USING THE PEN AS A WEAPON

Reconstructing Black Womanhood in the Life Writings of Angela Davis, Elaine Brown, and Assata Shakur

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The cover page features a poster which has appeared in the *Black Panther* newspaper in 1969. The poster, which depicts a female black panther holding a spear, was created by the graphic artist Emory Douglas who worked as the Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party from 1967 until the Party dissolved in 1982. In line with the claim of the Black Panthers that they promoted gender equality, Douglas stated the poster depicted that "women were a major part of the Party … their role was equal to that of men in the Black Panther Party" (qtd. in Lumsden 904).

(Source of poster: Moca Pacific Design Center, *www.moca.org/emorydouglas*)

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From the left to right: Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, Elaine Brown (Source: Associated Press)

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BLA	Black Liberation Army
BPP	Black Panther Party
COINTELPRO	Counter Intelligence Program
CRC	Combahee River Collective
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
TWWA	Third World Women's Alliance

INTRODUCTION

LIBERATING THE RADICAL BLACK WOMAN

I used to dream militant dreams
of taking over america to show
these white folks
how it should be done

I used to dream radical dreams
of blowing everyone away
with my perceptive powers
of correct analysis

I even used to think I'd be the one
to stop the riot and
negotiate the peace

then I awoke and dug
that if I dreamed natural
dreams of being a natural
woman doing what a woman
does when she's natural

I would have a revolution.

-Nikki Giovanni "Revolutionary Dreams," 1970

Much controversy aroused after the editors of *The New Yorker* decided to feature "The Politics of Fear," a cartoon by illustrator Barry Blitt, on the cover of the magazine's July 21, 2008 issue. On this particular cover, shown in illustration 1.1, Barack Obama is depicted as an Islamic terrorists while his wife Michelle is portrayed as a gun-toting Black Panther who are fist-bumping each other in the Oval Office while the American flag is burning in the fireplace

behind them. Although David Remnick, the editor-in-chief of *The New Yorker*, clearly stated that the cover should be perceived as "satire … meant to target the distortions, misconceptions, and prejudices about the Obama's past and politics," (qtd. in Sklar par. 5) Obama's campaign spokesman Bill Burton has criticised the cover as providing a useful tool for advancing the idea that Obama is a terrorist and Michelle an angry revolutionary (Sklar par. 2).

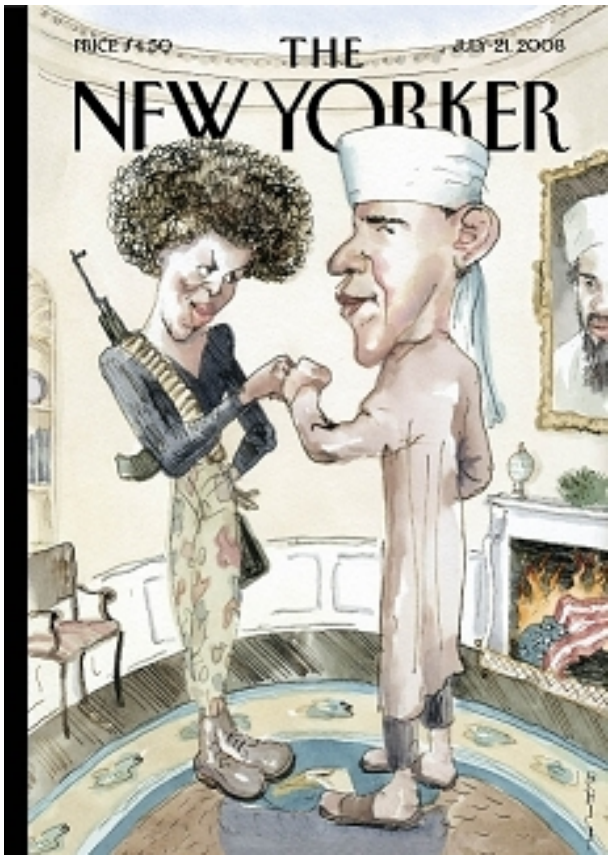

Illustration 1.1. Barry Blitt's "The Politics of Fear," used on the cover for the July 21, 2008 issue of *The New Yorker*.

However, besides being a useful illustration for ridiculing, supporting, or analysing the prejudices and stigmas the Obama's are confronted with, such as, as Remnick's states, "the idiotic notion that somehow Michelle Obama is the second coming of the Weathermen or

most violent Black Panthers," it is also a relevant image for examining how female Black Panthers are represented as and perceived in American culture and society (qtd. in Sklar par. 4).

In the posthumously-published 1965 *The Autobiography of Malcolm X as Told to Alex Haley*, which has become one of the canonical texts of Black Power advocates, Malcolm's discussion of the ideology of proper gender roles significantly shaped the sexist thinking in the ideology of the Black Power movement. However, although Malcolm's statements about women have been called misogynist as he stated, for example, that "all women, by their nature, are fragile and weak" who had to be protected by strong black men "in whom they see strength," his actual relationships with black women show that there are distinct differences between Malcolm's rhetoric on gender politics and the reality (96). While many representations of black women have simplified Malcolm's comment that "women love to be exploited," (*Malcolm X* 135) and if they not, they exploit men, to the image of women as being, as Stephane Dunn points out, "the older stereotype of the mammy, a stereotype of a black woman who was submissive to white control but too dominating over her own men," (44) few have taken the gender dilemmas as evident in Malcolm's work into consideration. Furthermore, few representations reflect, as Sheila Radford-Hill notes, "the cultural dynamics that produced these views" (64). As Malcolm lived in a patriarchal and racist world, it should be taken into consideration that his view on women was influenced by dominant gender ideologies of his times on white manhood and womanhood, which he, as Patricia Hill Collins suggests, "applied uncritically to the situation of African Americans" (*Black Sexual Politics* 74). As, for example, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 ethnography *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* demonstrates, black female subordination while at the same time affirming black manhood was rooted in the notion that men should regain their position as the social and economic head of the family by being placed in, as Moynihan claims, "an utterly

masculine world" (qtd. in Dunn 68).

These representations of women changed however in the early 1970s, when black women actively pushed against the definition of Black Power as a "masculine regime that sought to institutionalize all forms of male privilege" (Radford-Hill 70). With organizations such as SNCC's Black Women's Liberation Committee, radical writings such as Mary Ann Weathers's 1969 manifesto "An Argument for Black Women's Liberation as a Revolutionary Force," and literary works such as Toni Morrison's 1973 *Sula*, the agency and voices of black women emerged more visibly in black public discourse because of these feminist projects. Furthermore, as the Panthers openly denounced sexism with BPP leader Eldridge Cleaver stating that "the women are our half. They're not our weaker half; they're not our stronger half. They are our other half," (qtd. in Ogbar 277) the Black Panther Party became the first major black organisation to align itself with the women's liberation movement of the 1970s. However, despite that the BPP appointed women to key positions, and its newspaper, the *Black Panther*, featured representations of Panther women as being strong and beautiful, women in the BPP such as Kathleen Cleaver and Ericka Huggins continuously had to deal with male chauvinism and sexism prevalent among their the male counterparts. In line with Malcolm X's dilemma concerning his admiration for his "big, black, outspoken and impressive" (4) half-sister Ella while he was simultaneously not able to fully acknowledge that she has been a vital source of power and freedom in this life, the representation of women as being, what Dunn calls, "black bitches" intensified when female activists dared to address sexism or criticise black masculinity (44).

Taking these complexities of race and gender as categories into account, together with the fact that women, as Nicole Martin states, "were key in shaping the Black Panther Party," (par. 2) it is not surprising that the current interest in the Black Power period aiming to shed a more nuanced, light on the Black Power movement, is focused on the experiences of female

activists to counter the image of a supposedly male-centered, violent movement. Although there are various approaches which could be taken to explore this issue, ranging from focusing on individual female activists icons such as Higgins, to placing black feminists collectives such as the Third World Women's Alliance in a nexus of Black Power groups, this thesis will explore Black Power revisionism by focusing on the life writings[1] of thee female revolutionaries affiliated with the Black Power movement. This approach has been chosen for two main reasons. First of all, the life writings of black women coming to age in the Black Power movement are useful sources to explore, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson suggest, "the complex legacies of racial and sexual exploitation" of radical political movements in the 1960s and 1970s (6). To better understand this observation, it is useful to take Françoise Lionnet's theory of "métissage" as outlined in her 1989 *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*, into consideration. In staking out a territory of life writing by women of colour, Lionnet suggests that as historically silenced subjects, women create "braided texts" of many voices emphasising the "irreducible hybridity of identity" (4). In privileging difference, plurality, and voices, Lionnet asserts that not only new subjects but new kinds of subjects emerged in the life writing of women (5), such as is the case in Angela Y. Davis's 1974 *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*, Elaine Brown's 1992 *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*, and Assata Shakur's 1987 *Assata: An Autobiography*. The second reason why these three women and their life writings are selected to be discussed is more straightforward. Before explaining this in-depth, a brief summary of the content of the life writings already reveals the striking similarities in the women's experiences and thus the kind of subjects they address in their texts. Davis's *An Autobiography* follows her story from her childhood, to her being charged as an accomplice for homicide and kidnapping, and ends with

[1] Instead of using the term autobiography, the concept of 'life writing' will be used in this thesis to refer to Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's texts. Taking into consideration that autobiography, as Smith and Watson observe, "only refers to the traditional Western mode of the retrospective life narrative," (*Reading Autobiography* 4) the more inclusive term life writing is used as the heterogeneity of self-referential practices is a major theme in the three texts.

her being not find guilty. Brown's *A Taste of Power* relates the dramatic story of her youth, her political awakening, her rise to power in the BPP and ends with the moment she decides to leave the Party. Lastly, Shakur's narrative opens with her being arrested for murder of a New Jersey state trooper, describes her incarnation, and ends with her being given political asylum in Cuba. As this shows, an overarching and central theme in each of the women's focus on their experiences as revolutionaries. Furthermore, not only were these women influential in the Black Power movement, with Davis having been a prominent associate of the BPP, Brown having chaired the BPP from 1974 until 1977, and with Shakur having served in the BPP as well the Black Liberation Party, their works were also for a long period, as Margo V. Perkins points out, "the only book-length autobiographies published by women on the front lines of the Black Power Movement" (xiv). Combining these two reasons, it will in particular be explored how the life writings of these activists shed new light on the politics of gender in the Black Power movement, an issue largely ignored in the life writing of Black Power male activists such as in Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* and Huey Newton's *Revolutionary Suicide* (Perkins xvi).

However, although it will be examined which kind of new subjects emerge in Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings, the main focus of the analyses will be on exploring the rhetoric of self-presentation these women used. In order to provide more direction to this approach, their rhetoric is discussed in the context of 1970s feminist discourse as, for example, Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, in which black and white patriarchal notions of black women are challenged. In doing so, the analyses of these life writings aim to contribute to the academic discussion which focuses on discussing the (in)compatibilities of black feminism and Black Power ideology. On the one hand, scholars such as Jeanne Theodaris and Komozi Woodard suggest that by exploring "the ways women negotiated race, gender, class, and sexuality *within* the Black Power movement," the

scope of black radicalism can be more fully understood (6). Furthermore, other scholars reject the notion that black feminism was a reaction to the exclusions of Black Power. For example, Stephen Ward suggests the following: "Black feminism was not simply a critique of Black Power politics but, rather, a *form* of it … black feminist organizing of the 1960s arose largely as a response to an increasingly misogynistic and male-dominated political culture, but its growth and evolution in the 1970s reflected a wider commitment to progressive political action and a sustained engagement with the struggles of African American communities" (121). However, although acknowledging that Ward's observation that "a broader black feminist sphere" (122) came out the Black Power Movement is a viable point, Tracy Matthew's detailed study on the role of women in this movement shows that despite women in the Black Power organisations "carved a space of genuine agency and political power," it was "one that was constantly under threat" (231).

Although there is valid research available on the connection of 1970s black feminism with the development of transnational feminism and third world feminism,[2] this thesis will take a less universal and more particularistic approach to explore the relationship between feminism and Black Power. In doing so, Kimberlé Crenshaw's "intersectionality" will serve as a key concept to analyse the fluid, flexible but complex boundaries between Davis's, Brown's and Shakur's identity as being both black as well as women ("Mapping" 1241). Coined in 1989, Crenshaw describes intersectionality, also sometimes referred to as intersectional feminism, in its simplest form as a term which conceptualises how different types of power structures and forms of discrimination interact in the lives of minorities, specifically black women ("Mapping" 1242). Although the concept of intersectionality emerged after the 1970s, it provides a useful theoretical framework to study Davis's,

[2] See, for instance, Cheryl Higashida's *Black Internationalist Feminism* (University of Illinois Press, 2011), Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Duke University Press, 2003) and Valentine M. Moghadam's *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks* (John Hopkins University Press, 2005).

Brown's, and Shakur's life writing, as Crenshaw states the following: "In every generation and in every intellectual sphere and in every political moment, there have been African American women who have articulated the need to think and talk about race through a lens that looks at gender, or think and talk about feminism through a lens that looks at race. So the intersectionality theory is in continuity with that" (qtd. in Adewuni par. 3).

Although intersectionality will serve as a key concept in this thesis, it should be pointed out that the concept has been criticised by research coming from the other side of the spectrum of the academic discussion regarding the connection between black feminism and Black Power. For example, Algernon Austin's 1999 essay "Theorizing Difference within Black Feminist Thought: The Dilemma of Sexism in Black Communities," points out that intersectionality has its limitations. In suggesting that the use of intersectionality as a theoretical tool to demonstrate that black women's oppression based on race, gender, and class fails to engage the diversity of black women's political views, Austin instead focuses on the "ideological factors that may lead black feminists away from addressing the issue of black sexism" (54). Moreover, Austin argues that antagonism exists between black feminism and black nationalism as the preference on advocating black nationalism leads black women away from fully focusing themselves on challenging issues of sexism and chauvinism (58). In demonstrating that few major works of black feminist from 1960 to 1990 have overtly discussed the theme of sexism or gender oppression, Austin concludes from his research that "black women with black nationalist or black Marxists orientations are less likely to support black feminism. Opposition to black feminism may be strongest among those women espousing black nationalism" (64).

Taking these conflicting views into consideration, the analyses of Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings will focus on the ways their texts function as "extensions of their political activism," (Perkins 2) both in terms of black feminism and Black Power ideology.

However, besides approaching these works as political writings, and besides dealing with the question focusing to what extent these three female activists have constructed an alternative history of the Black Power movement, the main question is framed around the psychological battle these women experienced caused by the internal contradictions between the Black Power movement's ideals and its practices. Using Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality to explore the various types of discrimination black women faced, to what extent do Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings reveal how intersectional systems of oppression coming from within as well as outside the Black Power movement have motivated but also challenged their reconstruction of black womanhood?

In framing this research question, Crenshaw's intersectionality has been specifically included as it is not only a useful concept to expose systems of oppression and different forms of discrimination, but also because the concept has entered the mainstream debate on feminism only in the past few years.[3] Although intersectionality has become a popular concept to support the point that feminism and sexism focuses too much on the plight of white women only, the concept has also been used to reject actress Patricia Arquette's remark she made backstage during this year's Oscar ceremony (qtd. in Barmore par. 1). By stating that "it's time for all the gay people and all of the people of color to fight for us [women] now," (qtd. in Barmore par. 4) Arquette has been criticised for viewing , as Heather Barmore states, "feminism through the lens of her experience as a white woman, but failed to acknowledge that discrimination and privilege (or lack thereof) manifests at the intersections of race, class, sexual identity and orientation and gender" (par. 5). Taking this into account, intersectionality will be used to analyse how the rhetoric used in Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings exposes these intersectional systems of race *and* gender oppression. However, more than

[3] See, for example, "Akilah Hughes Explains Intersectional Feminism With The Perfect (Pizza) Metaphor" (*Huffington Post*, 15 Apr. 2015), "The Uses and Abuses of Intersectionality" *(The New Statesman*, 20 Feb. 2014), and "'Intersectional Feminism'. What the Hell Is It? (And Why You Should Care)", (*The Daily Telegraph*, 15 Jan. 2014).

exposing this oppression, writing their experiences down is also a strategy, as Davis, Brown, and Shakur demonstrate, to "give voice to the voiceless," and a tool to provide alternative ways of transformative activism by theorising the obstacles they were faced with, and black women remain to be facing to today (Perkins 3).

It should be emphasised that conflicts between black women's influence or leadership and the gender norms of Black Power ideology was not confined to black nationalist organisations such as the BPP only. As, for example, Cynthia Fleming's 1998 biography of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, a woman who was essential to the daily running of SNCC, shows, is that Smith was struggling with gender roles in the black community, as she stating that "the crusade for racial justice was really men's work after all" (qtd. in Fleming 166). Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore to what extent women like Smith challenged definitions of gender roles in SNCC, it could be stated that the confusion Davis, Brown, and Shakur dealt with was not dissimilar from the personal crisis other black women like Smith were dealing with. As especially during and after 1966, SNCC workers, as Clay Carson notes, "stressed the need to inculcate among urban blacks a new racial consciousness as a foundation for future struggles," and as SNCC's organisational form of participatory democracy and ideology of inclusion and cooperation clashed with the rhetoric of Black nationalism, it could be stated that internal contradictions in the liberation's movement's ideology and patriarchal norms are relevant to explore. In other words, the experiences of Davis, Brown, and Shakur as described in their life writings, provide relevant insights and criticism to the wider issue of gender oppression in the nationalist struggle of the 1960s and 1970s.

As mentioned before, the works of Davis, Brown, and Shakur were for a long time the only life writings available from women actively participating in the Black Power movement. However, it should be noted that in 2010, the life story of Black Panther Safiya Bukhari, who

died in 2003, was posthumously published.[4] Although Bukhari's *The War Before: The True Story of Becoming a Black Panther, Keeping the Faith in Prison & Fighting for Those Left Behind* is a very useful autobiographical text for exploring the main question of this thesis, Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings have been selected as the three main primary texts as there are two important distinctions. First of all, Bukhari's *The War Before* is a collection of 22 edited commentaries, in which each chapter could be read as a separate essay in which she makes a distinct argument, whereas Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's texts overall present a more coherent life narrative. Secondly, although *The War Before* features chapters which provide thorough insight in her life as a Black Panther, the latter half of the work is mainly focused on her lifelong commitment as an activist fighting primarily for the rights of political prisoners. Although this part of her life story is fascinating to, to discuss it is beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, *The War Before* features a highly relevant chapter for examining the thesis question. For this reason chapter 6, "On the Question of Sexism Within the Black Panther Party," taken from Bukhari's life writing will be used as a primary texts which will be discussed in the light of the analyses of Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings.

