

‘Why can’t y’all be like Perry Mason?’: Black Panther Autobiography Meets Crime Fiction

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Abstract

In this study, I examine the autobiographies of four activists associated with the Black Panther Party, namely, Angela Davis, Huey P. Newton, Assata Shakur and Elaine Brown, investigating their use of a number of conventions taken from crime fiction. Crime fiction as a genre has often been discussed as reproducing conservative ideas about law and order. In light of this, and considering the fact that the connection between criminality and the Party is something these activists seek to challenge, I ask why they might nonetheless want to use the grammar of crime fiction in order to retell their lives. Focusing on a number of crime fiction elements evident in their texts, including *in medias res* openings and the courtroom drama, I show how these tropes allow them to perform powerful political reversals that further their critique of the U.S. justice system as well as pose questions about the nature of crime itself. Worth noting is also that the texts under study do not all emerge from the same historical and political moment, something that I argue has consequences for how we interpret them today.

Keywords: Black Panther Party; autobiography; crime fiction; Elaine Brown; Angela Davis; Huey P. Newton; Assata Shakur

Introduction

One of the few things that most people probably know about the Black Panther Party (BPP) is that they were once considered the ‘greatest threat to the internal security of the country’ by then Director of the FBI J. Edgar Hoover (Wilson 2006: 215). While some scholars have later questioned the level of accuracy of this description,¹ it has continued to characterize the way in which the BPP has been thought of and represented, not least in popular culture. One of the latest manifestations of this is Spike Lee’s 2018 movie—*BlacKkKlansman*—which, although

¹ See, for example, Roz Payne’s article in *In Search of the Black Panther Party* where she looks at the Party from the point of view of the FBI agents tasked to monitor and disrupt it and the irony that some of them felt about the FBI having potentially fed a popular interest in the Party through overstating the threat it posed.

not focused on the Panthers, still cannot help having a character repeat this famous quotation which very much serves as a badge of honor for the Black liberationist group. That a political organization which never really had a massive formal membership should be seen as such a threat by the nation's highest security official is indeed no small feat. On the other hand, the oft-repeated quotation also effects another kind of cultural work, namely, to bring up images of the group's involvement in armed resistance and guerilla warfare, connecting them with guns, violence and ultimately, at least in the eyes of those who do not sympathize with them, criminality. This is perhaps only natural since the group gained their aura and long-lasting place in people's memory through their highly militant stance which, as Amy Abugo Ongiri argues, was carefully staged. Two of the most iconic images of the Party are after all the one with Huey Newton posing like an African king in a wicker chair with a spear in one hand and a rifle in the other and that of him and Bobby Seale both standing in front of a BPP office carrying a rifle. The third image that is probably used most when representing the Party is also that of a half dozen armed Panthers standing guard on the steps of the California State Capitol in Sacramento in May 1967 when the BPP staged a protest against a new bill that would make it illegal for anyone in the state to carry a loaded weapon. This in effect outlawed the practice that had made the BPP visible and popular first locally and then nationally, namely their armed patrols aimed at 'policing the police' in primarily Black neighborhoods 'in order to provide protection for ordinary citizens against the threat of police violence during traffic stops and arrests' (Ongiri 2010: 44).

According to Ongiri, much of the effectiveness of the BPP's political work can be connected to the idea of the spectacle and the spectacular.² As a result, she claims that the party's greatest political impact has been in the realm of the symbolic rather than in actual politics. On that symbolic level, however, the BPP has been able to perform skillful cultural reversals that brought into question some of the most fundamental beliefs about law and order and social hierarchy. Their practice of 'policing the police,' for example, asked questions such as:

² Jean Genet already pointed to the spectacle as a central element in the BPP's politics when he wrote '[w]herever they went, the Americans were the masters, so the Panthers would do their best to terrorize the masters by the only means available to them. Spectacle' (qtd in Singh 2005: 202).

who rules? by what means? and what happens if people stop accepting the rules of the game? It made possible new ways of thinking for the Black community who suddenly stopped seeing themselves in the way the institutions of state power would have them do. As Singh puts it, ‘in employing a logic of policing and the law *against* the police and the law, they sought nothing less than a transvaluation of conventional racist imagery about rampant black crime, turning the police instead into the “symbols of uniformed and armed lawlessness” (2005: 201, emphasis original).

Ongiri’s study of the BPP’s cultural politics raises a number of interesting questions about the political influence the Party had at the time as well as its lasting impact. While it contributed to their success, how problematic was it, for example, that the Panthers relied for their own self-representation on ‘the romance and the threat of violence endemic to [traditional] constructions of Blackness’ (Ongiri 2010: 51)? Was the Panthers’ uncanny ability to exploit the potential of popular culture for political ends not also a double-edged sword facilitating their safe cultural ‘absorption’ (2010: 56)? In this essay I aim to pose similar questions using a different set of materials. Rather than look at the political campaigns the BPP organized, I want to investigate the ways in which this taste for the popular and the spectacular manifests itself in the autobiographies published by Black Panther activists between the 1970s and the beginning of the 1990s. In particular, I am interested in how these narratives make conscious use of tropes taken straight out of crime fiction in giving shape to the re-telling of how they became their present political selves. Crime fiction as a genre has often been discussed as reproducing conservative ideas about law and order³—the genre’s politics having, moreover, a tendency to re-inscribe itself through its core

³ As Ernest Mandel argues, ‘the *mass* of readers will not be led to seek to change the social status quo by reading crime stories, even though the stories portray conflicts between individuals and society. The criminalisation of these conflicts makes them compatible with the defence of bourgeois law and order’ (1984: 10). Much has changed in the genre of crime fiction in the last few decades; yet, certain conventions such as the need for closure means, according to Peter Messent, that there usually is a ‘firm re-establishing of the disrupted status quo at the text’s end’ (2013: 26). Maureen T. Reddy also shows the specifically racial forms this conservatism takes in the crime fiction genre and subgenres in *Traces, Codes and Clues: Reading Race in Crime Fiction* (2003).

conventions even when writers have attempted to consciously undermine them.⁴ Considering the pitfalls of the genre and the extent to which Black activists both then and now have tried to undermine the tenacious and dangerous connection between Blackness and criminality,⁵ one may wonder what might be accomplished by, even partially, using the grammar of crime fiction to retell one's life? Can these rhetorical choices perform another powerful political reversal in the hands of these activists or do they risk reinforcing already existing stereotypes? In what follows I will try to answer these questions by looking at several of the tropes, motifs and rhetorical strategies adopted by these autobiographers, starting with their use of dramatic openings and ending on the way they integrate elements of the courtroom drama into their narratives.

A Note on the Selection of Texts

The resurgence of interest in the Black Panthers from the 1990s onwards has meant that a constantly growing corpus of texts could be considered for this article.⁶ I have chosen, however, a limited number of sources in order to allow for a more in-depth analysis of the ways they make use of elements of crime fiction. The texts I will focus on are Huey P. Newton's *Revolutionary Suicide* (1973), Angela Davis's *With My Mind on Freedom* (1974), Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987) and Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power* (1992). This selection is based first on the specifically relevant nature of these texts for the inquiry, i.e., my aim is not to suggest that the same tropes recur in all of the autobiographies

⁴ See the chapter on 'Detective Fiction' in Anne-Cranny Francis *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction* for a discussion of how this has affected feminist authors writing both within and against that tradition.

