

Chapter 17

**Womanifesto:
Historicizing the Literary Activism of Claudia Jones and
Assata Shakur**

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Introduction

Some poetic language deserves claps, a few snaps, and often verbal praise. Some poetry elicits an immediate audience reaction while it also transcends the present moment by speaking for an entire community at a specific historical milestone. The poetry of Black women activists can be found in the literature of the Black Arts Movement, Civil Rights Movement, and the global Black Communist Movement. Individually and collectively, these separate movements represent the needs of the African Diaspora in the twentieth century. In 1981, Joseph Harris and colleagues defined the African Diaspora as “a community with an identity linking them to a geographical area of origin; similar physical attributes, derivative cultural traditions, a passionate commitment due to a common social condition, to a set of ideals, in the case of Africans and their Diaspora, of racial justice and human rights.”¹ The content and genres of writing within the African Diaspora include revolutionary writings, autobiographical writings, prison writings, and published essays. While most of these genres are straightforward, prison writing has been referred to as

¹ Joseph E. Harris, "African Diaspora Studies: Some International Dimensions," *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1996), 6-8.

the “writing of the political activist who uses the space of incarceration and the time of detention to reflect on the conditions of being incarcerated, the political conditions of the state, and the nature of the human condition and his/her life up to that point.”²

The cases of Assata Shakur and Claudia Jones are similar with respect to the themes of FBI investigation, incarceration, literature, and Black women’s resistance. While Jones’s case prefigures Shakur’s, their lives share remarkable similarities. Both women fall under the umbrella of Black woman activists, incarcerated activists, and prison literary activists who have challenged racism, capitalism, and the justice system in the United States and abroad. Jones was imprisoned under the Smith Act for her communist involvement in the U.S., while Shakur was charged with several crimes, including a conviction of a state trooper’s murder in New Jersey. The stories of both women align with the objectives and goals of struggling for liberation. It is also noteworthy that Jones was later exiled to London, and Shakur escaped to find asylum in Cuba.

The poetry written by Claudia Jones and Assata Shakur during and after the time they were incarcerated represents resistance, the key feature of the discussion and scholarship of Africana women who continue the Black Radical Tradition. Within the poetry produced by Jones and Shakur are the historical themes surrounding their activism and literature. Examining Black radical women’s literature within the African Diaspora not only highlights the extraordinary writings of these women, but also shares their voices

²Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 103.

and provides readers with a memory of the history they documented. Such an examination reveals their radical ideas, thoughts, motives, and, in most cases, the actions in which women engaged during critical moments in the history of the African Diaspora. It should be noted that throughout this chapter the designation of *Africana* refers to people of African descent in the Diaspora, and the terms Black, African, and Africana are interchangeable within this chapter.

CLAUDIA JONES

Claudia Vera Cumberbatch was born in Belmont, Port of Spain (the capital city of Trinidad and Tobago) on February 15, 1915. Her family moved to Harlem, New York, when she was nine years old. Jones's mother died five years after moving to Harlem, leaving her father to work and support the family. By conventional standards, her life in Harlem was essentially "normal." However, she grew up in poor living conditions, and she contracted tuberculosis at an early age and sustained major damage to her lungs. She would suffer from this condition for the rest of her life. Jones was known as a bright student, but instead of attending college after graduating from high school as she had wished, she worked in a laundry primarily due to her immigrant status.³

The poverty she experienced at a young age, combined with having to work instead of attending college, contributed to her developing the mindset and consciousness necessary to address issues facing Black people. For instance, as a youth,

³ Carole Boyce Davies, ed. *Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment* (Oxfordshire, UK: Ayebia Clarke Publishing Limited, 2011), 190.

Jones joined the Scottsboro Nine Movement in 1936. During this time, at the age of 18, she was introduced to the Young Communist League, which later became the American Youth for Democracy. As a part of the Women's Commission of the Communist Party, she soon found herself at the center of the struggle. During her time in the party, she became the secretary of the organization, as well as a prominent figure within the movement.⁴

Jones can accurately be described as a radical historical figure, Black Nationalist, political activist, radical journalist, and a Black Communist. She explained her reasons for becoming a Communist:

From an early age, like most native Negro Americans and with the additional penalty of being foreign born and a Negro in the United States, I experienced the indignity of second-class citizenship in the U.S. My parents emigrated from the West Indies in 1924 in the hope of finding greater economic opportunity and freedom to rear their children. But what I found instead in the U.S. was not only economic poverty for the working-class, but the special brand of American racism—Jim Crow.⁵

Jones's political activism reflected the multi-faceted themes of women's rights, journalism, prison, deportation, and the struggle against White supremacy. Her activism displayed anti-imperialism, Marxist/Leninist theory, and the intersectionality of a Black woman's empowerment. Jones's Black internationalism can be placed within the same discourse as that of other well-known Black women such as Eslanda Robeson, Ella Baker, Amy Ashwood Garvey, and Audley "Queen Mother" Moore. Her political life provides a glimpse of Black artists' efforts prior to the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. For instance, Jones's writings published in the *West Indian Gazette* and her founding of the

⁴ Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 68.

