Black feminist theorizing that is aware of gender violence, while not subtending Black liberation as a biproduct of gender liberation. The relationship is more constitutive than a first-then or an either/or logic. Which is to say that gender is important but not essential

to how the Black suffers. However, the violence experienced by Shakur and exposed in the text disallows gender to fall completely out of the fold.

The violences that constitute a Black (un)gendering are written into the entire autobiography, and they are not, I would argue, solely nor exemplarily highlighted by Shakur's detention at the Middlesex County Jail. Since her arrest, and up to the present, Shakur has been subjected to a vicious propaganda campaign. As the beginning of the book demonstrates, in itemized form, Assata was arraigned on several unsubstantiated criminal charges. Her entire time in prison was conditioned by egregious forms of torture. Shakur was beaten ruthlessly by police officers and prison guards, was strip and cavity searched, was confined in an ant and centipede-infested basement in a men's prison, was held for months at a time in solitary confinement, was starved and subjected to intense medical neglect which almost resulted in the loss of her pregnancy, and had her baby stripped from her soon after birthing. These are instances of an (un)gendered Blackness. Shakur contextualizes these experiences through and in conversation with her childhood straddling the (imagined) border between the segregated South and the "integrated" North. However, as she details, there was little distance between her experience being terrorized by gun-toting whites while visiting her Grandparents in the beach towns of North Carolina, and being ridiculed and shamed by white children in New York City schools. Antiblack hostility, which is a priori (un)gendered, was the framing tone of Shakur's life and what called her to join the BLA. Further, it presents her story of coming into Black consciousness. Shakur writes, "Every day out in the street now, i remind myself that Black people in amerika are oppressed. It's necessary that I do that … After a while, people just think oppression is the normal state of things. But to become free, you have to be acutely aware of being a slave."[29] This is the (un)intentional effect of inhabiting a world where Blackness is nonexistence. The gratuity of Black suffering necessitates reminders. The confines of non-black feminist and gender theory are also constitutive of this paradigm.

III

"Freedom." After years living underground, following her liberation from prison, Shakur describes her arrival in Cuba: "I couldn't believe that it had really happened, that the nightmare was over, that finally the dream had come true. I was elated. Ecstatic. But i was completely disoriented. Everything was the same, yet everything was different."[30] Her description mirrors that of the formal emancipation of slavery, or what Hartman has called "the shifting and transformed relations of power that brought about the resubordination of the emancipated, the control and domination of free black population, and the persistent production of blackness as abject, threatening, servile, dangerous, dependent, irrational, and infectious."[31] *Assata* concludes with a postscript on Shakur's arrival in Cuba, but her story continues affectively in the minds and actions of readers, and through the desire for her capture.[32]

The public spectacle around Shakur's liberation to Cuba continues to be reanimated by the federal government. In May of 2013, the FBI increased its bounty for her capture and return to one million dollars.[33] Nearly 34 years after her liberation from prison, and 29 years after she was granted political asylum in Cuba, she was added to the Most Wanted Terrorist list by a Black Attorney General under the administration of the first Black President of the United States.[34] The reanimating of her case under these terms epitomizes what Frank B. Wilderson, III terms "objective vertigo, a life constituted by disorientation rather than a life interrupted by disorientation. This is structural as opposed to performative violence. Black subjectivity is a crossroads where vertigoes meet, the intersection of performative and structural violence."[35] The political disorientation of the black deputized against the Black. Though, the vengeance is clear as the United States vows to bring Shakur to heel.

The FBI bounty on Shakur still looms. Though the FBI, and the libidinal economy of antiblackness, have never been quite clear about *who she is*. Shakur writes, "The FBI cannot find any evidence that i was born. On my FBI Wanted Poster, they list my birth as July 16, 1947, and, in parentheses, "not substantiated by birth records." Anyway, i was born."[36] This misappropriation of her image and body spans temporal shifts, in much the same respect as the proclamation by Hortense Spillers that "my country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented."[37] Shakur the individual becomes a stand-in symbol for power, violence, and deceit. The vengeful nature of the FBIs pursuit of Shakur demonstrates that, at the symbolic and libidinal level, there remains value in reanimating the image of the dangerous, threatening, and infectious Black Revolutionary Woman.[38] This positioning of Shakur illuminates the fungibility of her physical form and her social and political origin. Furthermore, it animates her Black gender by re-asserting that docility is not a trait of Black womanhood. Rather, like other Black gendered tropes, she too is a purveyor of brute force and violence.