In terms of selecting secondary sources, it should be emphasised that an interdisciplinary rather than a purely literary, philosophical, or sociological approach is used to explore the life writings. It is, therefore, that some of the main secondary sources used in this thesis are scholarly works discussing the possibilities of "autobiographical literary criticism" (Freedman, Frey, Zauhar 3). For analysing the literary mode of autobiography, Sidonie Smith's and Julia Watson's, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, and *Women, Autobiography, Theory* and Johnnie Stover's *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography* serve as important secondary sources. In doing

[4] On a side note, Kathleen Cleaver, the widow of Eldridge Cleaver and former communications secretary of the BPP, is also reportedly working on her memoir, tentatively titled *Love and War.*

so, more general "tools" for reading life writings taken from *Reading Autobiography* such as "the strategy of gaining agency," exploring the connections between the compatible or conflicting "autobiographical I's," and examining "models of identity," (*Reading Autobiography* 72) will be combined with literary strategies taken from *Women, Autobiography, and Theory* to further "situate subjectivity in women's autobiographical practices" (5) In turn, the use of these tools will be further placed in context by using these strategies to explore the rhetoric used by black women in autobiography as explained by Stover. Furthermore, other important secondary sources serve understanding and deepening the discussion of the concept of intersectionality. Although Crenshaw's texts on intersectionality serves as the main sources for examining and explaining this concept, it should be noted that Crenshaw originally used intersectionality in discourses of law, most notably to capture the applicability of black feminism on anti-discrimination law. However, throughout the years, intersectionality has been expanded to use as a concept in other academic disciplines and discourse, such as American Studies, ethnic studies, and women's studies, as the concept guides, as Michele Berger and Kathleen Guidroz suggest, "new and established researchers to engage in a critical reflection about the broad adoption of intersectionality that constitutes a new social literacy" (4). In theoretically contributing to understanding the applicability of intersectionality, the concept is placed in a discussion focusing on the ways Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's identity, both in terms of being black as well as being female, has been shaped by systems of oppression which could be analysed by intersectionality. In doing so, this interdisciplinary approach will be used to analyse how Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's use of rhetoric is connected by the ways they position themselves in the sociopolitical context of America in the 1970s, taking Stover's viable observation into account that "the African American woman's autobiography took on hybrid characteristics as a merger of literary writing and personal history that grew out of and reflects

the world that shaped both it and its writer" (4).

In short, in analysing how the autobiographies of three female activists of the Black Power movement shed light on the ways intersectional forms of oppressions has influenced their self-representation and their private identity, specific attention is given to Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's use of rhetoric to frame public spaces to position, describe, and challenge the state of womanhood in that particular space and place. In order to clarify which aspects will be examined to explore this issue, the thesis is organised in the following way: the three life writings will be discussed thematically in three chapters, both divided into sub-sections arranged by the points Davis, Brown, and Shakur raise concerning a specific theme or issue. In each chapter, a sub-section is included which will connect an aspect of intersectionality with the findings presented in the respective chapter. To not lose focus, however, the chapters will be arranged somewhat chronologically. This means that the first chapter will focus on Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's experiences prior to their lives as activists. In other words, the first chapter will explore how these women describe the political and historical context they are placed in and out of which their life writings emerged, their formative experiences through which they achieved revolutionary consciousness, and the experienced which eventually moved them to becoming revolutionaries. Taking as an outstanding question in this chapter, it will be examined how intersectional systems of oppression present in American society at the time in which they grew up has played a significant role in shaping them as revolutionaries. The second chapter will subsequently discuss Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's membership or relations to the BPP, by further focusing on their rhetoric used to describe, what Perkins refers to as "the power and gender dynamics in the Black nationalist struggle" (xvi). In order to analyse this, this chapter will focus on the extent to which intersectional forms of oppressions inside the Black Power movement, most notably the BPP, has shaped their identity and self-presentation as black

female activists. After tracing their journey as active participants in the Black Power movement, the third chapter will discuss how the Black Power movement has shaped their identity, influenced their perception on the place of black women in American society, and formed their life writing as instruments for social change, especially in the light of the trials they were facing. In light of this, this chapter will be framed around the question to what extent Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writing perception of the freedom is influenced by their experiences as black female revolutionaries. After that, a final chapter will bring all the separate analyses together and draw a final conclusion and will, furthermore, discuss the influence of the three female Black Power narratives in shaping people's collective consciousness, especially those of black women.

Thus, in providing a different image of Black Power female activists than the anti-American radical Michelle Obama is satirically represented as on the cover of *The New Yorker*, the three life writings could be perceived as social instruments aiming to provide an alternative, more nuanced, representation of female revolutionaries. In exploring, what bell hooks[5] calls, "radical Black female subjectivity," the analyses of Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings will show an alternative side of the Black Power movement through their critical reflections on gender relations ("Feminist Politicization" 271). In doing so, the life writings of these revolutionaries reveal that exploring these dynamics is an essential part for critically reassessing the Black Power movement.

[5] In not capitalising the letters of her name, noted social activist and feminist bell hooks attempts to subvert grammar rules. According to her, dismantling language and eliminating grammatical norms is crucial to mental liberation. Furthermore, in taking the name of her maternal great grandmother, hooks aims to "honor them and debunk the notion that we were these unique, exceptional women. We wanted to say, actually, we were the products of the women who'd gone before us" (qtd. in Lowens par. 7).

1 | BECOMING AN ACTIVIST:
MOVING FROM THE PRIVATE TO THE PUBLIC

In the introduction of the 1988 reprinted edition of *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*, Davis reflects on her life narrative nearly fifteen years after its first publication in 1974. Despite pointing out that the strength of her life writing lies in "its honest emphasis on grassroots contributions and achievements" which in turn demystifies "the usual notion that history is the product of unique individuals possessing inherent qualities of greatness," Davis also mentions that she partially regrets that, in doing so, "I did not really write about myself" (*An Autobiography* viii). In explaining that she was during the time she wrote her narrative "vehemently opposed" to the feminist slogan "the personal is the political," which was highly popular during the young women's liberation movement of the 1970s, Davis expresses regret that she was not able "to apply a measuring stick which manifested a more complex understanding of the dialectics of the personal and the political" (*An Autobiography* viii). However, despite this statement, and despite mentioning her increasing understanding on why this slogan was powerful, she continues to oppose "all easy attempts to define these dimensions as equivalent" (*An Autobiography* viii). Taking these observation into consideration, Davis's statement in the introduction of the 1974 edition of *An Autobiography* that she was not a "real person separate and apart from the political person" (ix) is a relevant to take into account for analysing the possibilities and challenges which arise because of the dynamic connection between the personal and the political.

To understand how this relation between the personal and political works in the act of life writing, it should be taken into account that the autobiographical form allows the writer to theorise, politicise, or teach their experiences in order to frame their experiences as models of

criticism or understanding. As hooks suggests, "[t]here is much exciting work to be done when we use confession and memory as a way to theorize experience, to deepen our awareness, as part of the process of radical politicization" (*Reel to Real* 110). For this reason, Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings are useful sources to explore, as hooks states, "the conditions that enable the construction of radical black subjectivity as well as the obstacles that impede its development" (*Reel to Real* 110). In other words, the women's reflections on their processes on coming into revolutionary consciousness are relevant to analyse for two main reasons. First of all, it should be noted that each life writing follows, in Perkins words, "a teleological form" (41). This means that in each work, the activists' experiences of their early lives illuminate how they arrived at their present circumstances as teleological narratives posit "a linear trajectory using what is known at the end to generate the beginning" (Perkins 41). Secondly, Mark Freeman's "the trope of development," (95) the notion that refers to a subject's move from having little or underdeveloped self, political, or social awareness to a point of greater self-consciousness, is relevant for exploring how Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's identity has transformed over time, especially in the realm of the private and the public. To position Freeman's development theory into the context of black American's women's autobiography, it is important to consider that black autobiographers almost always focus on, what Nellie McKay refers to as, "the racial authentication of the self … Their narratives begin from a stated (sometimes disguised) position that establishes and asserts the reality of self through experience" (96). However, as Craig Werner points out, there is "an internal pressure for self-authentication in the black narrative" which originates in "the African American's awareness of the contingent self" (209). In other words, Davis's, Brown's and Shakur's reflections on their formative experiences of becoming activists provide models for demonstrating how they, despite the social constructs that make it almost impossible for powerless people to take the self for

granted, were able to reconstruct their identity, and to define their "black selfhood in a racially oppressive world" by gaining a sense of agency (McKay 96).

However, it should also be noticed that the narrative strategy of development is an important, if not integral, aspect of the autobiographical genre that is known as the "political autobiography" (Perkins 10). In line with the conventions of this genre, Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's, life writings follow the model of development to emphasise the importance of their own processes in becoming radical activists in the political struggle for black liberation. In doing so, Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings reveal how becoming revolutionary is inextricably connected to the social milieu in which they grew up, as Brown also pointed out in an interview: "When I talked about growing up, all of us have gone through that process. I didn't spring forth saying 'Power to the People!' It was a gradual process" (qtd. in Sinclair 24). Furthermore, in terms of identity development, and in terms of connecting as well as interpreting past narratives, it should be emphasised the 'self' as invoked in life writing is, as Smith points out, "not a noun, a thing-in-itself, waiting to be materialized through the text" ("Performativity" 108). As the "autobiographical self" is not a coherent, whole, and seamless entity before the moment of self-narrating, the very sense of self as identity is thus derived, as Smith suggests, "paradoxically from the loss of consciousness of fragments of experiential history" ("Performativity" 108). In other words, as Benedict Anderson suggests, this kind of "estrangement" from the experiential history thus necessitates "a conception of personhood, identity … which, because it cannot be remembered,' must be narrated" (qtd. in Smith "Performativity" 109). In line with these observations, the construction of black female identity in Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings are shaped in such a way that the self is a witness against the sexism, racism, and classicism part of the social milieu in which they grew up.

To return to the points raised by Davis in the introduction of *An Autobiography*, it

should be considered that there are various ways memory could be used as, according to Anne Dillard, “writing actually renders memory because once you’ve written, you can no longer remember anything but the writing” (71). In other words, in recreating the past as part of the narrative process, past experiences or stories could be shaped around the act of presenting a specific, contextually-marked identity. As Smith points out that the “narrative performativity constitutes interiority. That is, the interiority or self that is said to be prior to the autobiographical expression or reflection is an *effect* of autobiographical storytelling,” (“Performativity” 110) the ways Davis, Brown, and Shakur have chosen to recreate their past experiences is interwoven with the larger objectives of their works.

The concept of intersectionality is useful for analysing how Davis, Brown, and Shakur have recreated their pasts to point out the social and political context they were living in, particular gender norms, and their status as racialised subjects have played a crucial role in their process of becoming revolutionaries. However, as Smith suggests that “autobiographical narration begins with amnesia, and once begun, the fragmentary nature of subjectivity intrudes,” it should not only be considered which parts of their early lives Davis, Brown, and Shakur have decided to emphasise in their life writings, but also on which aspects they have forgotten, or at least are considered less relevant to discuss (“Performativity” 109). To explore this, one specific form of intersectionality is particularly relevant. In examining structural sociocultural elements and hierarchies, the concept of “*structural* intersectionality,” (“Beyond Racism” 551, emphasis added) which Crenshaw explains as “the way in which women of color are situated in overlapping structures of subordination,” shows to which extent relations between multiple identities as defined in sociocultural categories result in very different individual experiences (“Beyond Racism” 552). In terms of Davis’s, Brown’s, and Shakur’s life writings, to which extent has the ways their private identities were located in the

intersections of various structural definitions of 'identity' resulted in the engendering of their revolutionary consciousness, and have shaped their public identities as activists?

1.1| STRUCTURAL INTERSECTIONALITY THROUGH GENERATIONS

The notion of the "novel of the passing" refers to an African American tradition which is used to theorise the ways characters, who have familiar ties to the black community, but are light-skinned enough to be considered 'white,' cut those ties with the culture of the black community to gradually become part of the white elite (Levinson 2). However, only a slight percentage of the marginalised community has an option to actually pass. Not only is the degree of passing based on the complexion of these characters, in "passing narratives," as Melanie Levinson suggests, "a number of authors indicate that even amidst this small group there are often divisions along gender lines. Male characters normally have less trouble adjusting to life in another cultural realm – female characters seem to be troubled more significantly by the ramifications of leaving their "blackness" behind" (2).

To understand how intersectionality functioned in Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's early lives, it is important to reconsider the ways passing narratives are incorporated in their life writings. Similarly to Adrienne Kennedy's 1964 play *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, which represents one of the earliest examples of black feminist theorising on intersectionality, Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings expose the deleterious effects on intersecting oppressions on black women (West 139). In the play, the protagonist Sarah's sense of "physical wholeness" (Levinson 2) is fractured by the mainstream images of white and black people provided to her. As her self-hatred increasingly grows by her inability to be fully included in the white patriarchal society, which is deemed to be the "winning side," (West 140) Kennedy aims to expose and criticise the ways structural systems of oppression inflict mental and physical agony on black women. As Sarah's internalised oppression is mostly

evidenced in her obsession to 'pass' into white culture, Kennedy's play could be placed in the tradition of black women writers who, as Collins states, "[portray] the range of ways that African American women experience internalised oppression … They are suspended in time and place, their life choices are so severely limited that the women themselves are often destroyed" (*Black Sexual Politics* 93). This obsession with passing for white is a theme which also returns in Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's representation of their early lives. One the ways they trace the influence of structural intersectionality is by linking black women's contemporary struggles to those of their family, especially to those of their foremothers. Unlike the Western autobiographical tradition of placing emphasis on the lineage of the husband, in black women's autobiography, as Stover states, "there is widespread practice of tracing relationships through the mother," (65) it is relevant to explore how Davis, Brown, and Shakur have readapted this focus on the matrilineal lineage in their works.

In *An Autobiography*, Davis introduces her mother to the readership when she visits Davis is prison. Describing her as a "sensitive person" who "might not be able to bear the strain of seeing her daughter behind bars in a filthy-mouse ridden jail," Davis recalls that though her mother tried to appear in high spirits, "I could tell from the deep furrows in her forehead that she was deeply disturbed" (*An Autobiography* 59). Although it may not be surprising that Davis's mother was distributed her the conditions her daughter was put in, the introduction to the character of Davis's mother also serves to make a different statement. As Davis grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, images of her and her early childhood based on the stereotype of her as being raised in poverty by a family who most likely were fanciful and provisional, *An Autobiography* offers a completely different image of her family as being well-spoken, educated, and middle-class. In the first chapter of *An Autobiography*, suitably titled "Roots," (77) Davis discusses her complex upbringing in Birmingham under the tyrannical supervision of the Commissioner of Public Safety Bull Conner, who enforced racial

segregation and denied civil rights to black citizens. Davis experiences the pain Jim Crow laws inflicted personally, as she, for instance, recalls how she had been tricked on her first bus ride to give up "her favorite place, directly by the driver" by being placed in the back (*An Autobiography* 82).However, her mother, who was involved in anti-racists movements, was determined to learn Davis that "the battle of white against Black not written into the nature of things … Every time I said "white lady" or "white man" anger clung to my words. My mother tried to erase the anger with reasonableness" (*An Autobiography* 79). At the same time, by hearing the stories of her grandmother, who she describes as "a symbol of age, wisdom, and suffering," (*An Autobiography* 82) of what slavery had been like, Davis writes that she also defended her pride by shouting "the worst epithets to white people we knew: Cracker, Redneck" (*An Autobiography* 80). Hiding this behaviour for her mother, Davis states that "they could not know how important it was for me, and for all of us who had just discovered racism, to find ways of maintaining our dignity" (*An Autobiography* 80). Although Davis does never state that she considers her parents' trying to pass into white culture, she does state that she cannot fully believe in her mother's dream for "a future world of harmony and equality" (*An Autobiography* 80). Before being able to dream of such as world, she states that black people first should acknowledge to "never harbor or express the desire to be white" (*An Autobiography* 85). Although Davis expresses admiration for her parents' accomplishments for building a "not-so-poor," (89) stable live in racist Birmingham, she rejects the "Booker T. Washington syndrome" or "work-or-be rewarded syndrome" (92) . As these values permeated in the black community, Davis writes that it irked her because "it was as if these products would always be there, part of the natural way of things, rather than the product of a system which we could eventually overturn" (*An Autobiography* 94). Furthermore, in stating that "it hurt to see us folding in on ourselves, using ourselves as whipping posts," (95) Davis writes that these sentiments prevented the black community to form a struggle against "the real

cause of our misery" (*An Autobiography* 95). On the one hand, as Davis eventually distances herself from her family's middle class environment after aligning herself with fighting against the oppressive systems with severely limit the economically dispossessed, she becomes a middle-class radical who essentially commits, what Perkins refer to as "class suicide" (52). However, on the other hand, it could also be stated that the representation of her mother as college educated, being active in anti-racists movements, and working as a high school teacher conveys a positive image of the affirmation of the black woman's possibilities to survive and thrive in a milieu of systematic racism and sexism

Although Davis briefly mentions that, as a child, she "used to secretly resent my parent's for giving me light skin instead of dark, and wavy hair instead of kinky hair," (*An Autobiography* 98), a significant theme in Brown's life writing reveals revolved around her struggle with intense forms of self-hatred. In *A Taste of Power*, Brown presents her relationship with her mother as initially being very close. Growing up in one of the poorest parts of Philadelphia, living together in one house with her mother, grandmother, and aunt Mary, her mother represented a source of security and warmth for Brown as she was surrounded in her room's by "complete darkness" by feelings of "complete nothingness" accompanied "by the magnified sounds of mice scurrying and hearts beating in fear" (19). Similarly to Davis's admiration for her mother's hard work to provide for the family, Brown respects her mother's determination to survive. However, the message Brown subsequently attached to the survivor instinct of her mother has a more pessimistic tone than Davis's message. First of all, by describing how Aunt Mary "only went out to go to work" as a wire clipper on the assembly line, expect for the five or six years during which "she scrubbed white folks' floors," (21) Brown shows that black women, especially from the lower classes, were limited in their possibilities to thrive. Furthermore, in terms of internal depictions of structural intersectionality, Brown demonstrates how her seemingly "strong, protective" (22) mother is

deeply struggling with feelings of internalised racism. Connected to the passing narrative, Brown's mother hopes to provide her daughter with the opportunities she never had by helping her daughter to successfully pass as 'white'. Brown recalls that her mother spent much time her daughter making sure "I looked 'right'," while complimenting Brown by stating she is "the most beautiful girl in the world" because her skin "was not too dark," her facial features "not too African," and her hair "good," (21) indicating that Brown's hair was straight according to Western beauty standards. As Brown inherited this internalised oppression from her mother, she learned to speak, behave, and act like white girls, and as a result, finally "became white" by passing into white culture and society (31). However, Brown's relationship with her mother starts to deteriorate when she realises that she can only break this pattern of structural oppression by forming an identity of her own, an identity she can fully possess. She writes: "we were nothing alike, I had told people, realizing now that we were as we had been – virtually one person. There was more than an umbilical cord to be broken. There was grabbing an identity for myself and letting her go, alone" (90).