⁵ Davies, *Claudia Jones*, 17.

Notting Hill Carnival in London demonstrate how Black art and literature operated as a much-needed form of expression against White supremacy on an international scale. As an Afro-Caribbean, her identity can be compared to figures such as Stokely Carmichael and Walter Rodney. Although some might question this characterization because Jones was a Black woman, very few women have been considered a radical intellectual on the forefront. Her radicalism is physically illustrated by where she is buried. Jones's gravesite is positioned literally left of Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery in London, England, offering a concrete example of what many scholars have emphasized about Jones's political thinking being to the left of Karl Marx.

Jones was active in Harlem during the same time as Malcolm X and other Civil Rights figures, which furthers emphasizes the role she played in connection with other prominent activists. Because she lived in three distinct spaces within the African Diaspora (her childhood in Trinidad, activism in the United States, and relationship with the Afro-Caribbean community in London), Jones's international influence is remembered differently in each of these spaces.⁶

THE POETRY OF CLAUDIA JONES

Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* provides a critical analysis of the ideological foundation of the European construct referred to as Marxism. Marxism, as a theory and practice, is embedded in the

⁶ Ibid., xxiv; Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 55.

ideals of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels and their challenge to the bourgeoisie in Europe.⁷ Robinson's approach and contributions to this knowledge address the limitations of the Eurocentric radical ideology laid out by Karl Marx. While Robinson acknowledges the roots of radicalism are not limited to Europe and America, he argues that Black resistance to enslavement and oppression in the Caribbean, the Americas, and Africa are the foundations of Black radicalism. However, Robinson's theory of Black Marxism leaves women out of the discourse, similar to how Karl Marx omits women from his analyses of the economic condition of workers. His contributions to Marxist theory focus only upon prominent *male* figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and Richard Wright. Yet, during the twentieth century, women such as Claudia Jones contributed greatly to the intellectual dialogue of African struggle throughout the world. For instance, while incarcerated, Claudia Jones used her poetry to reflect upon the issues of the world and to express and release her emotions. As a West Indian who fought for women's rights and the rights of the working class, her involvement in the Communist Party was intended to liberate victims of capitalism, sexism, and classism.

To encourage readers to resist lynching and racial oppression, Jones makes her demands known in her poem "Lament for Emmet Till," written in 1955. Emmett Till was a 14-year-old boy who was visiting his family in Mississippi for the summer. While there, he was lynched and beaten until he was unrecognizable—his only "crime" having been that he allegedly whistled at a White woman. His well-known murder ignited the Civil Rights Movement in America. Jones writes:

⁷ Robinson, xii.

Cry lynch—murder!
 Sear the land
 Raise fists—in more than anger bands!⁸

In this stanza, Jones writes of the lynching of Till and the action of Civil Rights supporters who raised their fists in protest of his treatment. In the mid-1950s, African Americans, particularly in the South, were still being lynched. This incident ignited the Civil Rights Movement and inspired many prominent figures to lead a call to action against lynching and other brutality directed at African people in America. Jones also addresses specific people in the poem, including Emmett's mother, who wanted her son to have an open casket so the world could see what they had done to her child. Jones writes:

Mother, mother—you who bore
 Son from womb of sorrow know
 White washed justice sure will reap
 More than it can ever sow...