In a 2019 FBI "Most Wanted Terrorist Poster," calling for the capture of Shakur, there are four photos aligned across the center of the page. Three are aging grainy headshots of Shakur. These three images appear to have been taken voluntarily, and are contrary to the style and form of mugshots, which were once the primary photos used to represent the formerly incarcerated on wanted posters. The resizing and digitizing of these shots, crystalize Shakur in time, suggesting that "such a subjectivity cannot be called "human," if we understand "the human" to mark a linearity progressive rational movement toward self-consciousness."[39] However, the fourth and final image is a crisp and clear digital rendering of "Assata," created by the FBI, to represent what she may look like now, and captioned, "photograph age progressed to 69 year old."[40] It is clear that one of these images is not like the others. The digitally produced image offers an assumed closed circuit of representation, asserting that if prior facts are discernible then the present presentation of Assata is obvious. But it extends beyond mere representation and beyond technologies of speculative surveillance. The image assumes the

political right to give Shakur new form. The FBI cannot say with certainty that this is, in fact, Assata *now*. Yet it is offered up as a close-enough rendering, as an (im)posture of a credible source of truth. A generation earlier, Audre Lorde responded to images of Emmett Till's disfigured and brutalized body, writing, "However the image enters/its force remains within/my eyes." [41] Power congeals this image of Shakur in memory as a form of capture. It posits a subjective understanding of knowing *her*.[42]

In "Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia," Angela Davis discusses the shock she experienced when someone, who initially was unable to remember her name, referred to her as, "Angela Davis—the Afro."[43] She describes how it is both "humiliating and humbling" to be "remembered as a hairdo."[44] This moment, Davis attributes to the iconization of 1960s and 1970s social movements through vacant fashion and political tropes that both mimic the past and threaten to render the replication of its forms "ahistorical and apolitical."[45] Like Assata, the imaging of Davis in a particular form was catalyzed by media representations, and, most critically, by the portrayal of her image on an FBI most wanted poster. The image of Davis, adorning an afro was deputized to narrate in the first instance who *she* was, and replicate a story and inscribe an identity of the Black Revolutionary Woman. For Davis, the message was that "the pictures should be associated with arms and danger."[46] Again these associations upend the pretext of womanhood as nonviolent at the level of the assumptive logic of gender. The use of FBI photos, in both Shakur and Davis' cases, bring to the fore "the violent event of colonization and enslavement that is the foundation of colonial society ensures that, as soon as they appear as such (and they always already appear as such), [they] are problems."[47] Considering the complex vectors of Black visual representation, Davis goes on to argue, "the photographs identified vast numbers of my Black female contemporaries who wore naturals (whether light- or dark-skinned) as targets of repression."[48] The problem, inherent to the historical arc of enslavement, is that all who are proximate to the Black mater(nal), which is to say all presentations of Black gender, are captured by these images, though the pernicious ascription of the Black femme as violent is not lost upon the argument here.[49]

While Davis was underground, she confronted her own wanted poster to learn how to esthetically present herself antithetically to how she was imag(in)ed by the FBI. At the time of her capture, she was photographed adorning a distinctly different look. Her captured photos were usurped, fungibly building upon the narrative of Davis as nefarious and violent. Davis cites Roland Barthes on what it's like to be possessed by every image of one's self, or, in Barthes' words, "I feel that the photograph creates my body or mortifies it."[50] Likewise, the fourth wanted poster image of "Assata" participates a feedback loop of descriptive gestures that tell the world how to read Shakur, and others like her, in countless encounters. It represents her as baseless. Though, I would argue that the use of the first three pictures, and any other replication of her image, perform this same hold. The wanted poster's itemizing of twenty-three possible aliases and a list of physical scars, seek

to perfect the execution of her capture. However, each discursive or photographic depiction (dis)appears Shakur, making her more or less present and/or obscure. She is both figured, disfigured, and refigured by what Davis terms an ahistorical and apolitical association with her presence. A shrouded "meeting ground of investments" scaled down to the hieroglyphics of her flesh, that cast the Black Revolutionary Woman as an epidermal enigma that arises out of nowhere.[51]