⁵ The Panthers themselves have long tried to call attention to other aspects of the Party's activities such as their establishment of community survival programs that included serving school children a free breakfast, the creation of schools and medical clinics, etc. More recently, the struggle against the deadly consequences of damaging stereotypes of Blacks as criminals have been at the heart of the Black Lives Matter movement.

⁶ For a discussion of the context of the 1990s revival, see Jane Rhodes's *Framing the Black Panthers* (2007: esp. 18-20). As Rhodes points out, the devastating social and economic conditions in which many Blacks lived not least as a result of a rapid de-industrialization, lead to 'black youth look[ing] backward to the black nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s for inspiration' (19).

written by Black Panther activists but that the selected texts do so in revealing ways. Another element in the selection is the canonical nature of these texts and the fact that they are the work of key figures in the movement.

Worth noting is that while Newton and Brown have a given place by virtue of their having been leaders of the Party at different times, both Davis's and Shakur's relation to the BPP is more fleeting. Davis was a member of the BPP only briefly, her long-lasting political affiliation being with the Communist Party and in particular the Che-Lumumba Club, which was the African-American section of the party in Los Angeles. Her ties with the BPP were, however, central in her dealings with the institutions of the law which are of special concern for this study. Shakur also left the Party rather early and joined the Black Liberation Army (BLA) instead. Yet, the BLA is often seen as an underground offshoot of the BPP formed mainly by New York members after the ideological split between Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver. All four texts can thus be said to originate from a similar political culture and relate to more or less the same time period in U.S. history, namely the late 1960s and early 70s, with Brown's text stretching further into the late 1970s.

As can be seen from the list above, the publication date of these autobiographies also varies, ranging from the 1970s, while the writer/activists were still in the midst of the Party's political struggle for Black liberation, to the 1990s, when the Party no longer existed, allowing the writer, in this case Elaine Brown, a more candid and distanced examination of her involvement in it. These differences in the context of writing of the autobiographies will be a relevant element to consider when looking at the rhetorical and ideological effects to which the crime story tropes are put in these texts.

In Medias Res and Other Dramatic Tropes

As if to prove that in the history of the struggle for Black liberation it is 'impossible to keep politics and aesthetics apart' (Bogle qtd in Iton 2011: 6), most of the narratives considered here take great care to bring a heightened sense of drama to the opening of their autobiographies. Two of them, Davis and Shakur, choose as the point of departure for the recounting of their life story an especially critical personal encounter with the forces of law and order. In other words, there is no attempt at a

tidy chronological and linear narrative starting with the activist's birth and slowly working up to the moment of narration. Instead, the issues of crime and justice, are immediately and dramatically thematized as these narratives cast the reader straight into the center of action.

At the time of the publication of her autobiography, Angela Davis had only recently been exonerated of the charges brought against her by the State of California for her alleged involvement in the Marin County courthouse shootout that saw her friend and BPP member Jonathan Jackson invade a courtroom at gun point in an attempt to demand the liberation of his brother.⁷ Davis's narrative is on the surface structured as a series of diary entries relating significant events in her life. These include her experiences growing up, her political awakening and activism as well as her close encounters with the justice system, including her attempted escape from the police, her arrest, imprisonment and finally trial. The first entry, dated 'August 9, 1970,' focuses on her vivid recollection of the moment when she was forced to go into hiding after discovering she was wanted by the police as an accessory to the courthouse shootout:

I believe I thanked her but I am not sure. Perhaps I simply watched her dig into the shopping bag and accepted in silence the wig she held out to me. It lay like a small frightened animal in my hand. I was alone with Helen hiding from the police and grieving over the death of someone I loved.⁸ (Davis 1975: 3)

An opening such as this would make proud any master of the 'crime thriller,' the subgenre of crime fiction that takes the perspective of the 'criminal'—or in this case someone designated as criminal by the state—rather than that of a representative of the law.⁹ Indeed, a scene depicting

⁷ Jonathan Jackson's brother was George Jackson who joined the BPP and agitated on their behalf from Soledad prison. He is the author of *Soledad Brother* (1970), a book that had a strong impact on people in the movement and at large. Davis was very close to George and very much involved in the Soledad Brothers Defense Committee. The shootout Jonathan Jackson was involved in resulted in the death of a judge, whom he had taken hostage, as well as that of Jonathan Jackson himself.

⁸ This is a reference to Jonathan Jackson.

⁹ Peter Messent defines it as a subgenre 'that is not police or private detective (private eye) fiction, and in which we shift away from a narrative structured

the protagonist on the run from the law having to find ways to conceal their identity (usually by means of a haircut and a dying kit) has become ubiquitous within the genre. Beginning her life story in this way, Davis thus builds on a recognizable and well-worn trope that nonetheless retains its potential to instill in the reader a powerful sense of identification with the narrator/protagonist. Here, in no more than two paragraphs, Davis skillfully plunges the reader into the same state of ‘anguish, tension and uncertainty’ (Davis 1975: 3) that she finds herself in.

Davis further builds on the sensationalist note struck by the opening lines of her autobiography when she recounts her capture by the FBI and later her extradition from New York to California. In relating her state of mind just before her arrest, Davis once again invites her reader to experience her feelings of fear and paranoia—‘monopoliz[ing],’ as any true thriller hero, ‘the reader’s sympathy and allegiance’ (Rubin 1999: 11):

We passed the broken-down shops on Eighth Avenue and were crossing over to the motel side of the street when suddenly I seemed to see police agents all around me. [...] as we walked through the glass doors of the motel, I had a sudden impulse to turn around and race back into the anonymous crowds I had just left. But if my instincts were correct, if all these nondescript white men were in fact policemen surrounding us, then the slightest abrupt move on my part would give them the excuse they needed to shoot us down on the spot. [...]

Inside the lobby, my fears seemed to be confirmed in every straight-looking white man standing around. I was positive that all these men were agents standing in a formation previously agreed upon, preparing themselves for attack.

(Davis 1975: 13-14)

Davis’s reliance on crime fiction tropes in this scene is self-conscious. She several times comments on the blurring of the lines between the real and the fictional. ‘Something told me,’ she writes, ‘that the *scenario* of the arrest had begun and that this man was number one in the *cast*’ (1975: 15, emphasis added). Before coming face to face with actual FBI agents she also remembers how she used to watch ‘*The FBI*—a typical, inane TV melodrama of agents pursuing fugitives, complete with the final violent encounter which left the pursued with bullets in their skulls and the FBI agents shown as heroes’ (15). The ultimate

round the process of detection to one driven by the *actions and motivations of the criminal*, and what then follows from them’ (2013: 26, emphasis original).

example of the loosening of the boundaries between reality and fiction comes when ‘[j]ust as I moved to turn off the set, a photograph of me flashed on the screen as if it were a part of the fictionalized FBI pursuit’ (15).

Unsurprisingly, this being the autobiography of a political activist and not a crime thriller, there are many ways in which the text not only departs from the conventions of crime fiction but also performs an ideological reversal of the genre which Davis both draws from and comments on. This reversal manifests itself through both her analysis of the popular cultural phenomena she mentions—not least ‘the FBI agents shown as heroes’ and the closure provided by ‘the pursued [being left] with bullets in their skulls’—and her adoption of an alternative perspective from those—note, for example, that even when she depicts *The FBI* TV show she uses ‘the pursued’ rather than ‘the criminal.’