Although Brown stops with claiming the identity as envisioned by her mother after she reaches adolescence, there are many instances in Brown's early life which serve to illustrate how deeply conflicted she was in her attempts to pass as white. Despite that she could play classical music, was considered by her white friends as "not like the other coloreds," and felt that "I did not belong on York Street," her life in the ghetto of York Street "threw me back, back to the realization that I might not ever really be white. I *would* have to get back. I saw that every time I returned" (33). In line with Tera Hunter's discussion of the ways working-class black women sought freedom through "resilient and creative" ways to thwart of oppression by using a variety of survival strategies, by explaining how recently freed slaves developed new forms of blues-inspired dance in "jook joints," (238) Brown reflects on the personal expression of chanting songs and doings rounds of "Hambone" (35)

together with her friends of York Street. This small expression of resistance shows that, already as a child, Brown attempted to find ways of gaining a voice to challenge the structural oppression racism her mother has not been able to truly escape from.

Similarly to Brown's mother, Shakur, who was born as Joanne Deborah Byron into a middle-class family in Wilmington, North Carolina, family tried to instill a sense of elitism in her. However, Shakur notes that, in doing so, they were also instilling a sense of self-pride in her. Noting that her family, in particular her grandmother, forbade "me to make subservient gestures when talking to white people," (*Assata* 27) they taught her lessons which "helped me to deal I would face when growing up in amerika[6]" (*Assata* 28). However, despite transmitting racial pride to Shakur, her grandparents also taught her that she, in order to be "as good as whites," she had to aspire to what white people had (*Assata* 29). Wishing that their granddaughter would become part of the black bourgeoisie, Shakur was forbidden to play with "alley rats," (Assata 29) attended an excellent school in New York, and gradually turned into a "puppet and i didn't even know who was pulling the strings" (*Assata* 55). In contrast to Brown's narrative, in which her mother desires her daughter to pass as white, Shakur recalls that she was the one who "had very little sympathy for my mother" for not being able to live up to the "Donna Reed" image of the perfect white housewife (*Assata* 54). Furthermore, despite that her grandmother instilled a sense of racial pride in Shakur, she continued to straight her granddaughters hair according to white conventions of beauty. Writing that "we had never heard the words "Black is Beautiful," Shakur states that "we were completely brainwashed and we didn't even know it. We accepted white value systems and white standards of beauty, and, at times, we accepted the white man's view of ourselves" (*Assata*

[6] Some of Shakur's use of language and syntax at the level of form is dictated by her political beliefs. Her consistent use of lowercase initials for proper names (e.g. amerika, new jersey), and her deliberate misspellings (most notably the substitution of the Germanic *k* for the letter *c*) point to a language of subversion which opens up the possibility to reconsider old ways of knowing. Since language encodes cultural values and particular ways of seeing, Perkins points out that for "activists language is understood as simply one more site of struggle" (86). In line with this, Shakur's refusal to submit to dictates of standard English, translates her resistance from the social spheres to the world of the text.

45). As Shakur eventually started to rebel against both her mother's and grandmother's wish to be accepted in higher social classes and instead starts to appreciate "my culture, my music, my dancing, the richness of Black speech," (*Assata* 53) her gradual reconstruction of her identity is emphasised by her emotional distancing from the class security her mother and grandmother offered. In writing that, in response to Shakur's rebellious nature, her mother would "slap me, shake me, punish me, but nothing worked … I was running away from home," (*Assata* 104) Shakur reveals that, both in a literal as well as symbolic way, she is running away to escape the black disempowerment as embedded in her mother's and grandmother's thinking.

In analysing gender differences in the formation of the Oedipal complex, Nancy Chodorow notes that the female child forms its ego in reaction to the dominating figure of the mother (167). As the female child retains its primary attachment to their mother even as they pass the Oedipal stage, and mothers tend to experience their daughters as continues with themselves, Chodorow suggests that "this means that a girl continues to experience herself involved in issues of merging and separation" (166). Although there are limits to using this theoretical formulation in regard to analysing life writing, it could be stated that Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's discussion of the influence of the mother-daughter relationship, or, in a larger sense, their relationship with their foremothers, follows this theory along parallel lines. Especially when combining this theory with Stephen Butterfield's discussion of how black women integrate their racial and sexual identities in their individual life stories, it could be theorised how the autobiographical selves are, in Butterfield's words, "not individuals with private careers, but soldiers in a long, historic march to Canaan. The self is conceived as a member of an oppressed social group, with ties and responsibilities to the other members" (2).

Using these observations to explore Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's relationships with their (grand)mothers, reveals how structural intersectionality has left deep marks on the

identity of black women. Although to varying degrees, issues such as self-hatred, isolation, family estrangement due to the external structural systems of oppression as most vividly shown in the passing narrative, has significantly shaped the identity of the three women. However, by breaking the structural intersectionality embedded in their matrilineal lineage, Davis, Brown, and Shakur decenter and deform the traditional passing figure as Davis moves away from the middle-class life style of her mother, and Brown and Shakur distance themselves temporarily from their mother's to construct an identity for themselves instead of taking on the 'white' identity as aspired by their mothers. Nevertheless, despite temporary separations with their mothers, Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's mother continued to play a significant role in their lives, with Davis's mother refusal "to bend under the terrible pressures to denounce her 'Communist daughter," (*An Autobiography* 221) with Brown's mother paying her bail after her arrest (174), and with Shakur's mother raising Shakur's daughter while she was in custody. Furthermore, although structural intersectionality has caused friction between the three activists' relationship with their mother's, Shakur's eventual reconciliation with her mother as captured in a sixteen stanza poem titled "To My Momma" (*Assata* 276). Although Shakur writes that her mother "is afraid to be real … i am proud of you" as "I look at you/and see the strength of our people/I have seen you struggle" (*Assata* 278, ll. 5-10). In understanding how intersectional systems of oppressions has affected their relationship, Shakur asks her mother "to leave the past behind/where it belongs/and come with me toward tomorrow," and in this way, breaks the pattern of structural intersectionality embedded identity of her mother in order to acknowledge their independency to each other as a means of survival *and* resistance (*Assata* 278, ll.15).

Thus, in locating the passing narrative within the discourse of structural intersectionality shows that despite that, as Smith points out, "passing is often constructed in racial terms," (43) its consequences are distributed differently on basis of gender. In

illustrating how the intersections of race and gender, Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings demonstrate how the interdependence of the lives of black women and their daughters is affected by the structural forces of oppression. However, as the three women eventually refuse to maintain in the positions to which they were regulated, they deliberately "construct passing as a potentially subversive activity" (V. Smith 43). In doing so, Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's discussions of the continuities as well as the discontinuities between their and their mother's personal experiences, become, in a broader sense, "productive sites," (V. Smith 57) for considering how the intersectionality of race, gender are constituted and denied.

1.2| INTERSECTIONALITY INSIDE THE BLACK COMMUNITY

Although dealing with structural intersectionality among their personal, close relationships has motivated Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's move towards revolutionary activism, there is a second significant factor in their early lives which has shaped their views, especially in terms of racist *and* sexist oppression. To understand this in terms of the three life writings, Mary Mason's introduction to *Journeys: Autobiographical Writings* includes valid observations to explore the autobiographical developments of the model of black female selfhood. Stating that in women's autobiographical writings, women "seem to recognize the full autonomy of the 'other' (in this case the male) without destroying their own sense of selves," Mason notes that in a great deal of women's autobiographies, the female self is constructed "by exploring her relation with a fully rendered Other" (xiv). However, as the other has taken different forms in the Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings, it is relevant to consider how these women have positioned themselves against this other. As is demonstrated in the previous sub-section, Davis, Brown, and Shakur have followed the trend in black women's writing to privilege "the other in ourselves" (Henderson 346). As black

women speak from a complex position, they speak, as Barbara Christian observes, “in a creative dialogue” (qtd. in Henderson 346). This dialogue is based on “a dialectic of identity,” with those aspects of shelf shared with the other in the form of, for example, their mothers, as well as on “a dialogic of differences,” in which women enter in a competitive dialogue with the other (qtd. in Henderson 346). Especially in discourses of racial and gendered differences between the self and other, women speak, as Christian notes, “a discourse of racial and gender identity in the subdominant discursive order” (qtd. in Henderson 347).

In relation to encounters with men in their early teenage years, in particularly Brown and Shakur have commented on their experiences with the ‘other’ in the form of white men. Working as a waitress in Greenwich Village, Shakur recalls that “any white woman, practically anywhere in amerika, can tell you about being approached, propositioned, and harassed by white men. Many consider all Black women prostitutes” (*Assata* 210). Brown, on the other hand, writes about her relationship with a white Jewish boy at age sixteen which abruptly ended after the boy ended the relationship as his family did not approve of him having a black girlfriend. Although these experiences were painful, both women assert that in spite of leading to self-hatred, these encounters were essential in further awakening their political consciousness. Although there are a variety of experiences described in the life writings of Davis, Brown and Shakur which are telling examples of the racist and misogynist white society these women were daily faced with in their early lives, in their narratives, these women also pay an equal amount of attention to the impact of sexism on male-female relations within the black community. In discussing “black sexual politics,” Collins states that “in relying on black sexual prowess” to redefine black masculinity, men “typically needed women in order to actualize this type of masculinity” (*Black Sexual Politics* 208). Furthermore, according to Collins, “male strength as expressed through sexual dominance,” “fathering many children as a mark of virility,” and “having multiple sexual partners,” are

examples of how black gender ideological theory was acted out in the wake of the Black Power movement (*Black Sexual Politics* 208).

In showing the dangers for women living in hyper segregated ghettos, Brown and Shakur have included a similar experience with sexual harassment by black men in their narratives. In Brown's case, she experiences being almost raped by one of the "boys' gangs" which controlled life in the North Philadelphia ghetto during a friend's party. However, when realising that Brown is a girl living on their own territory, thus, in the gang's view part of their property, stop assaulting her as it would morally deemed wrong (*Assata* 43). Furthermore, when a few years later, Brown does have the courage to decline the sexual advances of one the boys of the gang, she was beaten up by the boy while "sadness filled me" (*Assata* 61). Quite similarly to Brown's experiences, Shakur was nearly gang-raped by a group of boys she trusted. Most of all disturbed by the impersonal and careless attitude of the gang raping of girls which was, as Shakur writes, "a pretty common thing," she point out that "as a girl was caught on the wrong side of the park, or on the wrong territory … she was a target" (*Assata* 165). In analysing this relationship between black men and women, Shakur traces the behaviour of the boys back to the relationships formed on the slave plantations. As the black woman was placed on the lowest rank of the sexist and racial hierarchy, she became to be considered less than a woman, and thus, as Shakur writes "black men internalized the white men's opinion of Black women. And if you ask me, a lot of us still act as if we're back on the plantation with massa pulling the strings" (*Assata* 166).

Brown's and Shakur's experiences with sexual abuse in the black community could be partly understood by linking them to thesis of black male emasculation as set forward in Wallace's 1979 book *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. In this text, Wallace suggests that the black movement eventually "was nothing more or less than the black men's struggle to attain his presumably lost manhood" (63). Although a valid analysis, and although

a clear example of how intersectionality functions inside the black community, it is by no means to say that Brown and Shakur suggests that there are no ways forward to improve black male-female relations. Despite that their experiences challenge the black superwomen myth which assumes that "black women are towers of strength who neither feel or need what other humans do," (Wallace 64) Brown and Shakur state that these experiences made them realise how gender men and women were socialised due to the oppressive systems of society.

Although Davis did not experience a similar encounter with sexual harassment in her youth, her understanding of sexism and gender relations is shaped by the male-female relations in black community. In discussing the homosexuality she encounters in the Women's House of Detention in Greenwich Village, Davis observes how, for many women, homosexuality served as a way of creating family networks in jail which "humanized the environment and allowed an affiliation with others within a familiar framework" (*An Autobiography* 53). Although, as Davis writes, when these women "returned to the streets to rejoin their men, they [would] quickly forget their jail husbands and wives" this analysis is noteworthy for its demonstration how women could group together to form a community (*An Autobiography* 55). On a more personal level, Brown also comments on this notion in including her difficult relationship with her father in her life narrative. In revealing that her father rejecting her as he only had an affair with her mother, and that despite of his income as a physician, he left Brown and her mother living in financial hardship, Brown formed a kinship, a little community, with her mother, or in her words, "was finally on my mother's side. We were nothing … I had to work, to fight, to become something other than nothing" (*An Autobiography* 51).

Thus, in sharing this early experiences, Davis, Brown, and Shakur reveal the perils of growing up black *and* women in American society. To add a second layer of complexity to how structural intersectionality in the shape of various interactions of multiple hierarchies

present in black women's lives, their life writings demonstrate how a combination of racist and gender ideologies have created a particular image of black womanhood which in turn have played a significant role in limited their agency. In telling these early experiences to express a sense of solidarity with black women, it could be stated that writing about the black man as the other, and in part, realising how oppression has greatly influenced how black men reconstructed their masculinity, they actually speak in familiarity, exposing similar kinds subordination which limited the self as well as the other reconstruct an authentic identity. However, on the other hand, in situating themselves as being the subordinated other in American society, the three women are also in, as Audre Lorde suggests, "competitive discourses" with "the hegemonic, dominant discourses" (qtd. in Henderson 344). In other words, speaking both to and from the position of the other, Davis, Brown, and Shakur both expose, in the Lorde's words, "the external manifestations of racism and sexism," as well as the consequences of those "distortions internalized within our consciousness of ourselves and one another" (qtd. in Henderson 345). As their experiences has significantly shaped the identity of the three activists, it could be stated that their discussions of this subject is in line with hooks's urge for "critical pedagogy, the sharing of information by black women with black women [as] crucial for the development of radical black female subjectivity" (*Black Looks* 56). However, as will be further explored in the following chapter, these experiences also shaped the complex relationship of difference and identification with the other in the form of fellow male revolutionaries.

1.3| INTERSECTIONALITY AS SHAPING ACTIVIST SENTIMENTS

To briefly return to the points raised in the introduction of this chapter, it could be stated that intersectional systems of oppression in American patriarchal society has influenced how Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's constructed of their public identity as radical activists.

Although there are a number of factors which played a major role in raising their racial consciousness, such as the education they followed, and their interactions with white classmates, for understanding the Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's "historical I's," the position of the person writing the autobiography in the cultural world, it is especially important to consider how their the intersections between race and gender has shaped their "ideological I" (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiographical* 77).

As Shakur writes, "Black revolutionaries do not drop from the moon. We are created by our conditions. Shaped by our oppression" (*Assata* 89). In line with this observation, the women reveal how their experiences of their early lives as discusses in their life writings are exemplary for the subordination black women endured as a collectivity. Simultaneously, these experiences have changed their notion of their own personal personhood, racial and ethnic identity, and their womanhood. However, in moving from the private to public sphere, it should be considered that Davis, Brown, and Shakur have each recreating the private memories of their past in such a way that they correspond with their public images of activists. In other words, when taking the "narrating I's," (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 74) the agents of discourse, in the life writings of Davis, Brown, and Shakur into account, it could be stated that these are composites of multiple speaking voices. Speaking from the positions of a conflicted child and teenager struggling in an environment full of misogyny, as in the case of Brown and Shakur, or of a young middle-class girl who gradually becomes to align herself with the less fortunate, as Davis portrays, the narrating I's inhabit multiple voices part of their identity. Analysing these transformative, but also at times, fragmented and conflicted voice with the concept of intersectionality reveals how their identity changed in the process of them becoming revolutionaries by their gradually emerging resistance against structural forms of oppressions based on racism and sexism. However, as their past voices and subject positions are in the process of coming together while Davis,

Brown, and Shakur were forming both their political, racial, and self-consciousness, their focus on their early experiences are necessary to more fully understand the construction of their emerging public voice as activists.

However, their move from the private sphere of family and community to the more the public sphere of revolutionary activism is most of all highlighting by the events and episodes Davis, Brown, and Shakur remain silent on. These silences especially concerns, as Perkins observes, “the quality of each women’s relationship with their birth families leading up to and through their involvement in radical political struggle” (64). In other words, indicating that personal conflicts with their families when they move to intense activism have very likely become purposely silenced episodes in their life narratives, Davis’s, Brown’s, and Shakur’s texts have not included these private issues in order to focus on other objectives. Instead of telling how personal experiences of how their lives of activist have precisely reshaped their relationship with their mothers and with the other members of the black community in which they grew up, more attention is given to the external oppressions which fractured their early lives. With this in mind, the complex dynamics between Davis’s, Brown’s, and Shakur’s private and public image will be further explored as they position their personal experiences with the oppressive forces of structural intersectionality in the larger terrain of radical political struggle to achieve black liberation.

2 | FEMALE BLACK POWER NARRATIVES

INTERSECTIONALITY IN THE BLACK POWER MOVEMENT

As an opening to her narrative, Shakur's sixteen-stanza poem "Affirmation" serves as a summary of her main beliefs with Shakur speaking with the voice of her revolutionary self. Reflecting on her own experiences as an activist, political prisoner, and wanted fugitive, Shakur's poem is a manifesto for a dream of freedom, a freedom free of violence and racism and a freedom based on a strong belief in living. Although the first couple of stanzas present images of darkness and sadness as Shakur writes that "i have seen the death parade … i have seen the destruction of daylight … and breathed the stench of indifference," (*Assata* 1, ll.13-14, 25) the latter part of "Affirmation" conveys a message of hope for a better future set in motion by the life-affirming power of resistance. In reclaiming a sense of humanity, Shakur speaks the following words:

> I believe in living.
> I believe in birth.
> I believe in the sweat of love.
> And in the fire of truth.
>
> And I believe that a lost ship,
> steered by tired, seasick sailors,
> can still be guided home
> to port. (*Assata* 2, ll. 32-39).

In calling the subject into the future, this poem is used to place the subject into a liberated future distanced from the oppressive structures in the everyday practices and reality of American society. In line with Lionnet's discussion of the female autobiographical manifestos as offering a utopian "waking dream … which might inspire us to see beyond the constraints of the here and now to the idealized vision of a perfect future," (110) Shakur positions herself as a revolutionary subject offering the agenda for transformations of the 'I'.