Uncle, uncle who stood
 Firm-hand-in jim crow dock of wood
 Facing lynchers eye for eye
 Meeting sadism of parading child

People, people, you who swore
 Vengeance for this brutal hour
 Make your unity soar above strife
 To swiftly avenge Young Emmet Till's life!⁹

These three stanzas speak to Emmett's mother, uncle, and supporters who participated in protest and activism to draw attention to the violent criminal actions of the murderers who had beaten and lynched Emmett, closing in a demand that the culprits be brought

⁸ Davies, *Claudia Jones*, 192.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 192.

to justice. Speaking to the justice system and making it clear that many people felt strongly about these issues, Jones encourages them to find unity within this situation and to “avenge Young Emmet [*sic*] Till’s life.” This poem mirrors the song “Strange Fruit” by Billie Holiday. That song speaks to the racism of America and the lynchings of Black bodies that peaked in the South near the beginning of the twentieth century. In the same vein, Holiday’s lyrics reflect the inhumane treatment of Black Americans and highlight the issues within the Jim Crow South. As with “Strange Fruit,” Jones’s poetry can be used as a historical reference to the Civil Rights Movement and to Black activism during this time. Jones here provides a unique approach to the documentation of history through poetry, and she continues this tradition throughout the time she was incarcerated.¹⁰

The racial tension within the United States that was expressed so clearly in the early 1960s was the product of countless injustices experienced by African Americans since the first Africans were brought to North America. Because of the pain and disappointment, she endured in the United States, Jones’s life provides an example of the harsh treatment experienced by millions of African Diasporans in America. As a Trinidadian woman, her connections to many racially inspired events provided her with a different perspective that challenged and criticized the history of oppression in the world. With hopes of changing this reality, Jones’s activism highlights the work of immigrants or entities who she feels had done well. The poem “Yenan—Cradle of the Revolution” refers to the Chinese revolution and how it was viewed as a Communist dream for a better

¹⁰ Ibid., 83.

society. She wrote this poem in August 1964 as she returned from a two-day visit to Yenan, China. The poem captures her belief in socialism, especially in her admiration for what she perceived as socialist teachings and its inspiration of unity among the oppressed.¹¹

Scholars Robin D.G. Kelley and Betsy Esche provided the connection between Black activism and the Chinese Revolution of 1949: "How black radicals came to see China as the beacon of Third World revolution and Mao Zedong thought as a guidepost is a complicated and fascinating story involving literally dozens of organizations and covering much of the world—from the ghettos of North America to the African countryside." Kelley and Esche referred to a hip-hop song by The Coup that references *The Communist Manifesto* and revolutionary icons such as Mao Zedong, Kwame Nkrumah, and H. Rap Brown. Kelley and Esche explained that in Harlem during the 1960s and early 1970s, it seemed as though everyone had a copy of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*.¹²

China supported the Black effort in the U.S., and many Black radical leaders visited China and returned as transformed African Americans. This Black international experience provided Black activists with allies in a space where they felt "a sensation of freedom." Examining figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Elaine Brown, and Huey P. Newton, Kelley and Esche explored the impact of Maoist thought and the People's Republic of China on Black radical movements from the 1950s to the mid-1970s: "China offered black

¹¹ Ibid., 83.

¹² Robin D.G. Kelley and Betsy Esch, "Black Like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 1 (1999), 8.

radicals a 'colored,' or Third World Marxist model that enabled them to challenge a white and Western vision of class struggle—a model that they shaped and reshaped to suit their own cultural and political realities."¹³ Furthermore, the solidarity of China to the civil rights struggle of African Americans, presents a Black international link outside of the Eurocentric cultural traditions. Jones continues in her poem "Yenan—Cradle of the Revolution":

What then turned the tide?
 What organized the people
 Simple in their aspirations
 And desires, into a fighting fist
 To crush forever their Chiangs
 Their war-lords, backed
 By the imperialist might of
 US dollars and many-flagged guns.

The fight to win and
 Change the mind of Man
 Against the corruption of centuries
 Of feudal-bourgeois, capitalist ideas
 The fusion of courage and clarity
 Of polemics against misleaders¹⁴

Robeson Taj Frazier provides an in-depth investigation of prominent African American radical activists traveling and living in China. Frazier explains why so many Black radicals reached out to China during this crucial period of African American history, and why China found radical and socialist Black leaders to be viable partners in their own struggle for economic and political development during the Cold War. Chinese leaders placed China as the "leader of the anti-imperialist world struggle against capitalism, U.S.

¹³ Kelley and Esch, 8.

¹⁴ Davies, *Claudia Jones*, 155.