While adopting the perspective of the ‘criminal’ is typical of the crime thriller, Davis’s text certainly does not ‘emphasis[e] present danger rather than reflecting on, or investigating, past action,’ which is another central convention of the genre according to Scaggs (2005: 107). The past, not only that of Davis herself but also that of the whole African American community, remains omnipresent in the way recent events are both described and made sense of. In the midst of narrating her attempted escape from the police, Davis for instance draws a parallel between her life on the run and that of fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad:

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, as I did, the very teeth of the dogs at their heels. (1975: 5)

While such comments might be seen as another form of sensationalism on Davis’s part, it in fact aligns her narrative with the long tradition of (especially female) African American autobiographical writing.¹⁰ In these accounts, the experiences of the individual make room for the collective ones the author shares with other members of the Black community, thereby working against what Johnnie Stover sees as the

¹⁰ See Perkins for a discussion of how Davis’s, Shakur’s and Brown’s autobiographies fit into the broader African American autobiographical tradition.

origins of the autobiography as a genre, namely, 'the European man's first attempt to celebrate his uniqueness' (2003: 20).

Shakur also draws on the genre of the slave narrative, which is not only the beginning of the autobiographical tradition for African Americans but also the origin of African American literature more generally. In her autobiography, this connection is made in an unusual and rather light-hearted manner. The second chapter, which goes back in time to portray Shakur's early years, opens thus:

The FBI cannot find any evidence that i was born. On my FBI Wanted poster, they list my birth date as July 16, 1947, and, in parentheses, 'not substantiated by birth records.'

Anyway, i was born. (2001: 18)

This doubt about Shakur's exact date of birth, although here tongue in cheek, is of course reminiscent of the way many former slaves began their narratives emphasizing the fragile ground on which the slaves' claim to full humanity rested, considered as they were as a piece of property rather than as individuals whose date of birth merited recording. Frederick Douglass, for example, addresses this issue in the second sentence of his first autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845):

I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. (1995: 1)

The 'Most Wanted' poster in Shakur's text not only offers a modern spin on this tradition; it also embeds her critique of the criminal justice system in the very narration of her birth.

Rewinding a little, the first chapter of Assata Shakur's autobiography, very much like Davis's, takes the reader to the scene of a dramatic police chase. This time the chase is over and Assata is found fighting for her life:

There were lights and sirens. Zayd was dead. My mind knew that Zayd was dead. The air was like cold glass. Huge bubbles rose and burst. Each one felt like an explosion in my chest. My mouth tasted like blood and dirt. The car spun around me

and then something like sleep overtook me. In the background i could hear what sounded like gunfire. But i was fading and dreaming.

Suddenly, the door flew open and i felt myself being dragged out onto the pavement. Pushed and punched, a foot upside my head, a kick in the stomach. Police were everywhere. One had a gun to my head.

‘Which way did they go?’ he was shouting. ‘Bitch, you’d better open your goddamn mouth or I’ll blow your goddamn head off!’ (2001: 3)

The same sense of being thrown into the world of a crime thriller is apparent here in Shakur’s text. She also adds another fictional dimension to the scenes she depicts by weaving a lot of punchy dialogue in her narration. This is rather unusual in an autobiography since, as Margo Perkins observes in her discussion of Brown’s autobiography, the reproduction of verbal exchanges several years old obviously breaks with the conventions meant to establish truthfulness and authenticity which are central elements of what Lejeune has called the ‘autobiographical’ and ‘referential’ pacts (Perkins 2000: 91-92).

From the passages in the autobiographies discussed above, there is already evidence, which will be explored later in greater detail, that the idea of crime is itself turned on its head and that what the supposed ‘criminal’ uncovers in the process of narrating her life is a more invisible—because normalized—history of crime perpetrated not only by the repressive arm of the law but also by the U.S. as a nation built on the systemic racism and exploitation of people of color. This point is rendered typographically clear in Assata Shakur’s idiosyncratic spelling of the words ‘amerika’ (20) and ‘kourt’ (48), the implications of which are made even more evident when considering another way she has sometimes spelt ‘America’ as ‘amerikkka’ (Chesimard¹¹ 1973: 16). This succinctly conveys Shakur’s message about not only the complicity but the leading role the state apparatuses have played in ensuring, through violent and structural means, that the Black community is continuously kept down. Worth noting here as well is Shakur’s choice of the lower-case spelling for the first-person pronoun ‘i’ which serves a similar purpose as the non-capitalization of ‘amerika.’ Indeed, ‘i’ in effect cuts the author down to size, but not, however, because she thinks she is

¹¹ JoAnne Chesimard was Shakur’s name before she chose to rename herself as did others inspired by cultural nationalism such as Amiri Baraka, formerly LeRoi Jones or Malcolm X who was first known as Malcolm Little and later as Malik el-Shabazz.

unimportant or deserves the reader's scorn. 'i' here signifies a sense of humility in relation to the many (anonymous) others involved in fighting for the same cause.¹² It also powerfully conveys the activist's investment in resisting and undermining a key value often inherent in the autobiography as a genre and central to the American ethos itself, namely, the sanctity and primacy of the individual self.¹³

This underplaying of the individual 'I' in both Davis's and Shakur's autobiographies is not something which Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power* (1992) emulates. According to Perkins, there is even a 'foregrounding—as opposed to subjugation—of the individual "I"' in Brown's text (2000: 12).¹⁴ A strategy which Brown, however, adopts, and that is reminiscent of the other two autobiographies already discussed, is her choice to open her narrative with a strong sense of dramatic tension. Thus, in the first few lines, Brown is heard addressing a room full of (mostly male) Panthers on the day she took over the leadership of the Black Panther Party in August 1974 with the words: 'I HAVE ALL THE GUNS AND ALL THE MONEY. I can withstand challenge from without and from within. Am I right, Comrade?' (1994: 3, emphasis original). Brown's combined attempt at asserting her authority and threatening anyone who might prove disloyal immediately catches the reader's attention, seeming as it does to pander to their probable thirst for sensationalist stories about the guerilla-like organization. The way Brown portrays the reaction of the previously mentioned comrade, Larry, also feels as though it were taken straight from a book on the crime fiction shelf rather than a personal memoir:

¹² See Davis's own preface to her autobiography in which she discusses the importance for her not to adopt 'a posture of difference' or assume that she was 'unlike other women—other Black women—and therefore needed to explain [her]self' (1975: n. pag.) in writing her memoirs.

¹³ See Daniel Mendelsohn for a discussion of 'the troubling association between creativity and narcissism' (2010: para. 5) in the genre of autobiography from St. Augustine up to the present-day.

¹⁴ As Perkins points out, the differences between Brown's autobiography on the one hand and Davis's and Shakur's on the other are also manifested in the dedication of the three texts with Davis and Shakur emphasizing links to others involved in the political struggle for liberation while Brown's narrative 'is dedicated to her daughter, and to those who assisted in the manuscript's preparation' (2000: 6).

‘Larry snapped back his answer to my rhetorical question: “Right on!” His muscular body tilted slightly as he adjusted the .45 automatic pistol under his jacket’ (1994: 3). These and other examples certainly confirm Philip Vassallo’s characterization of *A Taste of Power* as ‘the stuff of major motion pictures’ (1994: 100).

The reference to ‘guns’ and ‘money’ in the first line immediately brings to mind images of the criminal underworld, and Brown’s autobiography could thus be said to borrow from the same subgenre of crime fiction as the other two activist autobiographers, namely, the crime thriller. Interestingly here, however, Brown portrays herself in a position of power, a tenuous one maybe—as will become even clearer below—but one that is nonetheless very different from the one Davis and Shakur adopt at the start of their own narratives. The idea of the connection between the party and criminality is thus not reversed at this stage of Brown’s text as it is in the other two, where Davis and Shakur appear as the victims of an unjust vendetta against them rather than as people proudly flaunting the law.