However, more than telling about her personal ideological visions, Shakur also connects them to the values embraced by other activist autobiographers. In line with Davis's statement in the preface of *An Autobiography* in which she writes that her life narrative should be read as a "political autobiography," set out to raise the consciousness under its readership by helping them "understand the cause of our oppressed people," (*An Autobiography* xvi) as well as inspiring others "to join our growing community of struggle," Shakur's narrative follows the strategy of connecting her personal experiences with the larger story of political radical struggle. As Davis's life writing was published in 1974 and was largely written while she was awaiting trial, and Shakur's work was published in 1987, eight years after her escape from prison, with large letters on its cover page emphasising that she remains on the list of the FBI Most Wanted Terrorists, it could be stated that a key objective of their life writings is to raise consciousness among its readership about the situations they are placed in. Brown's *Taste of Power*, on the other hand, was published in 1992, and thus emerged in a very different sociopolitical context than Davis's and Shakur's narratives. Being less a political autobiography but following more the autobiographical function of the memoir, which Smith and Watson define as a term generally referring to "life writing that takes a segment of a life, not its entirety, and focusing on interconnected experiences," *A Taste of Power* reveals more of the problematics arising between the private and the public self, between being a subject and an object in comparison to Davis's and Shakur's texts (*Reading Autobiography* 274).

This difference is already highlighted in the first pages of each life writing. Davis directly downplays her uniqueness in the preface by stating that "the extraordinary event of my life had nothing to do with me as individual," and therefore specifically emphasises that "the people, the events, and the forces in my life … propelled to my present commitment," (*An Autobiograph*y xv). In line with this uneasiness of the political autobiographer with the personal 'I,' Shakur uses a lowercase 'i' to deemphasise the importance of the personal 'I,' which indicates that she considers the self as neither more nor less important than any other (*Assata* 4). Brown, on the other hand, is less inclined to subjugate the individual 'I' as she writes in her brief introduction that her narrative "is a chronicle of a black woman-child in America. It is my life" (*A Taste*, xi). In other words, as Brown is less concerned with writing a political autobiography, but more focused on discussing the meaning of her individual involvement in the Black Power movement.

According to Perkins, resistance narratives are extensions of political activity, and often serve to challenge hegemonic history (70). In doing so, activists write their experiences down as a way, as Perkins suggests, "to document their experiences, to correct misinformation, to educate their readers, and to encourage the continuation of struggle" (70). As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, current research focusing on creating a revisionist, more nuanced, view of the Black Power movement have focused on the experiences of women within this movement. As Davis, Brown, and Shakur are offering new perspectives on the events and persons of the Black Power movement as part of their life writings, they are restoring the silenced accounts part of the hegemonic story by constructing an alternative image of the movement. However, on a more personal level, it should also be noticed that a second aspect is embedded their revising of activists' experiences as part of the Black Power movement. Although the three women are taking their position as radical activists as their "narrated I's," which as Lionnet explains, "is the subject of history," their

"narrating I's" as being "agents of discourse," remain to be fragmented and multiple, revealing that the "narrated I" as a thematic subject may be more fractured than it appears to be (qtd. in Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 73).

In order to detangle these complex dynamics, the ways Davis, Brown, and Shakur have commented on the theme of gender, as well illuminating to what extent their own identity as black women has influenced their experiences as activists, expose how intersectionality within the Black Power movement functions. To analyse these issues, two aspects of their lives as activists are particularly illustrative. First of all, the ways Davis, Brown, and Shakur have written about the gender ideology in the Black Power movement, and in particularly within the BPP, is relevant for understanding how they positioned themselves as political and public figures while dealing with internal structures of intersectionality. Secondly, more on a private level, it should be explored how Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's "counterhegemonic ways" of revising the Black Power movement through a gendered lens have contributed to the reconstruction of their personal identity, especially in terms of their perception of their womanhood (Perkins 71). Furthermore, as their life writings are, albeit to varying degrees, both the product of "political and personal intervention," a specific variant of the intersectionality theme is particularly significant in exploring sexism within the Black Power movement as it provides cues to the ways in which their experiences are weighed against narratives which cast doubt upon the validity of such harm (Perkins 70). Using Crenshaw's concept of "*representational* intersectionality," ("Beyond Racism" 554; emphasis added) which she defines as "referring to the way that race and gender images, readily available in our culture, converge to create unique and specific narratives deemed appropriate for women of color," ("Beyond Racism" 554) it will analysed how Davis, Brown, and Shakur, construction of their public and private image was fractured as well as redefined by the forces of this variant of intersectionality.

2.1| STRUGGLING WITH BLACK MASCULINITY

As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, the 1965 *The Negro Family: The Case for National action* by sociologist and future U.S. Senator Moynihan was influential for rehabilitating the issue of black manhood. Commissioned by the federal government to investigate the race problems in the U.S., Moynihan concluded in his research project that racial inequalities were the result of a "tangle of pathology" created by the combination of former slavery and the structure of black families (qtd. in Cheney 35). One of Moynihan's key observations on black women based on his argument that women were matriarchs whose autonomy psychologically emasculated black men because, as he claims, "[o]urs is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs" (qtd. in Cheney 35). This particular statement did later, as Charise Cheney points out, "profoundly influenced" (36) the development of gender politics in the Black Power movement, in particularly the gender of the BPP. From the beginnings of the BPP in 1966, the organisation aimed to reclaim their manhood through a macho rhetoric and display, a gender phenomenon which hooks calls, the "it's-a-dick-thing" version of masculinity (qtd. in Cheney 36). However, not only did prominent men in BPP such as cofounders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale attempted to embody black masculinity, their gender politics also implicated black womanhood and black women's sexuality. For example, while Cleaver embodied the black male rapist in *Soul on Ice*, his 1968 essay "Pronunciamento" is a clear example of the tone that characterised gender theorising during the Black Power movement. In this address delivered at the Berkeley Community Center, Cleaver comments on the notion of "Pussy Power," (par.2) a recruitment strategy which urges Panther women to reproduce members. In using the biblical narrative of Adam and Eve as an analogy to illustrate his argument, Cleaver states that the following: "Eve was a jive bitch. Because if she was hip to Pussy Power, all she had to do was just sit

down and say well you just go on and jack off because I'm gonna stay right here and fuck the devil. If Eve had done these things I'm sure that Adam wouldn't have held his ground" (par. 12). Although Cleaver seems to encourage women to flaunt instead of repress their sexuality as part of more progressive sexual ethic, his statement is also deceptively disempowering. Revealing, what Cheney refers to as, "a conservation of patriarchal authority," (37) this statement could also be interpreted as a manifestation of creating an image of female bodies being objects of male consumption, subjects to male desire, and thus, aims to demonstrate how black women's sexuality could be controlled.

However, although black nationalist ideology is thus partly shaped by a hegemonic masculinity, this patriarchal desire was in tension with the BPP's efforts to create a sense of a collective identity by, as Sally Robinson points out, "correcting some forms of male domination" as "overall the masculine ideals espoused by cultural nationalists and the Black Panther Party were mixed" (210). In explaining the two sets of ideals in the BPP, Robinson notes that one set emphasised "dying for the people," by stressing characteristics such as courage, self-defense, and revolutionary agendas while the second set focused on ideals based on community making, family, and unity, emphasising the virtue of "serving the people," through breakfast programmes and alternative schools (211). The tensions between these two ideals was further complicated by the Panthers' ideas about manhood. Although, for example, the BPP attracted both male and female recruits from the beginning, providing them with the same training in self-defense, and the official position that "there were no official roles" in the organisation, Panther men often regulated women, whom them dubbed "Pantherettes," (Estes 163) to administrative positions in order to only act out the second set of ideals.

In "On the Question of Sexism in the Black Panther Party," former Black Panther Bukhari strives to place the sexism within the BPP into a socio-historical context. Stating that "the Black Panther Party came out of the Black community and its experiences," (35) she

explains that the black people's history of damaged and sabotaged relationships between men and women has "begin to manifest itself in the sexism that is present in the Black community" (36). However, although Bukhari does not claim that women were not wrongly treated in the BPP, she does state that "we should not simply decry the role of women in the Black Panther Party, we should analyze the development of the situation and make the necessary moves to correct it ... The simple fact that the Black Panther Party had the courage to address the question in the first place was a monumental step forward" (57). Writing that finding "self-esteem," political education, and through social practice, the BPP could advance the struggle against sexism, Bukhari stresses "it is extremely crucial that, as we struggle against our primary enemy, we remember that ours is a collective struggle, a struggle for human rights for all of our people, men and women, and as long as one of us is oppressed none of us is free" (63).

Although Bukhari is not an apologist for the sexism within the BPP, it is interesting to compare her discussion of sexism in Black Power organisations, her solutions for challenging chauvinist attitudes, and her perception of the role of women within the BPP with those of Davis, Brown, and Shakur as discussed in their life writings. To do so, it is important to note that each women has been differently affiliated to the BPP. Angered by the events in Birmingham, most notably by the 1963 Street Baptist Church bombing in which four black girls with whom she acquainted with were killed, Davis was further radicalised by the harassment of white people of Algerian which she witnessed during her stay in Paris. As she began to achieve psychological distance from her educated, middle class identity, Davis became hugely inspired by philosophical thought such as phenomenology, the study of the structures of consciousness and experience, and the work of Kant and Hegel. However, it was Karl Marx's *The Communist Manifesto* which triggered Davis's lifelong interest in Utopian socialism. Writing that The Communist Manifesto provided her with finding answers "to

many of the seemingly unanswerable dilemmas," Davis began "to see the problems of Black people within in the context of a larger working-class movement" (*An Autobiography* 109-110). Returning to the U.S., which she had become to perceive as a thoroughly racist and oppressive society, Davis's belief in Marxism-Leninism as a philosophy was further strengthened by her cooperation with the preeminent theorist of the New Left Herbert Marcuse during her graduate studies and during her position as assistant professor at UCLA. It was then also partly because of Marcuse that Davis decided to attend a meeting in London were together with Marcuse, the revolutionary Stokely Carmichael was speaking who made it clear to Davis that "the Black Liberation struggle would have to become part of a revolutionary movement, embracing all working people" (*An Autobiography* 151). Sparked by an interest in organising, she became involved with groups working on community issues such as unemployment and police brutality and started to work on a daily basis with SNCC, the BPP, and the Che-Lumbamba Club, an all-black branch of the Communist Party. Shakur, on the other hand, became politically involved while she attended Manhattan Community College during "which she was learning and changing every day. Even the image of myself was changing" (*Assata* 248). After becoming associated with a group of African exchange students attending Columbia University, "her life became an African life" (*An Autobiography* 265). Furthermore, as she started to feel like a different person, she states that "I didn't feel like JoAnne, or no Negro, or no amerikan. I felt like an African women," (*Assata* 265) and changed her name to Assata Olugbala Shakur, meaning respectively "she who struggles," "love for the people," and "the thankful" (*Assata* 266). Being a different person, one who "moved long past the day that reform could possible work, but [that] revolution was a big question mark," (*Assata* 261-262) Shakur became affiliated with the Harlem branch of the BPP before going underground to continue her work with the BLA, an offshoot of the BPP. Brown came, compared to Davis and Shakur, to political activism quite late in life. It was

only after becoming romantically involved with the white, left-wing writer Jay Richard Kennedy, whom provided Brown with her pivotal political education by sparking her interest in Communism, and after meeting a women named Beverlee, who introduced her to the Black Congress, an umbrella organisation of groups, Brown immersed in the Black activists scene. In a chapter suitably titled "The Child Has Died," (83) Brown describes her transformation by writing about herself from perspective of Kennedy, just after she ended their affair. She writes: "His love is a young black woman … she has changes … She has become a Black Power militant … Now she must leave him, and the white and powerful world that oppresses her" (104). In the subsequent chapter, titled "Getting Black," she writes that at the age of twenty-five, in 1968, she became an official member of the Southern Californian chapter of the BPP (131).

Although each women is differently connected to the BPP, they each challenge of sexism and chauvinism in the Party and criticise the victimization of activist women at the hands of some of the male members. Davis writes that she was "criticized very heavily" by member of the BPP and of Ron Karenga's black nationalist U.S. Organization, for doing "a man's job" as he stated that "women should not play leadership roles" (*An Autobiography* 161). Furthermore, she discusses how she became acquainted very early with "the widespread presence of an unfortunate syndrome among some Black male activists" who "saw Black manhood as something separate from Black womanhood. These men view Black women as a threat to their attainment of manhood, especially those Black women who take initiative and work to become leaders in their own right" (*An Autobiography* 161). In *Assata,* Shakur criticises that "for a lot of Panthers struggle consisted of only two aspects: picking up the gun and serving the people" (319). As "Black self-determination" is in Shakur's view a "basic right," as "if we do not have the right to determine our destinies, then who does," (*Assata* 276) she considers the tools for self-determination the BPP offered was too much dictated by

the Party's ideology. This statement could be partlyconnected to her view of the BPP from a bottom-up perspective, as Shakur was a grassroots activists working on community building, which explains her criticism of the Party's leaders underestimation of "the need to unite with other Black organizations and to struggle around various community issues," (*Assata* 319) However, her observation could also be linked to her criticism of the BPP's ideological shift away from Black nationalism. In light of this, Shakur's separate statements that "the macho cult … was the official body in the BPP," (322) the Party's weakness lay in its inability to solve "unprincipled attacks on sisters," (319) and the fact that "criticism and self-criticism were not encouraged" (326) in the BPP, could together be perceived as outright yet indirect criticism against the lack of attention to and willingness of transforming the gender politics of the BPP. Brown, on the other hand, is much more open in directly criticising sexism in the BPP and transgressing personal silences on matters of sexual violence and machoism than Davis and Shakur. Although her position as former chair of the Party and her top-down perspective provide Brown with the knowledge and experience to write about internal affairs in the BPP and the decisions of Party's ruling elite regarding gender politics and issues, it should also be considered that, as Davis has stated in her review of *A Taste of Power* that this text "would have been inconceivable in the seventies – or even in the eighties. In radical circles, it would have been welcomed as an exposé of a fraudulent movement" ("Making" 4). In other words, although Davis, Brown, and Shakur are each critical of the ways women were represented and treated in black organisations, the extent to which they address, or on the other hand, remain silent about this issue, could be linked to the complex dynamics between their public and personal identity. For example, these dynamics come forward in the personal, romantic relationships the women have with black activists while similarly dealing with the ways this affected their public image. As Joy James aptly observes, "each male in the Panther pantheon can stand individually yet still "possess" a female counterpart: George Jackson was

linked with Angela Davis, Elaine Brown to Huey P. Newton, and Kathleen Cleaver to Eldridge" (140). As these black female icons were represented as the lovers of black male revolutionaries, their relationships serve, as James suggests, "as markers, promoting the image of black female militants as sexual and political associates, as beautiful consorts rather than political comrades. The American public as spectator would recognize in these personal if not political lives familiar heterosexual dramas of desire, betrayal, abandonment, and battery (140).

In *An Autobiography,* Davis's personal correspondence with George Jackson, co-founder of the Black Guerilla Party, and one of Soledad Brothers Davis passionately supporting by working on behalf of their defense committee, through letter exchange includes Davis's most elaborate discussion of gender in the Black Power movement. As Davis describes Jackson as "walking with confidence" and having "a face [which] revealed the depth of his understanding of our collective struggle," and states that while she was fighting for "my rights as a Black woman," (*An Autobiography* 264) the Soledad brothers "were fighting for their rights as Black men," they fought the "same struggle" and had the "same enemies" (*An Autobiography* 255). As Davis positions her public image as being a political associate of Jackson, she also felt "a personal commitment" as they were in a romantic relationship (*An Autobiography* 255) Although this indeed corresponds with James's argument that Davis's public image is strongly shaped by her connection to a male counterpart, it could be stated that in terms of gender issues, Davis was the more revolutionary figure of the two. As Jackson maintained a sexist view on gender roles in his 1970 autobiography *Soledad Brother* in which he stated that "women enjoy and need a strong hand poised above them," (108) his relation with Davis was pivotal in reshaping his view on Black women. As a letter from Davis to Jackson read in court during Davis's trial shows, is that Davis challenges the type of patriarchal family structure as envisioned by Jackson.

Strategically included in *An Autobiography*, this letter forcefully but subtlety conveys Davis's belief in Black women's revolutionary potential. As Davis notes that Jackson has eventually transformed his view on Black women, as she states that he apologised to women and "wanted them all to understand his misjudgment," (*An Autobiography* 317) it could be mentioned that Davis changed Jackson's ideas about gender roles. Although Davis agrees with Jackson that work needs to be done on awakening black women's revolutionary consciousness as "we, Black women, aim our bullets in the wrong direction and moreover, we don't even understand the weapon," (*An Autobiography* 373) she also provides a critical, but also constructive, context for Black women's activism, something which Jackson's narrative lacks. However, although these statements contribute to Davis's later public image as a feminist cultural icon, it should be noticed that the ways she has positioned her gender analysis are incredibly strategic. Instead of going completely and openly against the prevailing sense in the Black Power movement of what black women should and should not do, Davis relies on "a Marxist version of women's equality (Mostern 185). In writing that "liberation is a dialectical movement – the Black man cannot free himself as a Black man unless the Black women can liberate herself," (*An Autobiography* 374) Davis states that black liberation can only work when a sense of solidarity between black men and women is created. Furthermore, taking Jackson's statements regarding the oppression of black males he made in *Soledad Brothers* together with Davis's observations about the same oppression that limited the lives and choices of black women, creates, an, as Perkins points out, "intertextual" gender analysis (139). In other words, the inclusion of Davis's letter to Jackson in her narrative contributes to a "compelling gender dialogue" (Perkins 140) in which Davis strategically position her statements on gender as the other half of the narrative of gender in the Black Power movement.