Similar to Davis, Shakur is also confronted with how the exaggerated representations of her by the media and the government morphed her into an unrecognizable yet familiar form. After Shakur was abruptly taken from the Middlesex County men's facility, she was imprisoned on Riker's Island. She recounts meeting a prisoner named Coke, who is shocked to learn she is Assata Shakur. She writes,

> Assata, Assata Shakur, but my slave name is JoAnne Chesimard. […]
>
> When I saw your picture I thought you was much bigger. And much blacker, too.
>
> 'Really?' I laughed. It was a statement i heard over and over. Everybody told me they thought i was bigger, blacker, and uglier. When i asked people what they though i looked like, they would describe someone about six feet tall, two hundred pounds, and very dark and wild-looking.
>
> Bad as them papers said you was, I just knew you had to look bad. And here you are, just a little ole thing.[52]

Coke's description draws from media portrayals that "Assata," the revolutionary, the terrorist, is a darkened genderless brute, capable of destruction and violence. Coke's perception of Shakur and Shakur's "actual" appearance are situated in what seems like stark contradistinction. Yet this image is familiar to Shakur, she had heard it repeated countless times. Rather than suggest what Coke sees is wrong, I want to gesture elsewhere. First, asserting that Assata is not dark, genderless, brute, or violent, does nothing to disentangle these terms from Black abjection. In fact, freeing Assata from these terms by picturing her otherwise leaves unquestioned the fact that "blackness is the site of absolute dereliction at the level of the real" and "at the level of the symbolic."[53] Why are these terms unhuman? Reading these terms (dark, genderless, brute, and violent) through Blackness exposes how nonexistence figures each. As Davis writes in *Women, Race, & Class*, "The slave system defined Black people as chattel. Since women, no less than men, were viewed as profitable labor-units, they might as well have been genderless as far as the slaveholders were concerned."[54] Davis reveals how these terms are associated with the status of chattel: Black, genderless, physically capable of toiling at superhuman or unhuman rates, and requiring that one's potentials be held captive for the use of the master. But Blackness is not permanently fixed by these *exact* terms, it is conditioned by accumulation and fungibility. Blackness is held captive to innumerable terms of subjection, and those terms may not always appear as abjection.

In the after/life of slavery, Black people are made to take many forms. The morphing and (re)production of Black images is the violence of antiblackness. The (un)gendered nature of the refiguring of Shakur and Davis as brutal and violent, unjustifiably so, is figured in this calculus. In fact, *Assata* can be read as "rejecting the imago of violent black revolutionaries" though "she refused to reject armed struggle as a strategy" for Black freedom.[55] The fashioning of Shakur and Davis' images paradoxically situate the orientation of their Black womanhood by enslavement and its afterlife. Black womanhood, Black gender more broadly, is the property of a status where meaning and value are always in flux. In this sense, Black gender is (over)determined by instability.

My reading of *Assata* and various treatments of Shakur posits uncertainty and unreason as a productive ground for a politics of Black Studies. If certainty is the power represented by the FBI's recasting of Shakur's image, and if universal reason is domain of the Human (the logic of how the subject emerges and progresses), resting with opacity and fungibility opens alternative points of view for Black feminist theorizations of (gendered) violence. As politically awakening as *Assata* is, and will undoubtedly continue to be, it is an unfinished political project (insofar as Shakur is still actively hunted *and* Blackness remains captive to the after/life of enslavement). The irreconcibility of antiblack violence, gendered and otherwise, which extends beyond legalized enslavement into the present, presents a haunting. It unfolds a lacuna, that I, as a Black feminist scholar, continue to work through without the conviction that I can redress what it lays forth. My inheritance from Black Studies is the desire to make this clear, to bring into focus violence while making it evident that focus does not necessitate resolution. In the specific context of Black feminism, it means continuously grappling with how the fleshiness of Blackness matters, how it exposes the (il)logics of gender theory, and re-animates the call of Black Studies to counter the taken-for-grantedness of the status of the Black.