Brown’s indebtedness to the genre of crime fiction is, as in Davis and Shakur, made explicit to the reader, not least in her description of how she and other Panther members ‘were forced to back out of the place like gangsters in a third-rate movie’ when they go on their round of the local Black-owned businesses to ensure that they will continue their (not quite voluntary) subsidizing of the Party (1994: 12). This less than flattering characterization of herself and her crew introduces a level of distance and self-irony which is totally absent from Davis and Shakur. This has of course very much to do both with the different contexts in which their texts were written and with the moment in the history of the Party on which they focus. Davis’s text can of course only go as far as 1974 when her autobiography was published. Ostensibly, only four years separate the publication of Shakur’s and Brown’s texts; yet, Shakur retells her life while in exile in Cuba after spending years in prison for a number of crimes she was alleged to have committed. In 1988, Shakur does therefore not look back on her political involvement with the Party; rather, the consequences of that involvement are something still very much alive in her present—she is, after all, still wanted in the U.S. Moreover, Cuba as a place, contributes to solidifying rather than attenuating her militancy. Brown, on the other hand, is, according to Perkins, ‘less concerned (and has more freedom to be so) with upholding

Party propaganda or promoting positive images of the Movement than with illuminating the points at which both sometimes went wrong' (2000: 19).

Brown also emphasizes the issue of fictionality in her text in other ways. As she retells the scene of her assuming control of the Party, for instance, she pointedly calls attention to the performative dimension of what she is doing. 'Cocking my head to the side,' she tells us, 'I continued in the manner I knew was required' (1994: 4). Brown also emphasizes each breathing space, dramatic pause and theatrical effect of her performance:

I began to walk up and down the stage purposely emphasizing my words with the sound of the heels of my black leather boots. I punctuated each sentence with a nod to one or another of the soldiers standing on stage with me, backing me up.

(1994: 4-5)

She knows that playing the part right will prove vital in this context. She also realizes that her grasp on power very much hangs on the successful performance of her supporting cast, i.e., the male Panther 'soldiers.' In this way, Brown also highlights an important aspect of the gender politics that characterized the Black Power movement and the BPP specifically. The 'sea of predominantly male faces' (1994: 3) she addresses in the narrative's inception points to how the BPP, its formal endorsement of gender equality notwithstanding, remained a male-dominated organization both in terms of the sex of the majority of its members and also the highly masculine imagery on which it relied in carrying out its political work.¹⁵ Brown's femininity thus marks her

¹⁵ The BPP ostensibly (if awkwardly) adopted a gender egalitarian stance, for example issuing statements about their political support for the women's and gay liberation movements (Newton 1972: 152-55). Most Black Power organizations, however, made restoring black manhood a central political and social goal, often uttering disparaging comments about the role of women in the movement. For a critical appraisal of the treatment of women and the issue of masculinity in Black Power at large and within the BPP, see Rhodes (2007: 107-11). A whole section of Charles E. Jones' *Black Panther Party Reconsidered* is devoted to the gender dynamics within the Party, as are three chapters in Joseph's *Black Power Movement*. Gender is also a key lens through which Margo Perkins explores the three female autobiographies discussed in this

position in the Party as at once extraordinary (especially considering she has reached the highest rank possible) and vulnerable.

While the vulnerability Brown displays in her narrative contributes to making her sympathetic to her readers, it also diminishes the sympathy the reader might have for the Party she devoted her life to for ten years. This is not least the case since, structurally, Brown's autobiography could be said to resemble an epic, with the narrative beginning 'towards the end of the action, then break[ing] off to recount what ha[s] happened before' (Mendilow 1967: 269). As her narrative progresses, the reader feels a rising tension which, not unfrequently, comes from Brown's sense of fear, not from what the violent arm of the state can do to her and the Party, but from what she knows from experience others in the Party might do to her. As I pointed out before, this difference in Brown's narrative compared to the other two (and to Newton's as well) may very well be the result of historical distance, which allows her a more candid, and therefore less romanticized view of the Party (Perkins 2000: 13-14).

The Autobiographer as 'Specialist Investigator'

While the texts include a sensationalist dimension, they more often than not are centered on transforming the way readers understand the social, political and economic workings of their world. In doing so the autobiographers become transfigured from wanted criminal to 'specialist investigator'¹⁶ in charge of uncovering the crime of deep-seated and all-pervasive racism that infects U.S. society—a crime that had become

article in her full-length study *Autobiography as Activism*. For a discussion of masculinity in Huey P. Newton's *Revolutionary Suicide*, see Avril (2012).

¹⁶ The term is Dennis Porter's who defines a '[d]etective novel' as one 'whose principal action concerns the attempt by a specialist investigator to solve a crime and to bring a criminal to justice, whether the crime involved be a single murder or the endeavor to destroy a civilization' (1981: 5). While not strictly related to the autobiographies themselves, it is worth mentioning in this context that the very first issue of *The Black Panther* newspaper, from 25 April 1967, already thematized the idea of the Panthers as specialist investigators dedicated to exposing the crimes of a racist society itself bent on criminalizing Blackness. Indeed, the frontpage piece 'Why was Denzil Dowell Killed?' focuses on the murder of a young Black man at the hands of the police and the greater part of the article consists in compiling a list of inconsistencies between the police report and witnesses' accounts (reproduced in Foner 2002: 9).

obfuscated in the media by the designation of Black Power activists, the Panthers in particular, as themselves representing the most dangerous threat to the nation (cf. Hoover). In this context, these autobiographical narratives can be said to both blend and significantly transform some of the key characteristics of three sub-genres of crime fiction: 'detective fiction,' 'noir thriller' and the 'anti-conspiracy thriller,' the latter two making up the two strands of the 'crime thriller' subgenre according to Scaggs.

Just like 'noir thrillers,' these narratives focus 'on a protagonist who consciously exceeds the law, and on the social and economic context portrayed as contributing to the transgression' (Scaggs 2005: 109). More than this, however, the very question of the nature and fairness of the law is at stake in these texts. As a result, while they share with the 'noir thriller' the 'realisation that urban poverty and national economic depression, for some, made a life of crime appear to be an attractive proposition,' they do not follow its formal trajectory by plotting 'the rise, and inevitable fall, of the gangster hero' (Scaggs 2005: 109). Instead they even aim to redefine the notion of crime and put back on its feet what the state has turned on its head—an idea best expressed by Newton when he stated in an interview from prison for KPFA radio in March 1968 that 'it's a very common thing for the people who are in control of the mass media to define the victim as a criminal' (qtd in Rhodes 2007: 131).¹⁷

This project of denaturalization of the status quo turns the autobiographers into the kind of 'specialist investigators' who make up the heart of detective fiction. Another important element of the genre of detective fiction is that, '[p]erhaps more than any genre,' it 'foregrounds the related view of *reading* as a quest for meaning' (Scaggs 2005: 74, emphasis original). While this might ostensibly describe any kind of writing, detective fiction is based on the idea of a mystery presented early on in the narrative and which the ensuing plot proceeds to elucidate. Structurally, according to Skenazy, there are links between crime fiction, not least detective fiction, and Gothic literature. Skenazy

¹⁷ More recently, in her foreword to the second edition of Assata Shakur's autobiography, Angela Davis expresses a similar idea when she explains that in the past, just as much as today, 'brazen expressions of structural racism—such as the pattern of mass imprisonment to which communities of color are subjected—are rendered invisible by the prevailing moral panic over crime' (2001: viii).