Where Davis's dialogue with men such as Jackson offers some hope for improving

gender equality, Brown's experiences with sexism and sadomasochistic violence inside the BPP conveys a much different dialogue. Having the public image as being the female leader of the BPP, Brown had to deal with intense criticism of male members who considered her leadership position as "eroding black manhood" and "hindering the progress of the black race" (357). Her relationship with men in the BPP, ranging from Eldridge Cleaver to Bobby Seale and most notably her lover Huey Newton, whom she describes as her counterpart as "I was the woman in him as much as he was the man in me," resolve around issues of violence of chauvinism (299). Caught in a matrix of machoism, Brown recalls almost beaten to death by a BPP member named Steve after he believed she committed adultery, and mentions her tumultuous relationship with Cleaver whom she feared might kill her when she did not support his new agenda for the BPP. Furthermore, where Davis positions herself as a political comrade next to Jackson, Brown, in line with James's statement, writes that despite her strong connection to Huey, she was also just one of his many lovers as "I knew that the idea of his being "mine" could exist only in a very small place" (259). Throughout *A Taste of Power,* a complex dynamic exists between Brown's public image as leader as her private identity as being an oppressed women. One of the most complex ways Brown's narrative reveals these conflicted images is by her taking the identity as violent macho as part of her leadership positon. In her speech after being appointed chair, Brown immediately stresses that "there will be no external or internal opposition I will not resist and put down. I will deal resolutely with anyone or anything that stands in the way. So If you don't like the fact that I am a woman, here is your chance to leave. You'd better leave because you won't be tolerated" (5). Although Brown recalls being protected by Huey from sexism in the Party, her understanding that "I could no longer hide behind Huey," signals a change in her public identity (353). In line with Bukhari's observation that there were "three evils" that had to be struggled with in the BPP, namely "male chauvinism, female passivity and ultra-femininity (the I'm only a

female syndrome," (54) Brown's identity transgresses these roles to secure her leadership position. On the one hand, her ability to gain the support of male members of the BPP was partly result of her gaining a sense of agency as leader which "seemed a reparation for all the rage and pain in my life" (6). Attempting to follow the image of a strong and determined leader the Panthers wished to have, Brown did not shy away from exercising power as "it was a sensuous thing to know that at one's will an enemy can be struck down," (319) resulting, for instance, in her orders to assault Steve, who physically abused her a couple years before. Although Brown states that "there were large issues involved when I ordered Steve to Oakland," (368) her emphasis on asserting that she "had not intended committing an act of vengeance," (368) implies that she attempts to convince the reader that she tries to separate her public and private identity, while in fact, it is questionable whether the ordered beating was not a form of vengeance she could act out after she gained considerable agency (368).

Her relationship with Newton, however, exposes the lack of agency Brown truly has in the BPP. As Brown only has a *taste* of power, it is Newton who constantly is the one who really in charge. Not only on the political level of Party leadership, but also on a personal level, Newton is the one who makes the decisions in Brown's life and, thus, prevent her from gaining true agency. After being helplessly abused by Steve, Brown realises that she "was one of the oppressed," and it was a "fear of loneliness" which was "the deepest truth of why I was in the Black Panther Party, of why I smothered my life with Huey Newton" (310). However, in keeping some of her experiences with Newton silent, especially the fact that prior to her departure from the Party, she was reportedly beaten by Newton to the extent she was hospitalised (Perkins 80), she did deliberately not damage Newton's image as an inspirational revolutionary to protect the image of iconic figures of the Black Power movement. Thus, her eventual decision to break with BPP, after a female Black Panther was severely beaten, indicates that in order to escape from the sexist violence and regain both a sense, Brown had

to break with what has provided her with a sense of identity, both politically in terms of her public identity as leader in order to regain a sense of womanhood, as well as privately, by breaking away from being Huey's female counterpart in order to gain her own agency.

As Davis is linked to Jackson, and Brown to Newton, it is only Shakur who, as James suggests, "stands alone as an iconic figure, embodying masculine and feminine (stereotypical characteristics … Without a towering male persona, Shakur – unlike the "conventional" black female revolutionary – has no shadow of a legendary fighter and revolutionary to shade her from full scrutiny" (140). Unlike her female comrades, Shakur never had to explain the presence of a controversial male counterpart in her life narrative. Although she briefly mentions that she was married for a short period to Louis Chesimard, a student-activist, whom she describes as "politically conscious and decent," (*Assata* 281) they disagreements on gender roles eventually led to a divorce as Shakur had no desire to become "a homemaker" (*Assata* 282). Although being active in the BLA adds to her image as a "unrepentant rebel," (*Assata* 271) her leadership in life-and-death experiences with in police illustrates her as a militant, and her rejecting of her "slave name" shows her expression of America being a state of "slave masters," (*Assata* 272) her life writing shows a different side of her public image. Rejecting her image as being a 'masculine' violent revolutionary, *Assata* offers a portrait of Shakur as being committed to striving for black freedom while rejecting violence and armed struggle to obtain it, as she states that the revolutionary war is above all a "people's war" (*Assata* 274). Although the "people's war" has a military dimension according to Shakur, "by itself, it can never bring about a revolution," (*Assata* 274) as she stresses the importance of community building. Thus, although Shakur voices criticism against sexism throughout *Assata* only a couple of times directly, there can be more nuanced instances opposition found in her narrative. By mentioning that she rejecting following the tradition of black matriarchy as envisioned by Moynihan during her marriage, she criticises the gender expectations as set

in the Black community. Furthermore, as Shakur rejects the gun-toting, though image of Black Power activists as, for example, promoted by Cleaver, and in a larger sense the Black Power movement, writing her experiences down as a female activists is in itself a form of criticism against the silencing of female voices because of the influence of images which could be theorised under representational intersectionality.

2.2| THE POWER OF SISTERHOOD

Although rejecting sexism or criticism machoism could be done on an individual level to continue being part of the Black Power movement, Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings also convey a second way of challenging stereotypical images set in motion by representational intersectionality. In rejecting the notion of being marginalised women, the three activists have each commented on the importance of women in rebuilding the black community as part of the Black Power movement through teaching, and community projects such as breakfast programmes. However, more than being part of a collective struggle, taking gender as a lens to analyse the three life writings sheds light on the ways Davis, Brown, and Shakur gained a sense of agency by building a distinct movement with its own ideas and visions by joining forces with fellow female activists. Bukhari observes in *The War Before* that the reason why many black women did not participate in the Women's Liberation Movement during the late 60's was based on notions of white feminism. She writes: "white women were seeking to change their role in society vis-a vis the home and the work place and to be seen as more than just a mother and homemaker. But our situation was different, we had been working outside of the home and supporting our families. Our struggle was not a struggle to be liberated so we could move into the work place, but a struggle to be recognized as human beings (65). In line with this observation, in 1974, the Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist organisation, highlighted that the white feminist movement was not

addressing their particular needs, and the CRC constructed a different claim in feminism (Collins, *Black Power to Hip Hop* 163). In emphasing the importance of identity politics, feminism within Black women's community work, the CRC advocated black feminism as, as Winifred Breines states, "the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face … [T]he most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identities (124).

In line with Bukhari's observation that women in the BPP, were just like their male counterpart were busy with recruiting men, largely preoccupied with organising among women, Collins suggests that constructing "collective identity politics" is an essential part of achieving "substantive structural change for African American women" (*Black Power to Hip Hop* 159). Furthermore, Collins states that "revitalizing Black women's community work" (*Black Power to Hip Hop* 159) is vital "in a context that is cognizant of the mass-media environment that affects young Black women" (*Black Power to Hip Hop* 160). As Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's narratives are each characterised with a conversion to organised political activism, especially among women, their writings are "*testimonio*," (Warner 8) bearing witness to the experiences beyond their personal selves. In reading the three women's life writings as privileging the 'we' over the 'I,' their narratives become part of the genre known as "collective autobiographies," personal narratives of what Doris Sommer calls a "plural self" (qtd. in Warner 8). However, more than constructing collective identities, the women also positions its readers in relation to them, seeking to establish a sense of solidarity or mutual understanding. In other words, not only do Davis, Brown, and Shakur write themselves into a communal identity, readers do also play an active role in situating life narratives within frameworks, including those tied to group identity (Warner 8). Approaching Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings by following Philippe Lejeune's definition of autobiography as "ultimately being based on the function of a form," (qtd. in Goldman 288) it

could be stated that they offer, through their "self-positioning," (Warner 8) to demonstrate the potential for communities to actively transform oppressive representations of black women.

Taking Collins's sociological approach to black women's community building together with the theory of collective autobiographies as outlined above together, Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's narratives each show how their experiences in creating a collective identity based on sisterhood has shaped their perception of their individual womanhood. In situating themselves within "a historical continuum of African American resistance," (Perkins 43) the women write themselves into the tradition of the black slave narratives which are communal tales rather than an individual's narratives. For example, Davis writes that "thousands of my ancestors had waited, as I had done, for nightfall to cover their steps, had leaned on one true friend to help them, had felt, like I did, the very teeth of the dogs at their heels" (*An Autobiography* 6). Furthermore, as Shakur states that "to become free, you have to be acutely aware of being slave," (*Assata* 37) they position their identity by using, as Ron Eyerman puts it, "the prime means through which the collective was identified and is more or less forced to identify itself with, namely "the race and slave past" (83-84). However, apart from placing themselves into this communal identity, the focus on gender reveals how Davis, Brown, and Shakur also follow a different trend for forming a communal identity as women. In other words, apart from following "literary antecedents" (Perkins 21) in terms of describing race oppression, their focus on gender oppression in the Black Power movement creates elements in their life writings which could be considered as forming a new kind of feminist emancipation narrative.

As Kimberly Springer suggests, "the development of a black feminist collective identity was, in fact, non-linear and subject to constant redefinition by black feminists based on their interaction with one another and the social movement community" (114). In Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings, it is, when taking this observation into account, relevant

to note how these women write about each other, contributing in strengthening a sense of a collective identity. In *Assata*, Shakur comments on the connection she feels to Davis, as she writes that "she was the most beautiful women i had ever seen. Not physically, but spiritually, i knew who she was, because i had been keeping clippings of her in my file" *(Assata* 297). Brown also mentions Davis in her narrative. Meeting Davis during her first visit to the Black Congress, Brown recalls that "I was struck by her humble honesty about herself. She did not try to shade her freshman relationship to America's radical movement, which made me feel less intimidated by all the others there, who projected themselves as veterans," while she describes Davis's sister Fania as a "statuesque sister … who walked so regally one might step aside and bow for her" (*Assata* 108). Davis, in turn, expresses her great admiration for Shakur by writing a foreword for *Assata*. In this foreword, she states, that in following Shakur's life story, "you'll discover a compassionate human being with an unswerving commitment to justice … she speaks to all of us … she offers invaluable gifts – inspiration and hope. Her words remind us, as Walter Benjamin once observed, that it is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given to us" (xii). Although Davis writes about Brown that "we never became close friends," she states that "our political lives intersected in many significant ways" ("Making" 3). What these references most of all convey, is that a mutual understanding exists between them which instantaneously forms a sense of solidarity between them. In expresses their solidarity by referring to each other in their life writings, Davis, Brown, and Shakur have found a way to write each other into existence.

As Stover notes, "these alternative and subversive ways of communicating – away from the gaze of the dominant power," can take on many forms and shapes (169). In doing so, as Stover suggests, black women communicated with other to affirm their "visibility" (169). For example, despite the refusal of many BPP men to acknowledge the potential of Panther women and assigning them to "inferior roles," Brown comments on how she grouped

together with other women in a collective posture which became to be known as “the clique” (192). Although opposed by many male Panthers who were saying that “smart bitches, like us, needed to be silenced,” (192) through her clique, Brown gained a sense of agency. Not only were Brown’s connections with other women were important to her on a personal level, as she, for instance, recalls how she thought of her friend Suzanne “as a little secret, a soft, womanly secret self, who was untainted by the hardness of the world in which I lived,” (306) her political self was also significantly shaped by her interactions with fellow female activists. Experiencing and witnessing the silencing of female participation, Brown appointing in her position as chair, women to key position in the BPP as she stated “it was a given that the entire Black Power movement was handicapped by the limited roles the Brothers allowed the Sisters” (363).

However, were Brown uses to discuss sisterhood and her experiences with community building with women as part her life narrative, Shakur follows a different way of communication. Although Shakur mentions the importance of connections with other black women, her most powerful message of black feminism can be found in the way she has structured her life narrative. As she reveals quite late in *Assata* that “revolution is about change, and the first place the change begins in yourself,” (291) the previous part of her narrative serves to position her as a girl coming from poverty who, despite the hardships she endured, gained a voice. Although Brown was also born in the slums, her backstory differs from Shakur as Brown temporarily moved into high-class circles that included Frank Sinatra. At the same time, Shakur’s political education was far less evolved than Davis’s who was personally mentored by prominent communist figures such as the Apthekers. As Shakur did not know these privileges, her story, as James suggests, “is remarkable for its unremarkable nature” (142). It is in her position as ordinary, easily relatable girl and in her message to her readership that “maybe we [black women] are all running and hiding. Maybe we are all

running from something, all living a clandestine existence," (*Assata* 344) that makes Shakur's relations building with her readership so particularly powerful (344). By using her life writing as an instrument to connect with other women, her life story is empowering as it demonstrates that, despite the sexist and racist images forced upon black women, any ordinary black girl could grow up to became a revolutionary with a voice.

Although Davis mentions the importance of personal relationships she had with women and as well as the potential women showed in mass organising, one short, nuanced but, at the same time, powerful description of a black women Davis included in her narrative stands out in particular. Included in the penultimate chapter of *An Autobiography*, which is significant in the narrative as that the reader, as Kimberly Nichele Brown points out, is "finally privy to firsthand accounts of Davis's thoughts and feelings," (146) Davis's interpretation of others runs as a key theme throughout this section. Although, as Nichole Brown shows, there are several interesting examples of Davis's interpretation of others, in terms of forming a connection based on sisterhood, her interpretation of the only potential juror that was a black woman is specifically remarkable. In Davis's discussion, this women, Mrs. Janie Hemphill, stands for a broader point Davis wants to convey. Although Hemphill was quickly removed by the prosecuting attorney, the fact that Davis clearly remembers her name and appearance puts emphasis to the "familial feeling" Davis felt toward her (*An Autobiography* 353). Writing that "Mrs. Hemphill's story was the universal story of the Black woman in a world that wants to see her crushed," Davis forms a connection with her as "the system was poised against us. … My own present predicament was, on a different level, evidence of that same politically, economically, socially hostile world almost every Black woman must contend with every day of her life" (*An Autobiography* 353). Although having found a potential ally, Davis is not surprised when she is eliminated, the treatment Hemphill receives, with Davis making a small note that she was the only juror asked to answer

questions for the witness stand, indicated that Davis makes a larger statement by subtly showing how Hemphill's treatment stands for black womanhood being on trial. Taking this into consideration, when reading Bettina Aptheker's account on Davis's ordeal, it is interesting to note how Hemphill responded to accusations made by the prosecutor attorney that charges brought against her could influence her judgement of Davis, as Hemphill responded as follows: "No … For so many years I have had to blot out so many things … I could blot this part out. There's a lot of things I had to blot out in my life" (qtd. in Aptheker 176). In other words, Davis's connection was based on two dimensions of mutual understanding. First of all, it was an understanding that they were both had to deal with similar systems of oppression, secondly it was a connection based on a mutual connection based on admiration and a sense of hope. Despite the oppressive forces, Hemphill was crucial for Davis in demonstrating that she, just like Hemphill, "had to overcome" by claiming her own voice to create a correct public image of herself (*An Autobiography* 353).

Thus, in line with Stover's observation that "the 'I' in black women's autobiography often reflects an 'I' that is not simply of this world, but exists as a connection between community and individual," (22) Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings could be perceived as social instruments which voices the often silenced experiences of black women while simultaneously advocating the importance of collective awareness. However, Davis, Brown, and Shakur build connections with women to varying degrees and in different ways in their texts. However, whether by writing about the act of community building, such as in Brown's case, or by developing out of a social location an ethical conception of the oppression of woman as Shakur shows, or by expressing a sense of shared personhood, one that portrays black women as shapers of their own identity, as Davis does, there can be a recurring trend found in the texts. Through their personal narratives, these women discover a sense of agency which, in Stover's words, "frees their public voice … and the discovery that

she has a public voice gives her agency" (200). Rejecting "a black victim status in favor of a self-empowered female self at the center of their identity," (Doriani 200) their writings function as a site of resistance, showing, that despite representational images which position black women being placed at the bottom of multiple hierarchies by forcing oppressive, chauvinist structures upon them, these representational images could be successfully challenged by women who have assumed agency by constructing an authentic identity, both communally as well as individually.

2.3| IDENTITY AND GENDER POLITICS REVISED

According to Michel Foucault, power is, in his words, "already there … one is never 'outside' it … there are no 'margins' for those who break with the system to gambol in" (141-142). In line with Foucault's understanding of power as a system in which people constantly are in dialogue, challenging structures of power requires first of all requires an awareness of how one is positioned and to what extent one participates in that system. In terms of representational intersectionality, it should then first be understood how particular images construct how Black women are perceived and treated according to those conventions. Davis, Brown, and Shakur are each finding themselves in difficult situations as they attempt to dismantle the intersectional images of traditional feminine roles as envisioned by Moynihan. However, as they also aim to challenge the image of women as, as Brown puts it, "man-hating, lesbian, feminist bitches," (368) they experience difficulties by holding on to their womanhood. As female activists were often ripped of their femininity, or as Brown observes, "their 'bourgeois' sweetness that could have made them glamorous women," (260) black women only had the option to stick either to stereotypically "feminine" or "masculine" characteristics. In order to transgress these gender expectations by various mediated texts, the three activists show different kind of resistance in their life writings. Although there could be

similarities found in their criticism on sexism and machoism, especially in their mutual concern that women were limited from participating in full and equal activism because of prevalent gender norms, there are differences in the ways they voice their criticism in their narratives. As Davis's most elaborate and interesting points on gender issues appears in the intertextual dialogue she has with Jackson in the form of letter read aloud by the prosecutor in her trial, it could be stated that her statement that men and women need to rejoice to successfully build a "revolutionary path," (*An Autobiography* 373) is clearly based on the Marxist ideology of gender equality, her views on the intersections between race and gender remains overall quite objective. Thus, although as Kenneth Mostern states that "gender *politics* are absent from *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*," (185) gender *analysis* does eventually appears. Brown's points on the gender ideology of the Black Power movement is, in comparison to Davis's, based on a much more personal and subjective view. In showing how her public image as leader of the BPP, in so far that she even behaved in the machoist fashion of the male Panthers in order to assert her power, clashes with her personal identity of a women feeling oppressed and alienated in the BPP, Brown includes more explicit information on the complex dynamics between gender and power. Shakur, on the other hand, is more careful in writing explicit criticism down. In her case, the actions she committed during her life as activist rather than her rhetoric portray most powerfully how she thinks, resist, and transgressing prevalent notion of gender roles. This being noted, it should be taken into account that Davis, Brown, and Shakur have had different relationships with black male activist, had different position in Black Power organisations, and that Brown had much greater freedom to confront the loaded internal issue of gender, as her text was published in a very different context. However, taken as a collective, each narrative shows, in its own way, how life writing can be used to challenge structures of representational intersectionality. As their experiences and criticism expand each other, they collective create a narrative which

gives broad insight in the dynamics between gender, violence, and power in the Black Power movement.