Notes

1. Jared C. Sexton, "Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts" *Lateral 1* (2012): np.
2. For an in-depth historical analysis of the origins of Black Studies, see Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).
3. My used of "the Black" here, and throughout this article signals two things. First, this usage is a commentary on the objectifying overdetermined nature of Blackness. Secondly, the Black signals the infinite approaches Black Studies can take to consider the term in (non)relation with other things. For example, throughout the piece I consider the Black politico, the Black woman, and the Black gendered subject, as particular interrogations of the term.
4. For a full engagement with the relationship between ontology and sociogeny, see David Marriott, "Existence," in *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2018), 277–313.
5. Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* (Durha, NCm: Duke University Press, 2016), 1.
6. Charlene A. Carruthers, "Hearing Assata Shakur's Call: A Black Feminist Reflection on 'To My People'" *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly 46* (Fall/Winter 2018): 222.

7. Marriott, *Whither Fanon*, xviii.
8. Sylvia Wynter describes the Human as an overrepresentation of human form. She writes, "This pattern is linked to the fact that while in the post-sixties United States, as Herbert Gans noted recently, the Black population group, of all the multiple groups comprising the post-sixties social hierarchy, has once again come to be placed at the bottommost place of that hierarchy, with all incoming new nonwhite/non-Black groups, as Gans's fellow sociologist Andrew Hacker earlier pointed out, coming to claim 'normal' North American identity by the putting of visible distance between themselves and the Black population group (in effect, claiming "normal" human status by distancing themselves from the group that is still made to occupy the nadir, 'nigger' rung of being human within the terms of our present ethnoclass Man's overrepresentation of its 'descriptive statement' as if it were that of the human itself), then the struggle of our times, one that has hitherto had no name, is the struggle against this overrepresentation," in "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3.3 (Fall 2003): 261–62.
9. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-Century America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 100.
10. See Greg Thomas, "Proud Flesh Inter/Views: Sylvia Wynter," *Proud Flesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics & Consciousness 4* (2006): 24, for Sylvia Wynter's articulation of gender as a genre of the Human and a distinction of Human kind.
11. For a deeper engagement with the social death turn in Black Studies, see the work of Saidiya V. Hartman, David Marriott, Jared C. Sexton, Christina Sharpe, and Frank B. Wilderson, III.
12. Christina Sharpe, "Black Studies: in the wake," *The Black Scholar 44.2* (Summer 2014): 59.
13. Hartman, *Scenes*, 94.
14. An FBI report, leaked in October 2017, exposed the U.S. governments creation and use of the term "Black Identity Extremists" to identity politicized black people as potential domestic terrorist. For more, see Khaled A. Beydoun and Justin Hansford, "The F.B.I.'s Dangerous Crackdown on 'Black Identity Extremists,'" *New York Times*, November 15, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/15/opinion/black-identity-extremism-fbi-trump.html (accessed January 9, 2019).
15. COINTELPRO, refers to the FBI's Counterintelligence Program, which began in the 1940s to monitor and intervene in the activities of the Communist Party of the United States and other domestic political organization. The program is most notable for its roll in surveilling, imparting dissension, and destabilizing Black Power Movement organizations, such as the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army. Many Black political leaders targeted by the program are still incarcerated as political prisoners. For more on COINTELPRO, see Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars Against Dissent in the United States* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 2001).
16. Ibid., 65.
17. Ibid., 66.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., XV.
21. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Whose Story Is It Anyway? Feminist Antiracist Appropriations of Anita Hill," in *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 403.
22. For examples, see Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), Thomas A. Foster, *Rethinking Rufus: Sexual Violations of Enslaved Men* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2019); Cece McDonald "Go Beyond Our Natural Selves": The Prison Letters of CeCe McDonald, *TSQ: Transgender Quarterly 4*, no. 2, (2017),

243–65, Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton Books, 1999); David Marriott *On Black Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); John Saillant, "The Black Body Erotic and the Republican Body Politic, 1790–1820," *Journal of the History of Sexuality 5*, no. 3 (1995): 403–28.