explains this through the concept of ‘gothic causality’ which can itself be described, according to Scaggs, as

the hauntings that structure most crime narratives, in which ‘a secret from the past [...] represents an occurrence or desire antithetical to the principles and position of the house (or family)’ (Skenazy 1995: 114). *Knowledge of this secret, in both genres, is the key to understanding the seemingly irrational and inexplicable events in the present*, and it is *this drive to make the unintelligible intelligible* which characterises both Gothic romance and crime fiction. Characters protect themselves in the present by covering up their secrets in the past, and it is significant that in the Gothic novel, as in the crime story, ‘[i]n the skeletons that leap from family closets [...] there emerges the awful spectre of complete social disintegration’ (Botting 2001: 5). Gothic plots, furthermore, employ delayed or regressive revelations to create what Skenazy describes as a ‘double rhythm’, ‘moving inexorably forward in time while creeping slowly backward to resolve the disruptions and violence evident in the present’ (Skenazy 1995: 113). (2005: 16, emphasis added)

First, the ‘double rhythm’ described above fits also very well with the autobiographical genre, which itself moves forward to the present of the narration, while looking backward to provide the necessary context to explain the forces, experiences and characteristics that have shaped the person who is speaking as the ‘I.’ In the case of activist autobiographies, the idea that the backward movement is prompted by a need ‘to resolve the disruptions and violence evident in the present’ also feels uncannily apposite. Indeed, these exercises in life writing are not only concerned with giving an account of the author’s self, but also aim to alert the reader to present social and political dangers, inform them about the origins of these dangers and encourage them to become part of the solution to the crisis.

The ways life writing in these narratives closely intertwines with the investigation of a current crisis that has its roots in the past can be best illustrated through the opening of Huey Newton’s autobiography *Revolutionary Suicide* (1973): ‘Life does not always begin at birth. My life was forged in the lives of my parents before I was born, and even earlier in the history of all Black people. It is all of a piece’ (2009: 9). To understand who he is, Newton tells us, we must understand the history of Black America as a whole, not least how it began with the enslavement of millions of women, men and children violently uprooted from a continent on the other side of the Atlantic. The ‘quest for meaning’ which Newton and the other autobiographers follow requires that we not only use society to understand the individual life, but also that we draw

from the life of the individual in order to make sense of society. Exemplary anecdotes which the autobiographers share, and which they presumably have in common with many of their Black readers, thus function as the clues that can make the 'irrational and inexplicable events in the present' become 'intelligible.'

One such clue concerns the issue of self-hatred and the internalization of racist beliefs by Black people themselves. As is often the case in autobiographies by African American authors, the topic of hair becomes instructive in this context and all the texts discussed here include an anecdote about it. Newton writes, for example, that 'Bushy African hair was bad; straight hair was good; light was better than dark. Our image of ourselves was defined for us by textbooks and teachers. We not only accepted ourselves as inferior; we accepted inferiority as inevitable and inescapable' (2009: 18). Similarly, Elaine Brown remembers: 'Everyone understood. Everyone had always known that dark-skinned colored girls with "bad," or kinky, hair were ugly. [...] The rule was simple: The closer to white, the better' (1994: 31).

A significant event in Shakur's transformation of consciousness also hinges on understanding how the connection between 'black' and 'ugly' becomes engrained in the psyche of Black people. The episode Shakur recounts takes place in junior high and involves Joe, a sweet boy who wants Assata to be his 'girl' and whom she is driven to violently reject because of the pressure she feels from her peers and family. After recalling how she told him that the reason she did not want to be his girl was '[b]ecause you're too black and ugly,' Shakur also recalls the utter sense of revulsion she felt at herself after rejecting Joe and how this feeling led her to the realization that '[t]here was nothing i could do but change myself. Not for him, but for me. And i did change' (2001: 72). This anecdote makes clear as well that the process of writing her life is part of helping Shakur explain to herself and her readers how she herself could have become complicit in the reproduction of racist beliefs of which she is herself a victim.

Obviously, the clues these autobiographers provide in order to uncover the crimes of racism also stretch further than the authors' own personal complicity and include a number of structural inequalities that lead to de facto segregation in areas such as education and housing. Shakur illustrates both these plights with characteristic dark irony. In

relation to inequalities in school, for example, she comments on the fact that

A lot of the Black kids had been put into remedial or what we called 'dumb' classes. It never ceased to amaze me that the kids who were so smart in the street were always in the dumb classes. (2001: 71)

When it comes to housing, she ponders on another seemingly 'irrational and inexplicable' (Scaggs 2005: 16) mystery, namely, how South Jamaica, in New York City's borough of Queens, went from being an all-white neighborhood to a place where '[y]ou could live your whole life [...] and the only time you'd see a white face was when you shopped on Jamaica Avenue or when the insurance man came round' (2001: 99). Part of the demystification Shakur offers here lies in the recognition that the American Dream of social uplift and mobility will not be realized by Black Americans since they will never be able to escape the conditions of poverty and other social problems associated with it:

Black people had moved out to the Island to escape the ghettos of Harlem and Brooklyn. They bought old houses at exorbitant prices, only to find that, within a few years, their 'nice' neighborhoods had turned into the crime-ridden, drugridden, poverty-stricken places they had run from. (2001: 99).¹⁸

No matter how hard they try, Shakur suggests, the odds are stacked against them and these conditions will inexorably follow, like a curse, even the Black people who attempt a journey of social migration.

The autobiographers thus unveil the image of the 'world as it really is' (Scaggs 2005: 118) as they retell the stories of their own lives and political engagement. In doing so, they invite readers to embrace 'oppositional and counterhegemonic ways of knowing' (Perkins 2000: xii). Thus, while the 'skeletons that leap from family closets' in both Gothic and crime fiction threaten 'social disintegration,' these

¹⁸ Singh illustrates the way in which this structural racism functioned from the 1930s onward: 'Even as an officially sanctioned apartheid was being dismantled, however, new structures of racial inequality, rooted in a national racial geography of urban ghettos and suburban idylls, and intractable disparities of black and white wealth and employment were being established. For three decades, reformist and putatively race-neutral social policies formulated in the New Deal era actually reinforced and expanded numerous racial disparities' (2005: 7).

autobiographies, through their uncovering of national ‘skeletons,’ instead open up avenues for individual as well as collective enlightenment and liberation.

‘Collective’ is, however, a keyword that generally jars with the genre of crime fiction. Both the detective and the thriller hero, for example, can be characterized as a ‘loner’ (Scaggs 2005: 59, Palmer 1978: 83). To borrow Raymond Chandler’s famous phrase, ‘down these mean streets,’ the autobiographers do go and they are not ‘[themselves] mean’ but while they—minus the gender bias—can be seen as indeed ‘a common man and yet an unusual man’ they cannot be said to be ‘everything’ (qtd in Scaggs 2005: 56). In a number of ways, some of which have already been mentioned, the authors emphasize their social and political commitment and their status as unexceptional. What matters is the community and the sense that no liberation can be achieved while others continue to be oppressed. Davis, for example, does not forget that while she leaves the courtroom a free woman at the end of her autobiography, countless others still ‘remained draped in chains’ (1975: 397). The kind of investigation the autobiographers subject their society to thus takes a very different turn than most writing in the genre of crime fiction. Still, the parallels are many and they do not stop at the crime thriller and detective fiction, but often invite comparisons to yet another subgenre, namely, the courtroom drama, to which we will now turn.