In refashioning an identity against disparaging images of themselves as propagated by prevalent gender roles and in the popular press, Davis, Brown, and Shakur are using their narratives to re-write the self. However, more than establishing agency over constructing their own public and private identities, their autobiographical writing facilitates not only the move from the "isolationist I" but also the move from the "communal we" to becoming active rather than passive objects through empowering the potential of the collective identity of Black female activists (Goldman 288). In other words, the narrated I is becoming a speaking subject, inscribed in multiple discourses, and situated in multiple subjectivities. Thus rather than fixing the subject as and the texts as illustrating either a privileged I or as a 'we' that is metonym to a collective, identity might, as Anne Goldman suggests, "more effectively be appraised with reference to a continuum" (288). Holding on to what Goldman refers to as "the notion of balance," the use flexible identity model which is shifting between the personal and the public, and thus, between individual, and communal I, provides Davis, Brown, and Shakur with the possibility, as Goldman explains, "of supporting multiple self-positionings that can provide critiques of bipolar theories" (288). In doing so, as Goldman puts it, "the practice of self-contextualization" (289) allows people to speak "their own idiosyncratic selves into textual existence," while allowing them "to frame consciousness as involved with social conditions and community affiliations" (288).

In the case of Davis, Brown, and Shakur, their transgressing of conventional definitions of the isolationist I, allows them to draw distinctions between the 'me' and the 'us,' as is the case of describing their relation with male activists. In doing so, these women, in their own way, do not only testify their experiences with sexist systems of oppression in the Black Power movement, they also tie their experiences, to, as Perkins observes, "systematic

phenomena" (23). As a result, there life writings could be used to theorise personal experiences, expose connections between certain structures or phenomena and thus link them to the broader influence representational intersectionality exerts on both their personal and public identity. However, on the other hand, Davis, Brown, and Shakur also draw connections between 'me' and 'us," between male and female activist, but most of all between female activist. In participating in building a separate female collectivity within the larger Black Power organisations, they contribute in envisioning a Black female, or even feminist, collective identity by taking, as Springer suggests, "a both/and standpoint, taking into account their experiences as both blacks *and* women" (117). In doing so, the testimonies of these three female activists could be interpreted as doing more than clarifying compressional structures and demystifying sexist and racists representations. In demonstrating how these structures could be resisted, or at least be challenged, Davis's, Brown's and Shakur's become, in Perkins's words, "a site of pedagogy," (25) aiming to raise consciousness both on how notions of black womanhood are *formed*, and how these notions, by rewriting senses of the individual self and by reconstructing black female activists' collective identity, representations of black womanhood could be *transformed* (25).

3 | FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM

PRISON, TRIALS, AND ESCAPE

The most reproduced photograph of Angela was the one of her holding a microphone at a rally in the spring of 1970. It was reproduced on page 24 of a *Life* magazine cover-story article, published on September 11, 1970, and titled "The Making of a Fugitive." The message on "Free Angela" posters quickly evolved to add "& All Political Prisoners."

(Source: *collectorsweekly.com*)

Autobiographical texts are situated, as Smith and Watson explain, "in a paratextual surround" (*Reading Autobiography* 99). The term "paratext" is a combination between the term "peritext," which are all the texts added in the publishing process that accompany the main text in some way and the term "epitext," which refers to all the elements outside the text, such

as reviews and interviews (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 99). Although these texts may appear to be neutral additions to the text, the "peritextual process" (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 100) can dramatically shape and situate the narrative by inviting a particular political of reading. Furthermore, as "the peritextual package" (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 101) of autobiographical writing situated the narrative by constructing an audience, these additional texts added to the main text during the publishing process are, as Gérard Genette notes, "more or less endowed with significance" (qtd. in Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 99). After all, as Jerome Bruner has pointed out in his influential essay "Life as Narrative," eventually, as he suggests, "the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very "events" of a life" (15).

An example of such a peritext which frames the reception and perception of the reader is Lennox S. Hinds's foreword to *Assata*. In his forewords, Hinds, Shakur's longtime attorney, stresses that "Assata Shakur did not receive a fair trial in Middlesex County, New Jersey" (xxiii). As Hinds writes that he, over the years he worked with Shakur, "was to learn much about the selective, arbitrary, and ferocious ways the law and the its processes would be applied against Assata Shakur, his foreword already emphasises that *Assata* could be perceived as being a narrative of a witness recording the struggle of an incarnated subject who had to deal with dehumanising systems due to state repression (xix). In stressing how the federal government "aimed to destroy Assata Shakur … by arrest, prosecution, incarceration, and murder," Hinds's foreword serves to emphasise the wrongfulness with which Shakur was convicted (xxii). As Shakur was (and remains) a wanted fugitive at the time her life writing was published, *Assata* serves as an instrument for making the public aware of her predicament, gain mass support, and to undermine the ability of the government to retaliate

against her. One of the ways to add eligibility to her writing this account can thus be creating by adding a peritext written by a professor in criminal justice who also is world-renowned criminal defense and international human rights lawyer whose clients have included Nelson Mandela ("Hinds" par.1).

However, more in terms of moral instead of practical objectives, Hinds's foreword also serves to highlight the importance of Shakur's narrative in exposing the contradictions in the legal systems of a democratic nation such as the U.S. To analyse this, and especially when connecting this to gender, Crenshaw's third dimension of intersectionality is useful to theorise black women's suffering under violations of state laws and political systems. In order to reflect on the dimension within the "*political* intersectionality," ("Beyond Racism" 554, emphasis added) it should be noted that the concept could be defined in two distinct ways. Firstly, the political aspect of intersectionality is explained by Crenshaw as follows:

> I use the term to refer to the different ways in which political and discursive practices related to race and gender interrelate, often erasing women of color … the term reveals the ways in which politics centered around mutually exclusive notions of race and gender leave women of color without a political framework that will adequately contextualize the violence that occurs in our lives ("Beyond Racism" 554).

Secondly, the concept could be used to explore how, as Crenshaw points out, "women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas" ("Mapping" 1252). In other words, this approach to political intersectionality refers to the ways in which a category of people engaging in specific identity politics may, often unintentionally, disempower or marginalise each other. This cause-and-result effect could potentially pose serious problems. As Crenshaw explains, if black women are forced to align with either women, or their race, they cannot, in their forced decision,

create a medium contributing to both identities, but rather align to either of those identities based on the basis of which will gain them the most results in political and legal matters ("Mappings" 1252-1253).

This forging of identity under duress is also present in Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's experiences with legal authority, the federal government, and the FBI's systematic attack on black groups and individuals orchestrated by its counterintelligence programme known as COINTELPRO. To explore how political intersectionality functions within their narratives, two themes in the women's life writings are particular relevant to discuss. First of all, their testimonies of their experiences as being political prisoners, and how this state of being has affected their respective identities, is a key theme in the works of Davis and Shakur. As Davis penned her autobiography while in prison and Shakur wrote her work while being a wanted fugitive, these women were not only writing about their lives, but also, as Perkins observes, "writing *for* their lives" (27). Taking these observations into account, it is not insignificant that both Davis's and Shakur's life writings opens with them being arrested as wanted fugitives. Although having endured earlier political harassment such as being dismissed by her job by a campaign ruled by the then Senator of California Ronald Reagan, Davis was prosecuted by being linked to the January 17, 1970 Marin County courthouse incident. During this event, 17-year-old Jonathan Jackson, George Jackson's brother, attempted to negotiate the freedom of the Soledad Brothers by kidnapping Superior Court judge Harold Haley from the Marin County Civic Center in San Rafael, California (Aptheker xiii). The resulting shootout killed four people, including Jonathan and Judge Haley. In *An Autobiography*, Davis recalls the event as follows: "the enemy had closed in on Jon, who had tried to make some dent in the formidable prison system which was turning his brother – all his brothers and sisters – around and around, faster and faster in a vicious orbit of misery and brutality, frame-ups and assassinations" (297). As Davis was known to be close to the Jackson family and,

moreover, as several of the guns used by Jonathan were legally registered under her name, of which Davis writes that “no one needed to tell me that they would exploit the fact that my guns had been used in Marin in order to strike out at me once more,” (*An Autobiography* 6). following the event, a warrant was issued for the arrest of Davis. Despite planning to flee to Cuba by using false identification, the FBI found and arrested Davis in New York on October 13, 1970 in New York, an arrest during which she, as she writes “felt calmer and more composed than I had in a long time” (*An Autobiography* 14). Charged as an accomplice of homicide, kidnapping, and conspiracy, President Richard Nixon personally congratulated the FBI on “its capture of the dangerous terrorist, Angela Davis” (qtd. in Aptheker xiv). Shakur, on the other hand, was already charged with several crimes, such as bank robbery and kidnapping, although never convicted and even dismissed for several of these crimes before she, together with BLA member Zayn Shakur and Sundiata Acoli, was stopped by state police on the New Jersey Turnpike. Resulting in a shootout, that severely wounded Shakur and killed Zayd and New Jersey State Trooper Werner Foerster, she was “dragged by the foot across the pavement,” (*Assata* 4) and taken into custody, being charged with the murder of Foerster. As Davis spent roughly eighteen months in prison, and Shakur was imprisoned from May 1978 up to her escape in November, 1979, part of their life writings address their experiences as being black women incarnated in American prisons.

Although Davis was, on June 4, 1972, after thirteen hours of deliberation, acquitted by a jury which returned a verdict of not guilty on all accounts, Shakur was eventually convicted as an accomplice to the murder of Foerner and sentenced to a life in prison. Taking this into account, their autobiographical writings on these experiences are relevant for exposing how political intersectionality functioned in their trials. Brown’s narrative, on the other hand, diverts from Davis’s and Shakur’s in terms of her experiences with prison life and trials. It is, therefore, that political intersectionality functions differently in her narrative. In

exploring how she has written about her personal feelings about being metaphorically instead of physically imprisoned, her writing on this theme will be analysed next to Davis's and Shakur's experiences in prison. Furthermore, next to discussing Davis's and Shakur's trials, Brown's unsuccessful campaign for a seat in the Oakland City Council in 1975 will be explored in order to expose intersectional systems of political oppression which partly resulted in her failed bid. Taking all this into account, to what extent could the influences of political intersectionality be stated as having limited Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's construction of their agency?

3.1| GENDER STRUCTURES IN THE PRISON SYSTEM

In the famous essay "Civil Disobedience," Henry David Thoreau wrote that prison "is a more free and honorable ground … the only house in a slave-state in which a man can abide with honor" (14). Contrary to Thoreau, Davis states in her monograph *Are Prisons Obsolete?* that prison life is a form of slavery, "a contemporary manifestation of the racialized disparities that many of us believed to be abolished in 1865" (11). To explore how these "racialized disparities" are gendered, Davis suggests that "addressing issues that are specific to women's prison is of vital importance, but it is equally important to shift the way we think about the prison system as a whole" (*Are Prisons Obsolete?* 62). After all, as to assume that, in Davis's words, "men's institutions are the norm and women's institutions are marginal is, in a sense, to participate in the very normalization of prisons that an abolitionist approach seeks to contest" (*Are Prisons Obsolete?* 62). In line with the two points raised by Davis, Shakur writes in her essay "Women in Prison: How It Is With Us," published in *The Black Scholar* in 1978, about the inhuman conditions women were put under in Riker Island's Correctional Institution for Women. In light of the influences addressed by the concept of political intersectionality, Shakur demonstrates in this essay how black women are limited by being

situated in two subordinated groups that pursue conflicting agendas. Although white feminists seek to end the violence against women in prison, they often overlook the fact that life on the outside of prison inside is remarkable similar for black women. As Shakur emphasises the parallels between women's imprisonment and life on the outside, she writes of life in prison that "the police are the same. The racism is the same. The sexism is the same. The drugs are the same and the system are the same" ("Women in Prison" par. 31). In line with Davis's observation in *An Autobiography* that in New York's House of Detention, "at least ninety-five percent of the women … were either Black or Puerto Rican," Shakur states that "There are no criminals here at Riker's Island Correctional Institution for Women, (New York), only victims. Most of the women are black and Puerto Rican. Most have been abused by men and all have been abused by the system" (61, "Women in Prison" par. 8).

As part of Davis's and Shakur's narratives could be read as prison narratives, which Smith and Watson define as "a mode of captivity narrative written during or after incarceration," their writings from prisons could perceived as "occasions for prisoners to inscribe themselves as fully human in the midst of a system designed to dehumanize and to render them anonymous and passive" (*Reading Autobiography* 277). In understanding how the intersections of racism, male domination, and strategies of political repression as part the Davis's and Shakur's prison narratives appear in their life writings, it is important to link their observations to the following statement Davis makes in her essay "The Meaning of Freedom". In this essay, she states that "the structural racism of the prison can also be held responsible for the persistence of racism in the so-called free world" (141). Although Davis writes about the relationship between racism inside and outside prison when making this observation, it could be stated that as Davis's and Shakur's prison narratives reveal how gendering of state punishment and the extent to which women's prisons have hold on to patriarchal practices, sexism in prison can also be held responsible for the persistence of sexism in the 'free world'.

As these oppressive practices were most regularly executed by prison guards, it is relevant to consider how Davis and Shakur write about their experiences with them. Although they both reveal how inhuman the guards could be, and Davis writes about the "jailers' racist bias" she was introduced to in Marin County jail as the "way we were handcuffed revealed the blatant racism of the matrons … me with both hands manacled behind me, the Black women chained to the Chicano woman, and the white woman with both hands free," (*An Autobiography* 297-298) they also mention that they feel a sense of connection with them As Shakur observes that the "overwhelming majority of the guards are Black," (*Assata* 119) she expands this point in "Women in Prison" by stating that "Many guards hate and feel trapped by their jobs. If they were not working as guards most would be underpaid or unemployed. Many would miss the feeling of superiority and power as much as they would miss the money, especially the cruel, sadistic ones" (par. 17). As, for example, Davis writes that most guards "had been driven by necessity to apply for this kind of job," she states that they "were prisoners themselves, and some were keenly aware that they were treading ambiguous waters" (*An Autobiography* 43). However, despite that frequently guards, were similar to most prisoners, black women, they engaged in very different power structures and identity politics, thereby marginalising and disempowering each other. Although Shakur writes that while the opinions the black female guards expressed were similar to hers, she also stresses that "that's another story," (*Assata* 120) as in jail, the power structures between guard and prisoners prohibits them to align to each other.

As it is, in a sense, understandable that guards and prisoners do not align with each other, Davis's and Shakur's narrative are even more relevant in revealing how the possibilities for black female prisoners to build communities were very limited. Although it should be noted that both Davis and Shakur were for long periods of time confided to solitary confinement, and Hinds even states that "in the history of New Jersey, no woman pretrial

detainee or prisoner has been ever treated as she was, continuously confined in a men's prison … without the company of all the women for all the years she was in their custody," (*Assata* xx) the short parts of their narratives which focus on their relationships with female prisoners reveals a great deal about the dynamics in black female prisoner life. In "Women in Prison," Shakur notes "a striking difference between women and men prisoners at Riker's Island is the absence of revolutionary rhetoric among the women. The women at Riker's seem vaguely aware of what a revolution is but generally regard it as an impossible dream" (par. 26). In line with this, Davis observes that there was no revolutionary literature available to the women, as only novels were allowed (*An Autobiography* 302). An even more radical way of disrupting the possibility of women to build a community, can be connected to Davis's observation in *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, in which she points out that while "deviant men have been constructed as criminals, deviant women have been constructed as insane" (66). As Davis describes how many prisoners "received Thorazine with their meals each day, even as they were completely sane," they became to uncommunicative and detached to form a relationship with (*An Autobiography* 32). Furthermore, as Shakur notes that most victims of the many "suspicious suicides" tend to be "the most politically aware and socially conscious inmates in prison," (*Assata* 122) an internalised fear in prison could have played a significant role in preventing prisoners to be openly aspire political revolutionary thinking and to be actively forming communities.

However, besides these external forces which prevented women to form connections to each other or shape any sense of revolutionary consciousness, the ways prison life affected female prisoners internally, especially in the realms of their womanhood, also greatly contributed to diminishing their agency. Although Shakur writes that "while men in prison struggle to maintain their manhood there is no comparable struggle by women to preserve their womanhood," ("Women in Prison" par. 29) it should be noted that it is not the case that

women do not want to preserve their womanhood, they are rather deprived of their sense of it. One of the most illustrative ways Shakur describe how this is enacted, is by discussing the act known as strip search, which they experienced as an everyday routine of women's prison life. In *Assata*, Shakur describes the "strip and search" procedure as follows:

> [we] were given this stuff which they told us to put in our hair and on our pubic hairs and wash with it. "What is this for?" i asked. "It's for the lice and crabs," the guard said. It was humiliating. The last stage was the "search" ... The "internal search" was as humiliating and disgusting as it sounds. You sit on the edge of this table and the nurse holds your leg open and stick a finger in your vagina and moves it around … I wanted to punch that nurse into oblivion" (119-120).

The reason why this passage is extensively quoted, is because it exposes the everyday routine of being, as Shakur names it, "finger-fucked" (120). Being a standard routine which verges on sexual assault as the prisoner is not allowed to refuse, Shakur powerfully exposes how this form of gendered state-punishment works to humiliate and denigrate female prisoners. Although Davis mentions that she also had this "vaginal examination," (*An Autobiography* 22) she frames her strongest message on the ways women are deprived of their womanhood in a different way. As stated before in chapter 1 of this thesis, Davis discusses the type of community building in the prison through forming imaginary families. Although these families could contribute in shaping covert but essential relationships between female prisoners, analysing these 'families' by using the concept of political intersectionality, exposes the negative side to this type of community building. While Davis writes that "it humanized the environment," she also mentions that the "family system" had its "problems" (*An Autobiography* 53). As Davis mentions how "there were masculine and feminine role-playing women," she writes how as the masculine role-playing women inhabited a more "aggressive" mindset while the women who played feminine roles were considered as acting

out a “passive” role (*An Autobiography* 56). As this shows, the patriarchal, oppressive male-female relations are even acted out among women in prison. In other words, as the relationships between women in prison are, in this case, a copy of the unequal, stereotypical male-female relationships of the outside world, Davis’s example shows, in line with political intersectionality, how these prisoners, who are engaging in the same kind of identity politics, are marginalising each other’s agency. However, more than demonstrating the effects of the oppression caused by political intersectionality, this example shows how an interplay between the three types of intersectionality works. As the oppressive male-female relationship has become normalised to the extent that women start behaving according to this gender hierarchy, shows how the overlapping structures of subordination of structural intersectionality are acted out in practice. Furthermore, in showing how black women behave according to certain gender stereotypes, demonstrate how these deep these women’s identities are manifested in the familiar images in which they, as racialised objects, are imagined in society.