23. Hortense J. Spillers discusses Blackness as lacking symbolic integrity in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics 17*, no. 2 (Summer 1987), 64–81.
24. Patrice D. Douglass, "At the Intersections of Assemblages: Fanon, Capécia, and the Unmaking of the Genre Subject," in *Conceptual Aphasia in Black: Displacing Racial Formation*, ed. P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 103.
25. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "'Theorizing in a void': Sublimity, Matter, and Physics in Black Feminist Poetics," *South Atlantic Quarterly* (July 2018), 630.
26. Ibid.
27. Hartman, *Scenes*, 100
28. Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987), 50.
29. Shakur, *Assata*, 262
30. Ibid., 266
31. Hartman, *Scenes*, 116.
32. I want to caution against reading Cuba as an untainted space for Black freedom. As Joy James writes, " … the fact that media reported in 1998 that the U.S. State Department was seeking to negotiate with the Cuban government to lift the crippling forty-year embargo in exchange for the extradition of Assata Shakur and ninety other U.S. political exiles suggests that there exist no fixed sites for 'freedom,'" *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 113.
33. See Krissah Thompson, "Assata Shakur was convicted of murder. Is she a terrorist?" *The Washington Post*, May 8, 2013.https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/assata-shakur-was-convicted-of-murder-is-she-a-terrorist/2013/05/08/69acb602-b7e5-11e2-aa9e-a02b765ff0ea_story.html?utm_term=.2891ec7a9373 (accessed January 9, 2019).
34. See Bruce A. Dixon, "Not Your Daddy's COINTELPRO: Obama Brands Assata Shakur 'Most Wanted Terrorist'," May 8, 2013. https://blackagendareport.com/content/not-your-daddys-cointelpro-obama-brands-assata-shakur-most-wanted-terrorist (accessed January 9, 2019).
35. Frank B. Wilderson, "The Vengeance of Vertigo: Aphasia and Abjection in the Political Trials of Black Insurgents," *InTensions* 5 (2011): 3.
36. Shakur, *Assata*, 18
37. Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 65
38. This reference to the term "Black Revolutionary Woman" comes from Shakur's use of the term to describe herself. However, for a more extensive theoretical exegesis of the term, see Kara Keeling *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007).
39. Kara Keeling "Passing for Human: Bamboozled and Digital Humanism," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* (June 2008): 243.
40. See "Most Wanted Terrorist," FBI. https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/wanted_terrorists/joanne-deborah-chesimard/@@download.pdf (accessed January 21, 2019).
41. Audre Lorde, "Afterimages," https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42582/afterimages
42. The term "subjective understanding" is used here in the same respect as its usage in, Sylvia Wynter, "1492: A New World View," in *Race, Discourse, and the Origins of the Americas: A New World View,* ed. Vera Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 5–57.
43. Angela Y. Davis, "Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia," *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn 1994): 37.
44. Ibid.

45. Ibid., 38.
46. Ibid., 41.
47. Keeling, "'In the Interval': Frantz Fanon and the 'Problems' of Visual Representation, *Qui Parle* (Spring/Summer 2003): 102.
48. Davis, "Afro Images," 42.
49. Christina Sharpe argues, under enslavement, "The mother's condition (her non/status) reappears in the present in the ways that all black people, regardless of sex/gender, but especially the young and poor and working class have become in the United States (and not only in the United States) the symbols of the less-than-Human being condemned to death," in "Black Studies: in the wake," 62.
50. Qtd. in Davis, "Afro-Images," 41.
51. Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 65–67.
52. Shakur, *Assata*, 87.
53. Frank B. Wilderson, III, "The Prison Slave as Hegemony's (Silent) Scandal," *Social Justice* (Summer 2013):25.
54. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, 5.
55. James, S*hadowboxing*, 114–5.

About the Author

Patrice D. Douglass is Assistant Professor of Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies at Duke University. She received her PhD in Culture and Theory from the University of California, Irvine. Her research interests include black feminist theory, the legal archive of slavery, political theory, and gender theory.