The Courtroom Drama

In his discussion of Lucy Delaney’s slave narrative ‘From the Darkness Cometh the Light,’ Lindon Barrett has pointed to the significance of ‘the American courtroom as a site for the writing of African American identity and autobiography’ (1993: 105). The texts discussed in this article, with the exception of Brown’s, certainly support this claim. Indeed, as a result of their virulent critique against social injustice and their militant engagement to effect change, the activists often become entangled in legal battles that take them into the courtroom, to which they were often brought on charges such as conspiracy, kidnapping or murder. It is no surprise in this context that the ‘courtroom drama’ would thus figure as another crime fiction subgenre on which these narratives recognizably build. The courtroom drama also allows the autobiographers one more opportunity for a cultural reversal, in not only challenging the charges brought against them, but also putting the system

of justice itself into the dock by shifting the discourse from one focused on ideas of ‘law and order’ to one inquiring more profoundly into issues of ‘justice in America’ (Stokely Carmichael qtd in Ongiri 2010: 47).

In both Newton’s and Davis’s autobiographies in particular, the trial functions as the narrative climax. In Newton’s, the chapter called ‘Trial’ opens what is roughly the last third of the book. With its 41 pages, it is much longer than any of the other chapters prior to or following it, which range from 2 to 26 pages with an average of 8 pages each. Another chapter closer to the end of the book also covers Newton’s second and third trials on the same charges, making the court case against him a significant element in his autobiographical narrative. In these sections, the reader is given a very detailed and engrossing exposition of what went on in the courtroom while he stood trial for the alleged murder of a police officer on 28 October 1967. The gallery of characters the reader gets introduced to in this context include a corrupt and careerist prosecutor who ‘meant to get a conviction of first-degree murder, no matter how far he had to stretch the law’ (2009: 219), a judge not only ‘dour and humorless’ but also biased and racist (2009: 216), and a key witness for the prosecution who was ‘kept completely out of sight’ until the day of the trial (2009: 227, 229). Newton, having studied law, is very interested in legal minutiae and takes evident pleasure in instructing the reader as to the subtleties of various legal points.

In the anti-conspiracy thriller, ‘the protagonist is pitched against a powerful conspiracy without recourse to the forces of law and order’ (Scaggs 2005: 117). As we shall see below, this applies only in part to the activist autobiographers. Shakur points out, for example, the uneven odds she faces when she ironically asks of her lawyers: ‘Why can’t y’all be like Perry Mason?’ One of her lawyer’s reply—‘Did you ever see Perry Mason defend a Black defendant?’ (2001: 68)—also suggests inequalities in the eyes of the law both as it is represented in popular culture and in reality. If, however, none of Shakur’s attorneys seem to fit the Perry Mason profile, there is one figure in these narratives that undoubtedly does: Huey Newton’s white lawyer, Charles Garry. The trial sections in Newton’s autobiography are full of drama and excitement and that tension is in no small part connected to Garry’s highly effective and theatrical defense. Several times, portions of the trial transcript are reproduced in Newton’s narrative to show off Garry’s cross-examination skills (2009: 231-32, 233-35). In one instance, Garry also resorts to

effectful theatrics that would be worthy of inclusion in a Perry Mason episode:

Garry's most dramatic refutation of Grier's testimony [...] came during his final summary for the defense. He walked over to the table in the courtroom where all the evidence for the trial was on display and picked up the black leather jacket I had been wearing on October 28. Then he picked up Heanes's .38 revolver and walked over to the jury box. Standing before the jurors, he quoted Grier's original statement that I had gone into my jacket or coat pocket and pulled out a gun. The gun that the prosecution claimed I had hidden, a .38 pistol, could not have been much smaller than Heanes's revolver, Garry said, as he put the gun into the jacket pocket. It immediately fell out. He put it into the other pocket, and it fell out again. He tried putting the gun in the pockets several times, and each time it fell out; the pocket was too small to hold it. (2009: 235)

The reader cannot but become absorbed by the tense atmosphere that is built up as the attorney and his client struggle to uncover the truth and expose the lies of the prosecution. They can therefore only jubilate when finally, at the end of Newton's third trial, Garry comes up with decisive evidence that eventually gets Newton released: '*Henry Grier*,' the key witness mentioned above and on which most of the prosecution's case rested '*had never been at the scene of the October 28 shooting*' (2009: 319, emphasis original).

While it is depicted in ways that rely closely on the conventions of the courtroom drama, Newton's trial meant also to offer a searing criticism of the justice system and beyond that the whole social order that it seeks to uphold and defend. Newton points to this in the 'Strategy' chapter that precedes 'Trial,' where he explains that 'legal niceties were definitely secondary. The ideological and political significance of the trial was of primary importance' (2009: 201) and that 'for the black panther party, the goal of the trial was not primarily to save my life, but to organize the people and advance their struggle' (2009: 202). As a result of this strategy, Charles Garry does more than argue for the innocence of his client; he also becomes a vehicle for the Black Panther Party's political ideology and program. In his closing statement at the first trial, Garry for example tells the jury:

The Black community today, the Black ghetto, is fighting for the right of survival. The white community is sitting smug and saying, Let's have more police! Let's have more guns! Let's arm ourselves against the blacks! [...]

White America, listen! White America, listen! The answer is not to put Huey Newton in the gas chamber. It is not the answer to put Huey Newton and his

organization into jail. The answer is to wipe out the ghetto, the conditions of the ghetto, so that Black brothers and sisters can live with dignity, so that they can walk down the street with dignity. (2009: 256)

Statements such as these are examples of the way the courtroom becomes, in these narratives, a place of subversion where what is indicted is not the defendant themselves but the U.S. nation who comes across looking guilty of a slew of social crimes—police brutality, chronic poverty, unemployment, slum housing and inferior education (Newton 2009: 248-49)—for which nobody is usually ever held accountable.

Some might object to Garry, a white middle-class lawyer, taking so much space in a Black Power activist's political trial,¹⁹ and at times Newton seems more of a spectator than an actor in his own trial. In this, one could see a problematic aspect of the slave narrative reproducing itself, namely, the need for an authoritative white presence to authenticate and also 'translate' the experience of a Black subject into a framework that the audience/readership can understand.²⁰ Barrett, for example, explains in relation to the courtroom scene in Lucy Delaney's slave narrative that

The eloquence and 'explanatory power' of Judge Bates [her attorney] are beyond question, as is his role in securing the relief and victory of Delaney. The emphasis falls on his actions and influence, why Delaney appears as merely acted upon. The turning point in the crisis of her self-determination depends upon the force and efficacy of a *self* constructed by *another*. (1993: 120, emphasis added)

Newton can, however, hardly be described as having 'no authority, self-authority or any other kind' as Barrett describes Delaney. The context in which Newton writes is thoroughly different and his agency is emphasized throughout. For instance, he plays a major part in deciding trial strategy, as indicated above. In the end, he also cannot be de-centered in his own trial since his articulation of his personal experiences also figures as a central element in his defense. In a striking example of *mise-en-abîme*, the autobiographical narrative is reproduced in the

¹⁹ See 'Black Lawyers' in the November 23, 1967 edition of *The Black Panther* (in Foner 2002: 14-16).