Empire, and white supremacy."¹⁵ However, there were contradictions. China was not Black, and racism and anti-Black sentiments were common Chinese perceptions of Black people. Furthermore, Frazier shares more concrete narratives of activists such as Vicki Garvin, who taught English in China from 1964 to 1971, along with Shirley Graham Du Bois, Robert Williams, and several others. Jones, as a Black international figure, developed connections with leaders throughout the world during the time when she was working to build the Communist party. This work reflects throughout the rest of her poetry as well, especially when she wrote in solidarity with another woman involved in the struggle.¹⁶

In the 1955 poem "For Consuela—Anti-Fascista," Jones writes to her sister-comrade Blanca Consuela Torresola, a Puerto Rican activist serving four years in the Federal Reformatory for Women in Alderson, Virginia. Upon completion of the four-year sentence in the U.S., Torresola faced a 140-year term in Puerto Rico for her participation in the Puerto Rican independence struggle. Describing Torresola as an anti-fascist demonstrates her leftist agenda to fight for full independence for the island. She begins the poem by making a connection to their mirroring struggles. Jones writes:

It seems I knew you long before our common ties—of conscious choice
 Threw under single skies, those like us
 Who, fused by our mold
 Became their targets, as of old

¹⁵ Robeson Taj Frazier, *The East is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Imagination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 29.

¹⁶ Davies, *Claudia Jones*, 33.

Referring to Torresola as her sister, Jones expresses their connection with the common struggle against colonial powers. Although they represent two different regions, their common ties are reflected in their activism:

Oh wondrous Spanish sister
 Long-locked from all your care
 Listen—while I tell you what you strain to hear
 And beckon all from far and near

In the last stanza, Jones again affirms the anti-fascist sisterhood between them. She references her vision of the world as a better place in the line “eyes turn to stars.” This image brings together the hope that each of them had within their struggles. Realizing that it was always a constant fight, they had to remain diligent and focused. By acknowledging Torresola’s “source of spirit and of will,” Jones carries this same courage with her to London, and, in recognizing that “their justice” can never deter the struggle for liberation, she wrote:

O anti-fascist sister—you whose eyes turn to stars still
 I’ve learned your wondrous secret—source of spirit and of will
 I’ve learned that what sustains your heart—mind and peace of soul
 Is knowledge that their justice—can never reach its goal.¹⁷

On January 12, 1955, New York’s *Daily News* featured the photo of Claudia Jones, Betty Gannett, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. The caption read, “Smiling, three female second-string Communist leaders are ready for ride to jail.”¹⁸ Flynn was a prominent women’s rights leader and became the chairwomen of the Communist Party in 1961. In

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁸ *The Daily News*, January 12, 1955, 344.

1955, Flynn and Jones were sent to serve time in the Federal Reformatory for Women in Alderson, West Virginia. While in prison, Jones was separated from her White comrades, teaching Jones that segregation was still a part of the justice system, even behind the bars.¹⁹ In the 1955 poem entitled "To Elizabeth Gurley Flynn," Jones writes about the way she is reminded of Flynn throughout her day by various objects. She references Flynn's characteristics and life of service, even though it brings her strife. In the last stanza, Jones expresses how much she will miss Flynn as a comrade. In solidarity, she writes:

Of all the times I'll miss you most
Is when I'm least aware
Because you will intrude I know
Upon my inner ear
Beloved comrade—when from you I tear
My mind, my heart, my thoughts, you'll hear!²⁰

As a political prisoner, Jones recognized early on that her political activism was a threat to colonial powers like America, as well as to her home of Trinidad which had refused her entrance. In her poem entitled "The Elms at Morn," Jones writes about being imprisoned and surrounded by things she was unable to escape. Prison had become a metaphor of her whole life. No matter where Jones was located throughout the African Diaspora, she was restricted and entangled by the outside forces of colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and sexism. She writes:

Barbed wire fence surrounds me
And the fog rolls slowly in
The elms stand tall and stately

¹⁹ Davies, *Claudia Jones*, 190.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

And the maples crowd them in

The mops are on the porch my dear

And Frances sits beside me

Lois smokes a cigarette

I am in an awful net.²¹

As a freedom fighter for women's rights and the working class, Claudia Jones wrote poetry in the tradition of "Prison Blues," adding to the growing body of resistance literature and studies of incarcerated poetic creativity.²² Despite the fact that Jones never self-identified as a poet, her work is a reflection of her political identity as a Black Communist. She articulated a poetic language that defied the oppressive attempts by the state to silence her—even when she was imprisoned. Mirroring the work of other Black women writers such as Lorraine Hansberry and Rosa Guy, Jones represents the Black internationalist woman figure by contributing to the political struggle centered on the visions of freedom and liberation of African-descended people throughout the world.²³

ASSATA SHAKUR

In May 1973 Assata Shakur, formally known as Joanne Chesimard, was riding with Zayd Shakur in a car driven by Sundiata Acoli on the New Jersey Turnpike. Trooper James Harper pulled the car over for traffic violations, and Trooper Werner Foerster responded as backup. When the troopers approached the car, they asked the driver, Sundiata Acoli, to step out for questioning. A shootout ensued; both Foerster and Black Panther member

²¹ Ibid., 186.

²² Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 125.

²³ Ibid., 125.

Zayd Shakur were killed, and Acoli, Assata Shakur, and James Harper were wounded. Both Acoli and Assata Shakur were arrested for the murder of Foerster. Due to her wounds from the shootout, Shakur was confined within the Middlesex hospital in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and was then moved to the Roosevelt hospital in Edison following her arrest. At the trial, Harper testified that Shakur fired the first shot from the front seat of the vehicle and that Acoli fired the fatal shots at Foerster, who died from ammunition from his own weapon. Shakur consistently proclaimed her innocence in the whole ordeal, and her defense team provided medical evidence for her plea. Despite evidence to the contrary, in 1977 she was convicted and sentenced to life, and on a daily basis during her incarceration at Riker's Island and Clinton Correctional Facility for Women, she was tortured, harassed, and tormented by FBI agents. With the help of her comrades, Shakur escaped from the Clinton Correctional Facility for Women in New Jersey on November 2, 1979. After her escape, Shakur went underground and eventually fled to Cuba, where she was granted political asylum by the late Fidel Castro. In 2013, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) offered a \$2 million reward for information regarding her whereabouts and/or leading to the apprehension of Shakur. Many prominent African American leaders, including Alice Walker and Angela Davis, were outraged by this announcement of an additional one million dollars onto the bounty for Shakur. The FBI classified her as a "domestic terrorist," and she was the first woman to be placed on the FBI most wanted list.²⁴

²⁴ FBI Vault, Poster, "Joanne D. Chesimard: Act of Terrorism—Domestic Terrorism; Unlawful Flight to Avoid Confinement—Murder. "Most Wanted Terrorist," May 2, 2013, https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/wanted_terrorists/joanne-deborah-chesimard_poster.

As a member of the Black Liberation Army (1970-1981) and the Black Panther Party (1970), Shakur's life as an activist poses pertinent questions of how she was targeted by the FBI, imprisoned and escaped, and granted political asylum in Cuba. The writings of Shakur from letters, essays, and publications demonstrate the resistance literature that continued the Black Radical Tradition during the late twentieth century. The lives of both Claudia Jones and Shakur have been similar in their fights against imperialism, racism, sexism, and White supremacy in America. Shakur specifically questions the concept of freedom in America and in Cuba. Embodying the characteristics of Yaa Asantewaa, Harriet Tubman, and Queen Nanny, Assata Shakur represents a contemporary Black woman warrior and revolutionary who fought and survived colonial oppression. Furthermore, her life exhibits the evolution of a revolutionary, the solidarity and support she gained from other revolutionaries, and the connection between poetry and activism.

Prior to being incarcerated, Assata Shakur lived what outwardly seems to have been a typical life of a young woman in New York. During her first two weeks at Manhattan Community College, Shakur discovered the Golden Drum Society, the Black organization on campus.²⁵ She described having an awakening because of the dashikis, an African garment, and her exposure to African-centered conversations. This environment was an entirely new arena for Shakur, especially since, in an effort to make barely enough money to survive, she had recently been working as a restaurant server.

²⁵ Barbara Casey, *Assata Shakur: A 20th Century Escaped Slave* (Rockhill, SC: Strategic Media Books, 2017), 24.

Having learned only about Harriet Tubman, George Washington Carver, and Booker T. Washington while she was growing up, it was history that inspired her the most while a college student. She learned about the struggle of Black people and the United States' systematic oppression of people of color for centuries. As a student, she also joined the Third World Coalition and became the student representative. During this time, she gained experience in protest by participating in demonstrations related to housing, welfare, the rights of construction workers, and antiwar movements. She came to understand the oppression that Black people in the U.S. and people in developing countries experienced, and her increasing awareness of such suffering was a significant factor that contributed greatly to Shakur's becoming a revolutionary.²⁶

THE POETRY OF ASSATA SHAKUR

Born JoAnne Deborah Byron, then using for a time her married name of Joanne Chesimard, Assata Shakur shared her personal and political life story in the 1987 autobiography *Assata*. Similar to the life of Claudia Jones, Shakur began learning about the oppression of Black people in America, and globally, at a young age while living in New York. After she was a political prisoner, followed by her political asylum in Cuba, many artists, writers, and prominent figures have paid homage to Shakur because of her activist influence. While residing in Cuba, she wrote her autobiography in which she shares her side of the story about the criminal allegations that had been made against her in the United States. Shakur's poetry is featured throughout her book and floats

²⁶ Casey, 25.

throughout the chapters. Some of her poetry focuses on experiences she went through as a child, while the rest highlights her imprisonment and her time as a conscious adult. In the poem entitled "To My Momma," she pays tribute to her mother and the way she struggled in America. This material refers to the American dream and the goals she could not reach. Unfortunately, this same pattern of harsh experiences was also a reality for a very large number of African people living in America:

To my momma,
 who has swallowed the amerikan dream
 and choked on it.