Brown, on the other hand, has only spent one night in custody. However, although she has not personally been subjected to the daily practices of prison life, as is the case with Davis and Shakur, they can be traces found in her narrative that describe her as being metaphorically imprisoned. First of all, it could be stated that she describes, from a personal point of view, how black people are socially imprisoned in the metaphorical prison which is American society. In, for example, describing how black activist could be easily dismissed by pleas of “justifiable homicide,” (182) Brown describes the terror in confrontations with the police in which any move could result in death. Furthermore, in describing how she was addressed by a policeman during the only, brief time she was detained, Brown reveals the type of sexist abuse she, and likely, many other black women were degraded with. She writes: “You’re the oldest whore of the pink pussies [Brown was a former employee at the Pink Pussycat

nightclub before she met Kennedy],' they said to me on the ride to the 77th Predict, 'so you must be the one with the biggest hole'" (169). Furthermore, as an interesting detail to her narrative, Brown included how she struggled with an addiction to Thorazine, the same prescription drug used in prison. As she was struggling with the pressure of leading the BPP and dealing with anxiety attacks caused by the constant threat of being persecuting in a coordinated COINTELPRO arrest, Brown reveals that she was propelled to seek out a 'professional,' who described her on Thorazine (148). However, although offering a way to escape her stress, after using Thorazine, Brown, most of all, felt, similarly to the female prisoners, "isolated," (149) adrift and lonely in the social prison of American society.

In conclusion, although prison for black men might become, in line with Thoreau's idea about prion, a place in which they have the opportunity, as Shakur states, to "get their heads together" ("Women in Prison" par. 28) and form revolutionary rhetoric, life for black women in prison resembled too much, as Davis's and Shakur's narrative reveal, the lives they led in the social prison of American society. As prisons are, as Davis observes, "thoughtless places. Thoughtless in the sense that no thinking is done by their administrations; no problem solving or rational evaluation of any situation slightly different from the norm," (*An Autobiography* 290) women are limited by external factors to align with other women, and to create a medium that contributes to both identities. Being placed in racist and sexist hierarchy, as, for example, illustrated by Davis's statement that "the men's linens and jail clothes were sent elsewhere for laundering; the women were expected to tend to their own," and if no one volunteered Davis writes that, "Black women were ordered to it," (*An Autobiography* 309). black women in prison were constantly marginalised on basis of their ethnicity and their gender. Although Davis, Brown, and Shakur were each, in their own way, limited by the politically intersections which disrupted community building and their sense of womanhood, through their life writings, they are challenging these intersections by exposing them and

demonstrating the need to protest against these practices. One of the most telling examples in exposing and simultaneously challenging these racist and sexist intersection could be found in a passage in *Assata*. By telling about a black female prisoner named Eva, "who had the courage to be totally honest," was sent to a hospital for the criminally insane after defending Shakur, she gives this marginalised women, through including her in her narrative, a voice. In dedicating a poem to her, Shakur writes that although "they hate you momma/cause you expose their madness/and their cruelty," "I saw your light/And it was shining" (*Assata* 92, ll. 29-31, ll. 53-54).

3.2| PROTESTING FOR JUSTICE

According to Michael Hames-Garcia, Shakur's conviction represented a "high-water mark" (134) in the persecution of political prisoners in the U.S. The similar could be stated of Davis's 1972 acquittal. However, while Davis's victory signaled the end of a successful era in the defense of political prisoners as being the last acquittal in the string of victories presented in An Autobiography, ranging from Newton, Ericka Huggins, and the New York Panther 21, Shakur's 1977 conviction, as Hames-Garcia points out, "took place in the midst of a whole host of setbacks for the left" (134). Following on the heels of Black Panther Geronimo Ji Jaga's 1992 conviction and Sundiata's 1974 conviction, Shakur was, given this backlash, more limited than Davis in using her life writing as a strategy to obtain justice by working within an unjust system (Hames-Garcia 134). Taking this key difference in Davis's and Shakur's trials into account, it is relevant to consider how the outcomes of their trials has shaped their discussion of these events in their life writing.

In *Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention*, Barbara Harlow suggests that writings of political prisoners in the U.S. enact two types of textual resistance (192). First, as

writing their experiences down enables the writer to represent the trial process, they can record and its injustices and present them to a larger audience (Harlow 193). Second, these writers enact a "textual reversal of the trial scenario," (Harlow 194) by putting the U.S. criminal system on trial, allowing the reader, in the role of the jury, to find it guilty of injustice. The trial proceedings recorded in such writings serve, as Harlow states, "to interrupt and temporarily reverse the charges and reframe the trial proceedings as an inquiry into racism in the United States" (195).

In line with Harlow's observations, Davis's discussion of her trial exposes the injustices part of the U.S. criminal system. In describing the "self-righteous condemnation of that tribunal," she states that they "were convinced they had the right to play God, master, and mother" (*An Autobiography* 351). Furthermore, describing how the scene where the trial took place gave her the feeling that a "sort of game was being played," in which "the contestants with the dangerously obsolete ideas have an unfair advantage," (*An Autobiography* 353). illustrates that Davis attempts to reframe the trail proceedings. As is already stated in the previous chapter, in the discussion of Davis's relationship with Mrs. Hemphill, the penultimate chapter is significant for showing Davis's own interpretation of her trial. One the most interesting points in this chapter, especially when analysing it with the notion of political intersectionality, is Davis's evaluation of how practices relating to gender oppression work to erase her agency. As the persecutor, Mr. Harris, states that "the evidence will show that the claim that the defendant is a political prisoner, the claim that the defendant is the subject of prosecution because of her political beliefs – all of these claims are false and without foundation," (*An Autobiography* 359) it could be stated that the credibility of Davis's politics is set on trial. In claiming that Davis's motives for freeing political prisoners was "not founded on a desire for social justice, It was founded simply on the passion that she felt for George Jackson," (*An Autobiography* 359). Harris specifically uses a framework which

highlights gender. In claiming that Davis is engaging in a politics structured by a desire for a man, Harris frames his defense around a form of politics which is set around mutually exclusive notions of race and gender. In her defense statement, Davis then also exposes this form of political intersectionality. Firstly, she highlights that Harris diminishes her politics for achieving racial justice by deliberately using gender stereotyping. She writes: "Members of the jury, this is utterly fantastic. … Yet it is understandable that Mr. Harris would like to take advantage of the fact that I am a woman, for this is 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 our society" (*An Autobiography* 363). Although Davis's includes various points in her statement which strongly underline her political activism, her most strongest defense could be find in the victory of Davis and her team of lawyers, advisors, and activist to organise mass protest and mass resistance against the persecution of Ruchell Magee, Davis's codefendant, and herself. Throughout her narrative, Davis stresses that, after gaining her freedom, she will continue her work on behalf of freeing other prisoners. Using herself as an example, Davis demonstrates how influential well-organised mass protests could be in aiding political prisoners. As she expresses that the participation of so many people had been "phenomenal," she states that she was most impressed by "the way in which the people who waged the flight began to involve politically" (*An Autobiography* 336). As she describes how "a large assembly of brothers and sisters had gathered to wait out the hearing," Davis recalls how they, in supporting her, were protesting as if "it was their own victory they were claiming" (*An Autobiography* 337). In line with one of the protesters who stated that she supported Davis, "not because I believe in Communism but because she is a black woman and she wants freedom for black people," (qtd. in Stern par. 31) Davis recalls a similar feeling of solidarity and unity In stating that "my own happiness should emerge and merge with the emotions of those who had created it," Davis directly frames her discussion of her acquittal as

being part of the strength of a larger social movement.

Although Harlow's observation that the "textual process of configuring a literary tribunal" by "writing the system against the system," (*An Autobiography* 191) is an effective strategy in the case of Davis, in Shakur's case, it could be stated that her discussion of her trial serves a different goal. As Shakur's attempts to gain justice in court by indicting the government by exposing its institutional racism by discussing her trail ultimately fail, she replaces, as Hames-Garcia notes, "her concern for justice unattainable within current institutions with a focus on transforming these institutions" (134). In order to understand this replacement, it is important to consider, that initially, Shakur does attempt to find justice by working from within the system. As, for example, the statement Shakur makes during the second trial for a Bronx back robbery illustrates, is that she is attempting to expose the conspiracy, injustice, and racism in the American legal system. She states how "I wasn't expecting any such thing as justice! … i was convinced that it [her trial] couldn't be treated like a normal, run-of-the-mill criminal trial. I was determined to use this case to expose the deceit and crookedness of the government" (*Assata* 98). This sentiment is also echoed during the statement she makes in her third trail for an alleged bank robbery in the county of Queens. Speaking to the jury, she states that "justice, in my eyesight, has not been the amerikan dream. It has been the amerikan nightmare …Why, you are probably asking yourself, would this government want to put me or Ronald Myers [her codefendant] in jail? The answer is very simple: for the same reason this government has put everyone else in jail who spoke up for freedom" (*Assata* 239). Although in this specific case, Shakur and Myers were acquitted as the "carefully planned, and carefully rehearsed case of the FBI and local New York police began to fall apart from the moment the witnesses were cross-examined," (Assata 244) Shakur's discussion of her final case includes an important piece of critical self-evaluation which alters her own perspective on the role she played in her trials. In her final trial, Shakur

is prevented, unlike in the two trials before, from testifying about the political reasons for her becoming an activist. She writes that "when the time came for me to testify, i was shocked. I had thought i would be able to go into everything … the entire political scenario to led to being in the courtroom" (358). Realising that she was participating in a staged procedure of U.S. justice, Shakur states that "I was tired of this case. I damn sure didn't believe that any appeals kourt was going to free me or that any racist white, prejudiced jury was either. It was obvious I didn't have one chance in a million of receiving any kind of justice" (*Assata* 360). In line with the observation Shakur made in her 1973 statement "To My People," in which she declares that "Black people must learn how to struggle by struggling. We must learn by our mistakes," (*Assata* 55) Shakur presents herself as the exemplary, imperfect subject. As she reevaluates her participation in the New Jersey trail, she writes that "i think i must have been crazy" (*Assata* 362). Indicating that it might not be possible to practice law against the system, despite the efforts of Shakur and her lawyers to denounce the trials, Shakur states that "participating in the new jersey trial was unprincipled and incorrect. By participating, i participated in my own oppression. I should have known better … In the long run, the people are our only appeal. The only ones who can free us are ourselves" (*Assata* 362).

Although the eventual outcome of the trials of Davis and Shakur thus clearly differs, their reasons for discussing their trials has one major aspect in common. Before discussing this, it is relevant to consider how Brown retells the FBI-orchestrated assassinations of Black Panthers Mark Clark and Fred Hampton in 1969. These murders are also briefly mentioned by Davis who refers to them as victims of "a systematic plan to disarm and destroy to Black Liberation struggle," (*An Autobiography* 226) and by Shakur, who, inspired by those events, writes: "If i stay a victim it will kill me, i thought. It was time to get my shit together. I wanted to be one of the people who stood up" (*Assata* 225). However, Brown discusses these murders in greatest detail. Although an event which has been discussed in the mass media as

being a standoff between the Panther men and the police, Brown's discussion of the murders provides an alternative account. As she recalls how she touched Franklin's bed, Brown writes how "it was sill soaking wet with Fred's blood, five days after the assassination" (205). Continuing with describing how the FBI had "kicked in the door and slain him in his sleep," while wounding several others and killing Clark "in their determination to reach their real target ... to eliminate the rise of a messianic black man, in the person of Fred Hampton," (206) Brown presents a counter history of this event. In other words, by including her witnessing of this specific event in her life writing, Brown fills in the silence of the violence of government-controlled agencies on revolutionaries left out in the mass media. In line with this, Davis's and Shakur's presentation of their personal trials is connected to a broader criticism of U.S. domestic policy, and most notably the U.S. criminal justice system, in affecting black people. As Davis gives an alternative telling of Jackson's death in the Marin Courthouse incident, it could be stated that she included this in her life writing in order to recover him from obscurity. In *Assata*, Shakur recalls her meeting with Lolita Lebrón, a Puerto Rican nationalist, who Shakur refers to as "the most respected political prisoner in the world," while imprisoned in a maximum security prison in Virginia (366). In describing her close connection to Lebrón, Shakur positions the political prisoner as "strong, unbent, and unbroken," and dedicated to independence and justice (*Assata* 367). However, apart from filling in silences and describing particular people in a different way they are usually presented as, Shakur's narrative of her trial features a remarkable omission. As shortly before the Bronx bank robbery trial, Shakur's aunt Evelyn Williams removes herself as her attorney, Shakur's presents Williams's remove as based on an argument on "personal stuff" (*Assata* 139). However, the account provided in Williams own autobiography, *Inadmissible Evidence*, reveal how the lawyer on the part of Kamau Sadaki, Shakur's codefendant, was willing to sacrifice Shakur's freedom if it meant that his client could be acquitted (*Inadmissible* 120). In

stating that Shakur refused to openly acknowledge Sadaki's lawyer's treachery, Williams write that Shakur wanted to "maintain cohesiveness" with Sadaki at all costs (*Inadmissible* 120). In omitting this episode from her life writing, it could be stated that she remained silent on this issue in order to maintain the critical relationship between political prisoners as a sign of solidarity against the forces which aim to disrupt their unity.

In an open letter to Pope John Paul II on the occasion of his visit to Cuba, Shakur wrote that "I am concerned about the repression, the police brutality, violence, the rising wave of racism that makes up the political landscape of the U.S. today. Our young people deserve a future … they have the right to live free from political repression. The U.S. is becoming more and more a police state and that fact compels us to fight against political repression" (par. 28). In this statement, Shakur mentions the main strategy to challenge oppressive forces which could be systemised by the concept of political intersectionality. As unity, solidarity, and mass resistance are presented as essential elements in protests against the corruptness in the U.S. criminal system, Davis, Brown, and Shakur use their life writings to challenge dominant historical records by providing counter narratives of events, including their own trials. Although Stover is discussing nineteenth-century black women's autobiography when suggesting that "there are moments when the author, and other oppressed blacks that these women present fight back, deliberately letting the oppressor know that they retain a voice and that attempts to suppress that voice have not been successful," it could be stated that Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings follow this tradition (149). In exposing and filling silences, providing counter histories, and by putting the U.S. criminal system on trial, these women include moments in their life writings which let the oppressor feeling less secure However, as Davis eventually succeeded with fighting from within the U.S. criminal system, Shakur eventually becomes increasingly disillusioned with the possibilities of political prisoners to be treated fairly within the system. According to Shakur, finding justice within a

capitalist and racist system eventually only legitimises this legal system. Although, similarly to Davis, who writes that she would continue to "work. struggle" (396) to "topple the edifice of injustice,"(An Autobiography 382) Shakur stresses the importance of collective resistance. However, Shakur's eventual discussion to escape prison is initially mainly shaped by personal motives. In the penultimate chapter of *Assata*, Shakur describes how she is visited by her young daughter in jail. She writes: "II 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." "No I can't," i say weakly. "Yes you can," she accuses. "You don't want to" (*Assata* 370). As Shakur recalls how she decided to risk pregnancy while in prison, she writes that it was a deliberate decision not to succumb to defeat, letting "these oppressors … make me kill my children in my mind, before they were even born" (*Assata* 93). Despite encouraged by prison doctors to get an abortion, Shakur's decision to risk having a child is a combination of an act of resistance, as well as act of hope, as she writes in a poem titled "Love," that "We are pregnant with freedom/We are a conspiracy" (*Assata* 130, ll. 7-8). As she recalls hope for freedom and justice as her daughter visits her, Shakur decides "that it is time to leave" (*Assata* 370).

In short, through public mass support or by gaining insights of people close to them, Davis and Shakur construct, in their own way, moments which challenge the forces of political intersectionality. As Davis states that "all our separate movements … might generate storms here and there. But only a mighty union of them could beget the great hurricane to topple injustice," (*An Autobiography* 382) it could be stated that in unifying social movements, including those of women's rights and national liberation, she has found a medium in which she could advance her rights as women and black. For Shakur, her protection of the right for black women to choose to bear a child has, particularly in this case, a unique significance. Womanhood, or specifically, motherhood, becomes for Shakur an impulse towards a revolutionary act. In citing Robert Daley's description of her as a "mother

hen" who "kept them fighting and kept them moving" (*Assata* 120) a page prior to discovering her pregnancy, her personal act of resistance is born out of her rights of woman of well stands as a continuation of the struggle for black liberation. In other words, through these moments of creating a medium which corresponds with both their identities as woman and black, these women construct a hope – whether through acquittal or through escape – which fuels a desire to transform U.S. society into a more free and more just environment achieved though revolutionary acts which challenge corrupt systems.

3.3| MEANINGS OF FREEDOM

To briefly return to Hinds's foreword of *Assata*, it could be stated that this peritext formed an excellent introduction for emphasising the intersectional forms of political repression Shakur experienced during her stay in prison and her trial. However, despite being a peritext which serves to stress the inhumanity and brutality which was imposed on Shakur, Hinds's ends his foreword on a note of hope as he writes the following: "I encourage you now to enter the heart and soul of Assata Shakur who, despite all that has happened to her, preserves fresh idealism and confidence in the power of principled people to make change together for the common good of the peoples of the world" (xxiii). Taking this note of hope for achieving more freedom for oppressed people together with Roger Rosenblatt's observation that "black autobiography often ends with an assertion of a self completed through freedom, a freedom symbolized with by a "final discarding of marks," it is relevant to give specific attention to the ways Davis, Brown, and Shakur have created an end to their life writings (qtd. in Hames-Garcia 112). However, before discussing this, it should be taken into consideration that, as Rosenblatt notes, "unlike white autobiographers who often write as if from an endpoint in their lives, for the black autobiographer, the future, which is not solely its own but that of his people and national ideals, generally seem more important to him than the life which he has

gone to such pains to record (qtd. in Hames-Garcia 112). As, for instance, Malcolm X ends his life narrative by writing that "I do not expect to live long enough to read this book in its finished form," (389) and thus the unfinished nature of his life writing is highlighted, it could be stated that he deliberately refused to fit the *Autobiography* in the literary pattern of coherent totality.