²⁰ For instance, Garry tells the jury: 'Frankly, it is not the type of police action that I have personally witnessed, but then again, I am not a Black man. I am not a Black Panther. I am part of accepted society. I don't think any officer would stop me unless I was actually, openly, overtly violating the law' (245).

courtroom as Newton manages to admit his entire life story into evidence. After Newton took the stand,

Garry opened up by asking me the two all-important questions: whether I had killed Officer Frey and whether I had shot and wounded Officer Herbert Heanes. I gave the only possible answers—the truth. No, I had not. After that, we went through the necessary background leading up to the incident, which in this case began the day I was born. (2009: 248)

Just like the jury, the reader is meant to see the whole autobiographical narrative that they have been privy to as relevant to his contestation of the charges against him. The strategy is itself subversive, as Newton reminds us that he and his lawyer need to skillfully oppose a number of challenges from the prosecution. Newton's powerful performance thus ends up making a spectacle of the law—a spectacle that was meant to have reverberations far beyond the space of the courtroom. Indeed, as Ongiri points out, Newton's trial became a turning point for the Party and, through the mediatization it received, 'the Black Panther Party successfully transformed the courthouse from its representative role as a vehicle for state power into a theater for the display of a spectacular blackness that was potent in its presentation and seemingly potentially revolutionary in its consequences' (2010: 48).²¹

The depiction of the trials in Shakur's autobiography share many points of similarity with Newton's. The emphasis on the political nature of the process is a case in point: 'I was determined' she writes 'to use this case to expose the deceit and crookedness of the government' (2001: 98). The narrative itself also fulfills this function and, just as Newton, Shakur shares with her readers her keen analysis of the American (in)justice system. One key aspect that Shakur emphasizes in this context—the same is true of Newton and Davis—is the difficulty of

²¹ The 'Free Huey' campaign who was organized by Kathleen Cleaver, then National Communications Secretary of the Party, was also key to the BPP's growth at that time. Rhodes points out that Newton's trial was one of 'the two biggest stories' in 1968 according to editors of the *Oakland Tribune* and that it 'placed the Black Panthers on the front page for weeks at a time' that year (2007: 117), the newspaper helping propel the party on a national stage through 'turn[ing] the case into a courtroom soap opera' (2007: 118). Two chapters of Rhodes' book are devoted to a thoroughgoing analysis of the press coverage of both the Free Huey campaign and the trial itself.

selecting a jury of one's peers as a Black defendant; one of hers, for example, 'looked more like a lynch mob than a jury' (2001: 67).²²

The tone in Shakur's text is, however, different from Newton's. Her attitude, as she relates these past events, is less detached and theoretical, but more emotional, admitting, for example, feeling 'more and more upset' (2001: 69) at the process of jury selection or wanting to 'scream, "Dirty dog, slimy pig, you're not a judge. You're just another prosecutor"' when the judge, who 'looks just like what he is: a racist dog cracka,' rejects all of her attorney's motions (2001: 89) Shakur also shares her joy on seeing her co-defendant or the '[f]riendly, familiar faces smiling at' her in the audience (2001: 89).

While the notion of 'spectacle' definitely does apply to Shakur's courtroom scenes as well as to Newton's, the show she offers seems taken from a different genre. The legal proceedings become, for instance, exposed as a charade when '[j]ury selection continued with only the judge and the prosecutor participating' after Shakur and her co-defendant are sent out for haranguing the jurors about the judge's bias. The two also had previously instructed their lawyers to remain mute to allow them to use the court as a militant platform. The atmosphere in the room also takes on a more unruly and carnivalesque turn as the audience is moved to join in in the disruptive performance, chanting 'Railroad, Railroad' (2001: 91) as they witness the brutal treatment of the defendants at the hands of the court marshals. A sort of 'cat and mouse' game follows with Shakur and her co-defendant being brought back to court several times, just to be sent back out again because of their refusal to 'behave' (2001: 90-91). While Newton uses the law in subversive ways, Shakur instead refuses to play the game, truly bringing the system into disrepute in the process.

Shakur does, however, manage to articulate a profound criticism of the justice system in more orthodox ways as well. In a later trial, having made herself co-counsel for her defense, she delivers an opening statement that clearly puts into relief the gulf that separates the idea of 'law and order' from that of 'justice' in all areas of life in the U.S., especially for all of its disenfranchised citizens and those among them who try to resist:

²² The issue of the composition of juries figured prominently in the Black Panther Party's political program and their 10-point platform.

While awaiting trial I have earned a PhD in justice or, rather, the lack of it.

I sat next to a pregnant woman who was doing ninety days for taking a box of Pampers and watched on TV the pardoning of a president who had stolen millions of dollars and who had been responsible for the deaths of thousands of human beings. [...] Ford stated that he pardoned Nixon because Nixon's family had suffered enough. Well, what about thousands of families whose sons gave their lives in Vietnam? And what about the millions of people who have been sentenced at birth to poverty, to live like animals and work like dogs. What about the families who have sons and daughters in prison, who cannot afford bail or even lawyers for their children? Where is the justice for them?

And what kind of justice is this?

Where the poor go to prison and the rich go free.

Where witnesses are rented, bought, or bribed.

Where was the justice for Medgar Evers, Fred Hampton, Clifford Glover?

Where was the justice for the Rosenbergs?

And where is the justice for the Native Americans who we so presumptuously call Indians? (2001: 166-67, emphasis original)

The 'life as evidence' strategy that proves successful for Newton is one that Shakur is eventually unable to use herself in her final trial, her lawyers warning her that it would be 'opening the door' for the prosecution to use her political activism against her—i.e., potentially connecting Shakur's involvement to more allegedly illegal actions than the ones she is charged for. Unable to build a political defense, Shakur is once again left silenced, though not by choice this time. As she relates this experience toward the close of her autobiography, she takes stock of her various experiences in court and reflects on the pitfalls that await activists as they engage with the justice system:

When i sit back today and examine why I participated in the trial, i think i must have been crazy. I guess i had been through too many trials and gotten too many acquittals and let that stuff go to my head. [...]

Participating in the New Jersey trial was unprincipled and incorrect. By participating, i participated in my own oppression. I should have known better and not lent dignity or credence to that sham. In the long run, the people are our only appeal. The only ones who can free us are ourselves. (2001: 252)

Shakur is thus left feeling much more bitter and weary about her experiences in the courtroom—not least of course because, unlike Newton, she was in the end convicted of the crimes of murder and assault at her final trial.

Davis is no different from Shakur and Newton in emphasizing the political character of her trial and the leading role she takes in deciding

on a legal strategy that would accord with the greater political goals of the movement:

They [the lawyers] had to be sensitive to the fact that the trial would be political in every respect. Moreover, the courtroom battle would be interwoven with a battle conducted by a mass movement. The lawyers would have to understand from the outset that what happened in the courtroom would of necessity be related to and coordinated with the campaign in the streets. (1975: 288)

One can, however, hear already in this passage a slightly different note which Davis strikes throughout her narrative. While Newton emphasizes his role as a leader, seeing his trial as a tool that will enable the Party to ‘organize the people,’ Davis credits the movement outside the court with an agency all of its own, one that is vibrant and that her defense can feed on as well as vice versa. As is evident from the very first words of her autobiography, Davis is keen to share the limelight with others and to acknowledge her debt to other activists, supporters, and fellow prisoners. This translates, for example, into the fact that she does not portray only her own trial in her book, but also that of other activists, not least that of George Jackson and his fellow Soledad defendants. She shows her solidarity by being there in the audience, just as others were there for her.