To my momma,
 whose dreams have fought each other—
 and died....

To my momma, who couldn't turn
 hell into paradise
 and blamed herself.²⁷

Shakur references the historical roots of African Americans all the way back to the anguish of those who were sold as slaves on the auction block. She highlights another harsh reality that prevented African people from achieving the American dream. The end of the poem expresses Shakur's pride in her mother for persevering and surviving her struggle in the world. Her mother is an example of the numerous Black women who sacrifice to provide a better future for their families. Here within this poem, as she does in so many of her other writings, Shakur acknowledges and testifies to the strength of "our people":

We have all been infected
 with a sickness

²⁷ Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987), 193-194.

that can be traced back
to the auction block.

You must not feel guilty
for what has been done to us.
Only the strong go crazy.
The weak just go along....

Momma, i am proud of you.
I look at you
and see the strength of our people.
I have seen you struggle
in the dark;
the world beating on your back,
dragging your catch
back to our den.²⁸

One of the most popular and frequently cited stanzas by Shakur focuses on liberation. Written as a reflection on the Black Liberation Army, it resembles the ending of *The Communist Manifesto* that states, "Workers of the World, Unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains!"²⁹ The untitled excerpt is frequently quoted by revolutionary and Pan-African organizations because the poem highlights revolutionary figures who have been lost in the struggle. For instance, Fred Hampton was a political organizer in the Chicago chapter of the Black Panther Party. In 1968, he attempted to merge the BPP and the gangs of the Chicago Southside. This effort of solidarity caused Hoover and the FBI to target his actions, which resulted in Hampton and several other BPP members being shot and killed during a FBI raid on December 4, 1968.³⁰ The short life of Hampton is just

²⁸ Ibid., 193-194.

²⁹ Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Pluto Press, 1996), 7.

³⁰ Jeffery Haas, *The Assassination of Fred Hampton: How the FBI and the Chicago Police Murdered a Black Panther* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010), 30.

one example of the political influence of the Black Panther Party and the similar movements of the 1960s. The poem was frequently used as a chant during protest and marches because it expresses the need for oppressed people to fight for liberation:

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

In the spirit of:

Ronald Carter
 William Christmas
 Mark Clark
 Mark Essex
 Frank "Heavy" Fields
 Woodie Changa Olugbala Green
 Fred Hampton
 Lil' Bobby Hutton
 George Jackson
 Johnathan Jackson
 James McClain
 Harold Russell
 Zayd Malik Shakur
 Anthony Kumu Olugbala White

We must fight on.³¹

In her autobiography, Shakur apologizes to other Black brothers and sisters involved in the struggle by saying she should have never been on the New Jersey Turnpike in 1973. She discussed the deaths of Black freedom fighters and the way the "pigs" try to tarnish their names.³² Every name that Shakur mentioned in this poem has

³¹ Shakur, 52-53.

³² Ibid., 52-53.

a historical narrative of its own. Each name has its own story, its own history that documents the harsh conditions they endured, but also the fatal gunshot that led to their demise. Shakur's poetry reminds readers of the acts of White supremacy and the way police and the FBI treated Black freedom fighters. In the poem "For Rema Olugbala-Youngblood," she pays homage to a man named Rema Olugbala, who hanged himself during an attempt to break out of prison. In prefatory comments to this poem Shakur writes, "Another Black man had died trying to be free." This moment was an emotional time for the many other revolutionaries who were in prison or underground at that time, and who had thoughts about freedom and about the steps being taken to achieve it. Shakur was deeply affected by this incident, and took it very hard, but instead of reacting out of anger, she wrote another poem:

For Rema Olugbala-Youngblood
 They think they killed you.
 But i saw you yesterday,
 standing with your hands in your pockets
 waiting for the real deal to go down.
 I saw you smiling your "fuck it" smile, blood in your eyes,
 your heart pumping freedom
 Youngblood!³³