This autobiographical mode is also embedded in the endings of Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings. Although each women gains a new sense of freedom at the end of their narratives, it should be noticed that their conceptions of freedom both correspond as well as divert from each other. As Hames-Garcia notes, "freedom consist of multiple meanings" (95). In line with this, Davis states in her "Difficult Dialogues" that "I take the category "freedom" very seriously, and I realize how far we have to go before we can say that we have truly shifted freedom's terrain" (197). This notion of freedom is also reflected in the epilogue to *An Autobiography*. Before analysing this, however, it is relevant to consider Molefi Kete Asante's observation of one of the major facets of African American rhetoric. According to Asante, the rhetorical function, from an Afrocentric stance, attempts to determine the purpose of the discourse (152). In light of this, he suggests that, from this perspective, "all rhetoric persuades one to act … a change of attitude is not enough" (28). Further, he states that "rhetorical condition is the structure and power pattern a society assumes or imposes during a rhetorical situation" (28). However, as power relations change form situation to situation, different rhetorical situations produce different conditions. Although Davis's rhetorical forms have shifted from persuasive to informative, her rhetorical language in her rhetorical situation as being a free woman can be interpreted as being, most of all, pedagogical. Although a *New York Times* reportage of Davis's acquittal describes her as very emotional by quoting her as having stated that "this is the happiest day of my life," Davis's epilogue conveys a more nuanced image (qtd. in Caldwell par. 2). In writing that she perceives her acquittal as "a point

of departure," rather than a conclusion, Davis states that in order to save others "who remained draped in chains … we had to preserve and build upon the movement … our ability to keep the movement alive offered the only hope to our sisters and brothers behind walls" (*An Autobiography* 396). In explicitly referring to the communal values of the "we," Davis's narrated 'I' comes to function as a point of consciousness for her people. As Davis writes that the epilogue was written during the preparations for a national demonstration to liberate Black leader Reverend Ben Chavis and sixteen-year-old Donald Smith from being persecuted, she emphasises "that unity is the most potent weapon against racism and political persecution," and ends her epilogue by writing that "We – you and I – are their only hope for life and freedom" (*An Autobiography* 399, 400). In line with this, Davis writes the following in "Difficult Dialogues": "We fight the same battles over and over again, They are never won for eternity, but in the process of struggling together, in community, we learn how to glimpse new possibilities that otherwise never would have become apparent to us, and in the process we expand and enlarge our very notion of freedom" (198). Instead of commenting on her own, personal, sense of freedom she gained after her acquittal, her epilogue most of all serves to highlight the importance of what could be called a collective conception of freedom. In line with her life narrative as connecting her personal experience to a mirror to reflect the larger social context black women, and in many cases, only men are situated in, Davis places her experiences within a larger political context. However, more than pointing this out, the ending of *An Autobiography* emphasises that Davis's life writing as a site for struggle and resistance to oppressions of all kinds in the lives of African Americans. Published in 1974, Davis's use of the concept of collective freedom, as being a state of being which, for the black community, is part of a communal process of struggle, which could only evolve, when people pose active resistance against oppression. In this way, the ending to *An Autobiography*, in line with the narrative, stresses for a final time, that Davis considers her story most of all

politically significant which should be interpreted as being an overt mode of protest.

As James points out that "while Angela Davis's 1972 acquittal proves to some liberals that the "system" works, Assata Shakur's escape from prison in 1979 invalidates that conviction," (144) it should be noticed that Shakur never obtains the kind of legal and physical freedom Davis does eventually gains. However, despite this differences between the women, their endings reveal that there is a key similarity between their conceptions of freedom. In line with Ernst Bloch's theory of critical utopianism, Shakur's narrative can be stated as following his transformative "principle of hope," (6) as she not only interprets the existing world but plans for a better one. As she defines freedom in the middle of her narrative by stating that "I'm not quite sure what freedom is, but i know damn well what it ain't," (*Assata* 155) she states that people who never experienced true freedom can only know what it exactly not is. Although a quite bleak vision of freedom, there runs a belief throughout *Assata* that there are possibilities to gain freedom which finally come together in the postscript of the autobiography. In the postscript, which focuses on Shakur's experiences as a fugitive in Cuba, she reveals on how her concept of freedom has expanded. As she writes that while her "nightmare was over" and "finally the dream had come true," she is also "completely disoriented. Everything was the same yet everything was different" (*Assata* 379). Although she "hated to tell people I was from the u.s.," (Assata 382) because the nation remains, in her eyes, the same oppressive nation, the experiences she gained by learning about black history in Cuba and by hearing that "racism is illegal in Cuba," (Assata 384) presents a hope that liberation can be attained. In line with the ending of Davis's narrative, Shakur stresses that future liberation can only be achieved by, in Hames-Garcia's words, "active freedom," (120) as she states that "I couldn't see how we could seriously struggle without having a strong sense of collectivity, without being responsible *for* each other and *to* each other," the ending reveals that freedom could only be attained by struggle (*Assata* 380).

However, not only does Shakur's narrative partly follows Bloch's transformative "principle of hope" as she eventually does manage to escape, also her individual conception of freedom has come to be constructed around hope. Not only is her sense of freedom based on struggle, it is also a freedom of hope, hope for future freedom and equality. The final poem in *Assata*, "Tradition," could be stated as being an introduction to the postscript as she writes that we "carried a proud tradition … pass it down to the children … carry it on now … TO FREEDOM!" (378, ll. 70, 73, 76, 78). In the postscript, she continues with the point of the image of her daughter as a continuation of both struggle *and* hope. In closing her narrative, Shakur writes the following as she is reunited with her daughter, mother, and aunt:

> How much we had all gone through … *Venceremos*, my favorite word in Spanish crossed my mind. Ten million people had stood up to that monster. Ten million people only ninety miles away. We were here together in their land, my small little family, holding each other after so long. There was no doubt about it, our people would one day be free. The cowboys and bandits didn't own the world (390).

As her narrative begins with a hope of freedom exclaimed in the poem "Affirmation," the last paragraph of *Assata* ends with an expression that in the future, freedom might become certainty for all. As the word *venceremos*, meaning 'we will be victorious,' is written in future tense, her certainty that one day, feeling what meaning truly means, is going to become attainable to her people as long as they hold on to each other.

Similarly to Shakur, the final chapter of Brown's *A Taste of Power*, titled "I'll Change the World for You," (437) conveys a hope that later generations, including her daughter Ericka, could live in freedom. As Brown has dedicated her autobiography to Ericka, her narrative ends with her dreaming the same dream for her daughter as her mother had for her: "I'll change the world for you/In just a little while…" (450). In writing that "I was abandoning something, but I was saving something," (450) Brown reveals that she left the

BPP as “I could not be so mad as to sacrifice my life for a dream that was dying. The pain was entwined with complexity, for I loved the Black Panther Party” (449). As the BPP was falling apart, Newton returned to his cocaine addiction, and the machoism in the Party increased with Brown noticing that “the words “Panther” and “comrade” had taken on gender connotations … Something awful was not only driving a dangerous wedge between Sisters and Brothers, it was attacking the very foundation of the party,” (445) she decided to flee with her daughter. In contrast to Davis and Shakur who emphasise the importance of people joining together to work towards achieving more freedom, the ending of Brown’s narrative shows a different dimension to this communal struggle for freedom, as she states the following: “Freedom. That was all I could feel in those seconds away from the Black Panther Party. The pain of leaving came swiftly. There were dreams we all held for our people and for each other, and we had become to forge our dream” (449). Where Davis and Shakur find a sense of freedom by coming together with others, Brown only finds her sense of freedom when she decides to leave her sisters and brothers as she chooses to favour her individual hope, “my hope,” in her child over the communal dreams of freedom envisioned by the BPP (450). What the ending to Brown’s life writing most of all demonstrates, is the insight that achieving collective freedom can only be attained until there is justice between the social relations among individuals, among activists, among men and women, among blacks and whites. In order to create this, Brown shows in the final chapter that individual subjects should first have control over their self-development. By leaving the BPP, Brown reveals that she finally had the freedom to take construct her own self-development, and provide her daughter with the freedom to do the same.

In sum, the ways Davis, Brown, and Shakur have decided to end their narratives demonstrates, especially by focusing on their conceptions of freedom, that the autobiographical genre offers the autobiographer the opportunity to express “a personal

account of what freedom means and how it can be achieved" (Braxton 131). Although the women discuss freedom from various angles, they are each concerned with the incomplete nature of their freedom. As at the end of their narratives, Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's freedom remains to be partly limited by the sexism and racism of U.S. society. However, in writing their stories down, they, in Stover's words, "find ways to fool the system, or at least manipulate it to their advantage" (82). Not only do their life writings give them a public voice, and their discovery that they have a public voice gives them agency, the freedom of writing and having their works published, is also a mode of empowerment, not only for the writers, but also for the readers of Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's narratives. In showing how the closures of their narratives only form a beginning to a future of more freedom, both the journey toward liberty as part of the narratives as well the very act of autobiographical writing both represent significant movements for attaining this goal.

CONCLUSION

LIFE THEMES IN THE LIFE WRITINGS OF RADICAL BLACK WOMEN

In *The Nature of Literary Response: Five Readers Reading*, Norman Holland offers a psychoanalytical model which analysing reading as an act of identity transformation. After conducting an interview-based research study with five university student readers reading classic short stories, Holland concluded that there are three modalities at work in the reading process (8). Although each modality is interesting to review, one of these is particularly relevant to briefly discuss in light of the analyses of Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings. According to Holland, reading is a process whereby readers' identities recreate themselves (2). On the other hand, Holland also explains that this kind of reading forms a modality which views identity transformation through the reading process as a re-formulation of the text in order to re-create the readers pre-existing self identity (4). Although it should be stressed that Holland explains reading models, his discussion of the ways how both readers' identities are re-created from the text as well as how readers re-create text on the basis of their "identity themes" (5) is useful for clarifying the main themes presented in Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings. On the one hand, their rewriting of the history of the Black Power movement and, as Perkins states, "their conscientious manipulation of language to foster alternative/counterhegemonic ways of seeing and knowing" (71) are examples of how these women use their text to recreate the image of the movement. However, on the other hand, on a more personal level, their reinventing of self is another inevitable outcome of the autobiographical process. To understand this, an overview of the "identity themes" or what James Birren and Kathryn Cochran refer to as "life themes," (viii) is useful for summarising

how Davis, Brown, and Shakur are able to revise their individual histories within their larger storiesof the Black Power movement.

All in all, it could be stated that each life writings consists out of intricately interwoven narratives. In attempting to explain their present conditions and opinions, the women each constructed a continuum leading from the past to the present. As this autobiographical writing model results in the forging together of events that had any number of meaning, these events are reduced to attached to various single meanings, or larger life themes, which fits more convincingly into their narratives of their identity development. To understand as well as analyse this "fundamental trick" (Freeman 95) in Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's very acts of telling, the dimensions of the concept of intersectionality as explained by Crenshaw is useful for clarifying the main themes in their life writings. Using *structural* intersectionality to explore their reflections on their formative experiences, *representational* intersectionality to focus on their experiences as activists in the Black Power movement, and *political* intersectionality to understand their discussions of prison, trials, and notions of freedom, it could be pointing out that a particular set of life themes is at the core of their identity transformation. Contrary to other activists' works from the Black Power era, Davis, Brown, and Shakur have created spaces for important discussion within their life writings about gender and sexual politics in the Black Power movement. However, besides this important kind of "political witnessing," (Perkins 130) there are also multiple layers of "personal invention" (Perkins 99) at work in their narratives. Life themes constructed around defending individual and group action, to advance the struggle, and to recuperate their public images are features common to all three women's life writings. However, exploring their stories as personal interventions exposes how the women seek to refashion a past 'I' which corresponds with their present consciousness as a key life theme. In doing so, Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's reflections on the tensions between their race and their gender

connects both to the objectives of their life writings as personal and political interventions. Using intersectionality demonstrates how their recreating of self as a recurrent, overarching life theme is tied to political consequences and repeatedly reveal that there is little separation between the two realms, as Perkins notes that "what is personal is almost always political and vice versa" (100).

However, apart from the fluidity between the realms of the political and the personal, a second, corresponding key life theme reveals how Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's identities are formed *and* transformed between the fluidity between the realms of their race and womanhood. Although these parts of their identity are often conflicting resulting in the double oppression they were facing which can be better understood by intersectionality, Lionnet's concept of métissage can be used to highlight how these women discuss the fluid boundaries between these two parts of their identity. Using métissage as a tool for exploring Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's structuring of their narratives reveals how their discussions of the relationship between historical context and individual circumstances, their reflections on the sociocultural construction of race and gender is challenged by their use of mechanism which allows them to "generate polysemic meanings from deceptively simple narratives techniques" (Lionnet 7). In other words, by undoing static binaries between categories such as white/black, men/women, and writer/reader, métissage can be used to examine how this life theme is constructed around exposing the "cultural realities" (Lionnet 8) and expressing and their multiple voices as for example, black women, Black Power activists, mothers, and daughters.

Although Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings overall follow the traditional narrative used in the autobiographies of black women in bearing, as Joanne Braxton observes, "witness to the continuity and vitality of black women asserting images of self in many and varies forms," (129) there are also differences between their reflections on their key life

themes. To understand this, it is useful to briefly reconsider Austin's argument as outlined in the introduction of this thesis. According to Austin, black feminists fail to develop a serious critique of sexism as they simultaneously utilise black nationalist sentiments and feminism (66). To use Austin's statement to critically review the gender analysis in Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings, it should be pointing out that neither of the three women has self-identified their works as feminist. As Springer points out, "black women were consistently concerned with race and gender oppression, but they strategically prioritized race over gender depending on available openings in the social movement and political opportunity structures" (114). In line with this, according to Mostern, the centrality of the categories of race and gender in Davis's *An Autobiography* are, as he suggests, "resulting from her sense that these are the identifications that have broad, explanatory power, while gender is personal, emotional, and sexual, and explains little or nothing about the world *as a whole*" (185). Overall, the same could be stated of Shakur's extensive focus on racial instead of gender issues. Furthermore, even Brown's explicit discussion of her own sexuality, of psychosexual dynamics in the BPP, and her criticism of the ideology of black masculinity, was not immediately received as a work of feminism by other black women. Kathleen Cleaver, for example, states that the representation of the BPP in *A Taste of Power* was not the party she knew, and furthermore, argues that Brown misrepresents the extent to which her relationship with Newton helped her to power ("Sister Act" 86). Moreover, Davis wrote in her review of Brown's life writing that she was disappointed about the "author's failure to explore her friendships with and working relations with other women in the Party more than perfunctory ways" ("Review 4).

However, on the other hand, despite the divergences in the women's discussion of the key identity themes of being black and women, there is one common purpose in their narratives which connects their stories to each other. As Carolyn Heilbrun notes, for

contemporary women's life writing, "there is one purpose behind these female stories: to tell what has not been told before, or has not been told in the public sphere by women to women" (37). In line with this, Perkins points out that "Black Power activists' autobiography collectively reveal a distinct shift in focus from the value of functional literacy alone to the importance of cultivating critical or *political* literacy as the prerequisite to self-empowerment" (28). As the crossing of the realms between the categories of their race and gender illustrates, this key life theme illustrates how closely Davis's, Brown's and Shakur's coming into racial-, political-, and self-consciousness are related to each other. In light of this, Brown makes the following illustrative statement: "the feminist were right. The value of my life had been obliterated as much by being female as by being black and poor. Racism and sexism in America were equal partners in my oppression" (367). As each women establishes in their life writing that a combination of social constructions of categories of race and gender have *together* limited their voice and agency, they review through their life writing in which ways black women – both past and present – have been oppressed. However, apart from making these observation, there is a third corresponding main life theme in the life writings. In *Assata*, Shakur writes that "to win any struggle for liberation, you have to have the way as well as the will, an overall ideology and strategy that stem from a scientific analysis of history and present conditions" (*Assata* 255). Thus, as this shows, in using their life writings as an instrument for social change, these women offer not only analyses of their oppression, but also insights in how this oppression could be challenged.

In *Woman, Culture, Politics*, Davis states the following: "Today, African American women must actively take the lead in the movement against racist violence … We know that empowerment for the masses of women in our country will never be achieved as long as we do not succeed in pushing back the tide of racism" (11). Making their life writings sites of pedagogy, Davis, Brown, and Shakur construct their life theme of finding agency and liberty

around their portrayals of the self as having transformed into black women who are “shapers of their own identities and destinies, and as individuals who need not meet the standards of whites and males to achieve their own personhood” (Doriani 202-203). Although Austin has a point that black feminists in the 1960s and 1970s more openly advocated racial instead of gender equality, Davis’s, Brown’s, and Shakur’s three key life themes demonstrates that this argument is too narrow. Using the concept of intersectionality to approach their texts reveals how black women are simultaneously situated within at least two groups, and are subjected to broad societal subordination – that is race and gender discrimination – which are traditionally viewed as monocausal. However, to add a dimension to intersectionality, the concept of métissage can be used to explore the ways in which the three women have used their life writings to not only expose but also to challenge this double subordination though the act of telling their stories. In doing so, the dynamics between the three key life themes in their life writings offer insights in how black womanhood could be reconstructed.

As black women protested in large numbers during the 2014 Ferguson Protests to have their voice heard, one female protester stated that “we're in a century where women are no longer satisfied to have their leadership channeled through someone else” (qtd. in Pearce par. 9). Furthermore, in May, 2015, a large group of topless protesters blocked traffic in downtown San Francisco as part of a national action to draw attention to the silencing in mass media about the great number of black women have been victims of police brutality (Schwiegershausen par. 2). As this example was quickly followed by similar events throughout cities in the U.S., the protesters exclaimed that “it is time to break the silence around black women” (qtd. in Mandaro and Guynn par. 13). Protesting against the lack of interests in black women’s lives, Patrisse Cullors, one of the three community organisers of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, stated that as “we saw that the three of us were being erased, we knew that erasing us would mean the erasure of black women and intersections that link

all black lives" (qtd. in Milloy par. 15).

In *The War Before*, Bukhari wrote the following:

> Sexism or the degeneration of the relationship between the Black man and woman to antagonism and brutality is a by product of this history. While I am clearly against the way this history plays out in our community, I am not a feminist. I am a revolutionary. I am a scientific socialist. I believe that we have to struggle on all fronts against those attitudes that threaten to destroy us as a people (50).

Similarly to Bukhari, the life themes in Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings demonstrate that their main focus is placed on their commitment to advancing political struggle of which advocating gender equality is a part of. However, hidden underneath this layer of traditional autobiographical writing by political activists, the "intrapsychic dimensions" (Perkins 13) of involvement in political radical struggle also exposes how the women each subtlety deromanticising of what it means to be a revolutionary. On the other hand, in conveying larger truths by telling stories which alter facts or myths, it should be noticed that their life writings individually are, as Perkins points out, "less *the* truth than *a* truth of the Movement and its principal players" (100). In other words, instead of presenting any simplistic notion of truth of what it meant to be a female activist in the Black Power movement, reading Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings intertextually, their texts acquire its larger meaning. Taken collectively, the life themes in their works provide insights into gender and power dynamics at work in the Black Power movement while also imparting valuable lessons for how female activists today might theorise contemporary resistance struggles. As Davis's, Brown's, and Shakur's life writings have individually called attention to the ways politics of history, truth, and identity are constructed, they collectively complement each other in reconstructing the notion of black womanhood and thus, as Frantz

Fanon once noted, effectively “transform spectators crushed with their inessentially into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history’s floodlights upon them” (2). Thus, in telling their alternative histories of the Black Power movement as well as showing how their personal experiences as black women have reshaped their understanding of the dynamics between race and gender oppression, Davis’, Brown’s, and Shakur’s life writings have included an essential female voice to the 20th-century tradition of African American resistance writing.

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