What is perhaps most unusual in her depiction of the judicial process, compared to the other two activists, is the lack of specifically dramatic effect. What stands out instead is Davis’s deconstructionist perspective on the justice system, and more specifically, the way it legitimizes and normalizes the operation of its power through symbolic means. On at least two occasions, her sharp analytical gaze is trained on the courtroom itself as a concrete material space that produces compelling ideological effects. In relation to the Monterey County courtroom where Jackson’s case is being tried, she writes:

Like most courthouses I had seen, this one had a plastic, shiny veneer. Its sparkling marble walls and antiseptically clean floor almost seemed designed to hide the dirty racist business being conducted there. It was as if the sheer weight of the marble, the inhuman tidiness of the halls alone spelled justice. Could there be bribery behind pink-veined Vienna marble? [...]

Here as elsewhere Justice was an image—heavy, slick and wholly deceptive.
(Davis 1975: 261-62)

The vivid contrast she identifies here between the purity evinced by the surface of the symbol and the corrupt reality it obfuscates recurs in

the description of the Marin County courtroom where her own trial unfolds. There, '[e]verything is modern and spotless,' yet it is from 'this neat, pretty room' that 'men and women are sent to dirty cells, some to the death chamber just across the way at San Quentin' (1975: 286-87).

To paraphrase John Keats, Davis lays bare, in her own narrative, the 'palpable designs' the architecture has upon her; yet, she also shows how materiality and form do things in ways that are not always easy to resist. In relation to the Marin County courthouse, for example, Davis comments on how its round shape was meant to reflect the idea of justice as a circle in which all the different elements, 'judge, jury, prosecutor and defendant are holding hands around a circle in the common pursuit of justice' (1975: 287). Practically, this means for her that the 'judge's bench was closer to me than [her co-defendant] Ruchell's chair. So was the prosecutor's.' The very design of the building is thus 'intent on breaking up the natural alliance between my brother and me' (1975: 292).

As well as the power of concrete material form to shape us, Davis also warns the reader against the one exerted by specific narrative forms, especially the dominant ones on which journalists covering her trial rely to tell their news stories. There again, the effect, as she sees it, is to reduce the possibilities for solidarity and collective identification as she, 'the newly acclaimed heroine of black revolutionaries,' is pitted against Ruchell in terms of differences in class background, educational achievements and celebrity status (Davis 1975: 292). Thus, Davis admits to falling into their trap:

When I walked into the courtroom, there was thunderous applause and my eyes were momentarily blinded by flash bulbs and bright lights. Looking straight into the spectator section, straining to see familiar faces, I raised my fist to acknowledge their reception.

Some days later, looking at a photograph of that moment, I was struck by the glaring incongruity of the scene. There I was, my face adorned with a glowing smile; my unencumbered arm raised high. At the table a few feet to my right, there sat Ruchell Magee, whom I had not yet seen. He was tangled up in a mess of chains, a trace of a grimace on his face, as if he were trying to find a more comfortable way of coping with the chains. Had I seen Ruchell sooner, my first gesture would have been to reach out to him, to affirm the bond between us. (1975: 291-92)

The lessons Davis draws from this are not unequivocal. On the one hand, she owes her freedom to the high visibility of her case which came from her already elevated status in the struggle but which became even more

pronounced thanks to the media coverage of her trial. On the other hand, the tropes that are ubiquitous in popular culture—such as that of the hero leading others into battle, and the narrative arc it presupposes—are not ideologically neutral and can be counterproductive to the goals of the movement. In this context, it feels all but coincidental that Davis steers away from the conventions of the courtroom drama in relating her and her comrades' dealings with the justice system.

The potential dangers of relying on well-worn and ideologically problematic tropes are perhaps best exemplified in Brown's narrative. Brown never had to defend herself in court, having accepted a plea deal for a charge of drug possession (1994: 366). She nonetheless also attacks the traditional understanding of justice in her autobiography:

We had no respect for the laws of the United States, a cloak of forked-tongue legal idiom that disguised the most iniquitous acts. [...]

Blacks and liberals had spent nearly a century simply trying to overturn the racist 'separate-but-equal' doctrine expressed in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Had no one noticed that no one had been able to truly enforce the meager dictates of *Brown v. Board of Education*? [...] We Black Panthers disregarded the law. We were, indeed, as newspaper headlines frequently suggested, outlaws. (1994: 329)

The key difference, however, in Brown's narrative, lies in the context of this observation. Indeed, her proud acknowledgment of the status of 'outlaw' does not stem from what can be seen in the other narratives as a righteous stand against a system hell-bent on destroying activists who struggle to bring about a better and more just world. Instead, it relates to a fire that engulfed a local theater in Oakland—a fire very likely started by the Panthers themselves to retaliate against the owner, who reneged on a contract with them. The 'outlaw,' here, definitely lacks the panache and moral high ground evinced by the other activists as they take on the justice system on its own ground. This therefore seems to take us back full circle to a re-inscription of the criminal stamp on the Panthers rather than a fundamental questioning of what constitutes crime and justice. When Brown states that 'in Oakland, a higher law was emerging, outside the established order' (1994: 329), she stresses more than anything the power the Party managed to wield locally at that time. In that power, however, the reader does not feel elevated by a sense of ethical or political victory; rather, our thoughts are turned to the kind of seedy underworld that the Party has often also been associated with.

Conclusion

As evident from this comparative discussion of the autobiographies of Huey P. Newton, Angela Davis, Assata Shakur and Elaine Brown, not all of them make use of the same narrative tropes and strategies, nor do they produce the same effects in the reader. Brown's text in particular diverges more significantly from the other three, not least because the inspiration she draws from the conventions of crime fiction comes, to borrow her own words, from the 'third rate' kind. As a result, she writes about her political engagement with the Party from a certain ironical distance and her text does not really perform a cultural reversal of the kind discussed in the introduction in any sustained way. The reason for this is that her narrative belongs to a very different political moment. Brown's autobiography does not respond to a political urgency to defend and build the Party and the movement; instead, it functions more as a narrative of redemption, one that necessitates moving away from a Party that had become toxic. It is striking in this context that while all the other activists plot a journey in which they have to free themselves from the clutches of the U.S. judicial system, Brown's narrative arc bends towards her escape from the Party itself. In this context, the fact that her narrative does not reverse the traditionally conservative effects of crime fiction is not the result of a naïve use of generic conventions which she is unable to harness to her own ends. On the contrary, the choices she makes are conscious and aimed to a certain extent towards de-romanticizing the Party (Perkins 2000: 13-14) at the same time as she also shows the need there was for it and her commitment to it.

When it comes to the other three autobiographies, one could argue that they in fact subvert the kind of 'cautionary tales in which the perpetrator of a criminal deed is captured, tried, and punished' which Scaggs associates with the origins of crime fiction (2005: 14). Indeed, the vilification of the activists, visible, for example, in Shakur's and Davis's faces adorning FBI Most Wanted posters, aimed at making their trial and conviction into highly effective public lessons of what will happen to people who militantly oppose the system. Their eventual legal victories (or escape for Shakur) and the narrating of them for new generations of readers render these lessons moot. In this respect, however, one might feel a sense of irony that in winning their cases, the activist autobiographers inadvertently give credit to the legal system in that it does deliver what they see as justice in the end. Newton's own

Perry Mason won the day again. Nonetheless, despite possible pitfalls, the autobiographers manage to use crime fiction tropes for subverting the conservative ideology that characterizes the discourse on law and order and to interrogate taken for granted assumptions about what constitutes a crime. In doing so, they also follow a long African American tradition of using the autobiographical mode not primarily as a demonstration of their individual transformation or redemption nor as a means of justification for their actions but ‘as politically meaningful testimony to systemic crimes against an entire people’ (Mendelsohn 2010: para. 15). Counteracting these crimes still requires a sustained struggle for radical social change.

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