This poem speaks to the youth. Tragically, well into the twenty-first century, Black people are still being shot and killed by the police. The protection of Black lives is an ongoing struggle in the United States. A number of the Black youth have lost their lives at the hands of police or trying to escape the injustices of the criminal system. Shakur speaks to them by saying that even though Rema is no longer alive, she nevertheless still

³³ Ibid., 163-164.

sees him in other spaces, such as in the playground and in the faces of other youth in the city. By this recognition, she means that there are other Black youth just like Rema all around. She reinforces Rema's legacy in greater depth when she repeats, "they think they killed you," metaphorically speaking of his spirit and the other Black boys who are much like him and embody the same spirit:

They think they killed you.
 But i saw you yesterday
 in the playground.
 Black skin, sweaty, shiny,
 hurling your ball bomb into the hoop
 right on target.
 Won't be no game next time
 cause you ain't hardly playing.³⁴

In the last stanza, Shakur refers to the youths as "Youngbloods" and asserts that they have no time to waste their blood on alcohol and drugs. She uses the terms "syringes" and "barroom floors" to make this point. She highlights the themes that were alive within the hearts and minds of the youth during this time:

Youngbloods ain't got no blood to waste
 in no syringes, on no barroom floors,
 in no strange lands
 delaying other youngbloods' freedom.
 We don't need no tired blood.
 No anemic blood. No blood clots
 in our new body.³⁵

In a lighter piece entitled, "Current Events," Shakur demonstrates her love for African things and African people. The poem compliments her love for natural beauty and

³⁴ Ibid., 164.

³⁵ Ibid., 164.

Black people while also mentioning that perhaps she is “out of fashion.” The 1960s and 1970s represented a time of the positivity related to the natural Black state. The slogans “Black is Beautiful” and “I’m Black and I’m Proud” were used to empower individuals to embrace their Blackness in its natural form. Similar to the “Phenomenal Women” poem written by poet Maya Angelou in 1978, Shakur affirms her womanhood and her Blackness.

She writes:

It is true i have not
 Straightened back my hair.
 Nor rediscovered Maybelline.
 And it is also true that i still like African things,
 Like statues and dresses
 and PEOPLE ³⁶

“Affirmation” is a poem of hope. Printed in the beginning pages of the autobiography, it establishes the way Shakur views freedom in the world. It affirms that all things should have the right to grow and prosper into whatever form they are destined to be. This poem seeks to give an understanding of how life should be, and how we often miss out on the little things in the struggle for liberation. By adhering to the belief in better days to come, even while fighting White supremacy and injustices in the present, Shakur sees the sunshine and a brighter future. It is one of her lighter pieces of poetry, in which she is speaking positively of what is to come, and not what is:

I believe in living.
 I believe in the spectrum
 of Beta days and Gamma people.
 I believe in sunshine.
 In windmills and waterfalls,
 tricycles and rocking chairs.
 And i believe that seeds grow into sprouts.

³⁶ Shakur, 1.

And sprouts grow into trees.
 I believe in the magic of the hands.
 And in the wisdom of the eyes.

The end of the poem takes a turn as Shakur recalls her own personal experiences with law enforcement and police. As a woman who had experienced harsh treatment at the hands of the police during the New Jersey Turnpike incident, Shakur's established views of the police were changed. She began to see them in a new light during her time in the hospital and while on trial, but she realized that these incidents were not the end of the struggle for her. In response, she writes, "a wall is just a wall," acknowledging that her journey was not complete.

I have been locked by the lawless.
 Handcuffed by the haters.
 Gagged by the greedy.
 And, if i know any thing at all,
 it's that a wall is just a wall
 and nothing more at all.
 It can be broken down.

I believe in living.³⁷

In the documentary entitled *Assata Shakur and William Morales Speak: Political Prisoners in the United States*, Shakur discusses the cases of her fellow comrades such as Geronimo, Sundiata Acoli, and Mumia Abu Jamal, most especially the fact that the government was trying to give Mumia the electric chair. In the interview footage from 1987, Shakur describes it as a case of a human being's life—a human being who had dedicated his life to the liberation of people. "If we allow the government to kill Mumia,

³⁷ Ibid., 1.

then what hope do we give the youth?"³⁸ In the spirit of solidarity, Shakur has continued the struggle even while living in Cuba. She continues to write about the injustices in America as a form of slavery. By describing herself as an escaped slave and a Maroon woman, she again places herself into the conversation of Africana warrior women. As a member of the Black Panther Party, Shakur recognized what kind of revolution she intended to practice. The Black Liberation Army provided her with the tools needed to practice the theories she had learned throughout her life of activism.

The mirroring lives of Claudia Jones and Assata Shakur furthers the conversation, scholarship, and research of Africana women and their contributions to the Black Radical Tradition. Jones represents Trinidad, America, and later London, and Shakur's Southern roots and her connections to New York and to Cuba offer a unique perspective on the conditions of Black people throughout the world. Their writings and activism help to paint the picture of the patriarchy, capitalism, and sexism that still flourishes in America. Because of the resistance literature they created and their roles as members of prominent Black movements, their history remains.

CONCLUSION

Appealing to Shakur's idea of the Black Radical Tradition, her poem "The Tradition" highlights the various ways African people have continued the struggle for liberation. She writes the poem as a chronological timeline, reflecting on events in Africa up until the

³⁸ "Assata Shakur and William Morales Speak: Political Prisoners in the United States," *Freedom Now*, December 7-10, 1990.

twentieth century. She demonstrates how the middle passage, newspapers, protests, and fighting are forms of survival that are traditions in our struggle for liberation.

Carry on the tradition.

There were Black People since the childhood of
 who carried it on.
 In Ghana and Mali and Timbuktu
 we carried it on.

Carried on the tradition.

We hid in the bush.
 When the slavemasters came
 holding spears.
 And when the moment was ripe,
 leaped out and lanced the lifeblood
 of would-be masters.³⁹

In one stanza, she references the slave ship revolts and the many enslaved Africans who chose to jump into the ocean rather than be enslaved. Shakur uses this unique moment to show the various ways Black people have resisted oppression. Even on the plantation, they fought back in ways like those in the story of Nat Turner in Virginia. Bringing together many diverse parts of the African Diaspora struggle, the poem situates the geographic scope of the resistance: "In Selma and San Juan. Mozambique. Mississippi. In Brazil and in Boston." She places an emphasis on carrying on the tradition. Shakur makes it clear through this poem to highlight key historical moments for African people everywhere, that wherever African people are, the tradition will be carried on:

On slave ships,
 hurling ourselves into oceans.
 Slitting the throats of our captors.
 We took their whips.

³⁹ Shakur, 263.

And their ships.
 Blood flowed in the Atlantic—
 and it wasn't all ours.

We carried it on.

Fed Missy arsenic apple pies.
 Stole the axes from the shed.
 Went and chopped off master's head.

We ran. We fought.
 We organized a railroad.
 An underground.

We carried it on....

In Selma and San Juan.
 Mozambique. Mississippi.
 In Brazil and in Boston,
 We carried it on.
 Through the lies and the sell-outs,
 The mistakes and the madness.
 Through pain and hunger and frustration,
 We carried it on....

TO FREEDOM!⁴⁰

The poetry of Jones and Shakur is a reminder of the Black Radical Tradition and the unique ways activists carry it on. Each poem contains its own historical framework and refers to an event or emotion that Africana people remember and can connect to. Poetry is ultimately a source that can be used to remember times of oppression as well as the times of empowerment. In other words, a poet can also be a historian. A poet can examine the same archive or experience the same event and write about it from their own perspective.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 263-264.

It remains unknown whether Shakur wrote any of her poems while incarcerated. Since she was held in solitary confinement during most of her prison sentence, it seems unlikely she would have been given frequent access to pen and paper the way that Jones often was during her incarceration. Being branded as a revolutionary takes away even the few freedoms that most other prisoners have, and solitary confinement separates them from the other prisoners. Following the tradition of women writers such as Mari Evans and Sonia Sanchez, Jones and Shakur fit well into the discourse of radical Black women writers. The literature of Africana women writers is vital to the preservation of historical narratives of African resistance in the world. In addition, reading the literature created by the oppressed offers a different perspective than does the research that already exists. As political prisoners, Claudia Jones and Assata Shakur are some of the few people who were able to fully tell their stories to those outside the prison bars. Unfortunately, many of their comrades such as Mumia Abu Jamal and Sundiata Acoli, because of their sacrifices, may never gain freedom.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why did the Communist Party appeal to Claudia Jones?
2. In what ways does Assata Shakur's experience with the criminal justice system influence changes in the Black Freedom movement?
3. How are the ideologies of Marxism, Black Nationalism, and Black Internationalism evidenced discussed in this section? Do the ideologies appear to be in conflict? Why or why not?

Writing Prompt:

Choose one of the poems by Jones or Shakur and explain how its message is relevant to the circumstances that people of African descent have confronted throughout history.