Other Ways of Being: Development, Difference, and Dissent in Assata Shakur and Manoranjan Byapari's Autobiographies

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Abstract

This thesis examines the way that Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987) and Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life* (2013; trans. 2019) challenge the nation-state's co-option and containment of subject formation. These autobiographies offer a counterpoint to the ideal of the abstract citizen-subject — representing instead marginal subjects who eschew the state's limited promise of liberal freedoms to minority communities and exceed permissible forms of agency. I argue that these narratives consciously challenge the *affirmative bildungsroman* — which tells the story of a problematic individual's incorporation into their social order — by representing a coming-of-age which centers on the process whereby the racialized and casteized subject recognizes their own difference. Furthermore, they depict the process of revolutionary self-fashioning — foregrounding the spaces in which Assata and Manoranjan consolidate their political commitments. These works also seek to make the reader aware of the political stakes of engaging with the life narratives of these revolutionaries. Therefore, at the level of form, they foreclose an aesthetics of witnessing and instead call on the reader to confront their own political commitments. Shakur and Byapari's autobiographies are utopian texts not only in the way that they offer an alternative vision of the world but also in the way that they offer another way of being in the world.

Résumé

Cette thèse examine la manière dont Assata Shakur: An Autobiography (1987) et Interrogating My Chandal Life de Manoranjan Byapari (2013; trans. 2019) remettent en question la cooptation et le confinement de la formation du sujet par l'État-nation. Ces autobiographies offrent un contrepoint à l'idéal du sujet-citoyen abstrait - représentant plutôt des sujets marginaux qui rejettent la promesse limitée de libertés libérales faite par l'État aux communautés minoritaires et dépassent les formes autorisées d'agentivité. Je soutiens que ces récits défient consciemment le bildungsroman affirmatif - qui raconte l'histoire de l'incorporation d'un individu problématique dans son ordre social - en représentant un passage à l'âge adulte qui se concentre sur le processus par lequel le sujet racialisé et casté reconnaît sa propre différence. En outre, ils décrivent le processus d'auto-façonnage révolutionnaire - mettant de l'avant les espaces dans lesquels Assata et Manoranjan consolident leurs engagements politiques. Ces ouvrages cherchent également à sensibiliser le lecteur aux enjeux politiques qui s'élèvent lorsqu'on s'engage avec les récits de vie de ces révolutionnaires. Dès lors, au niveau de la forme, ils écartent une esthétique du témoignage et invitent plutôt le lecteur à se confronter à ses propres engagements politiques. Les autobiographies de Shakur et Byapari sont des textes utopiques non seulement par la vision alternative du monde qu'ils proposent, mais aussi parce qu'ils offrent une autre manière d'être dans le monde.

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Thank you to my mum for serving as a model of resilience and grace. I feel grateful for all the parts of you that I see in myself as I get older.

I do not take for granted that I have written my thesis on the life narratives of revolutionaries who are still alive today. As arduous as these last two years have felt at times, I am incredibly privileged to be in a position to think about and write on the political work of Assata Shakur and Manoranjan Byapari. Their texts have changed me and I will continue to think about them far beyond the completion of this project.

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[The abject is] opposed to I ... [It is] radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses .... [It is] what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.[1]

Let us consider this infamous passage from the United States Declaration of Independence:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, *that all men are created equal*, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness —That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness [emphasis mine].[2]

This document which affirms the "deep horizontal comradeship"[3] between men and the ideal of an individual's emergence into a citizen subject is authored by Thomas Jefferson who, in his lifetime, owned more than 600 slaves. Since its pronouncement in 1776, the phrase "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" became an integral part of the American nationalist repertoire, even as chattel slavery remained a legal institution for almost a hundred years after the country was founded. Nearly two centuries later and on the other side of the world, Jawaharlal Nehru delivered the English-language "Tryst with Destiny" speech, on the eve of India's Independence from British colonial rule, to the Indian Constituent Assembly. The speech

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[1] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.
[2] Thomas Jefferson, et al, July 4, Copy of Declaration of Independence. -07-04, 1776. Manuscript/Mixed Material. https://www.loc.gov/item/mtjbib000159/.
[3] Benedict Anderson writes that "[The] nation is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is conceived [and presented by the state] as a deep horizontal comradeship." In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2016 [1983]), 7.

declares the triumph of Indian independence — positioning the event as a radical break from the past and anticipating freedoms to come:

> A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new - when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance…Before the birth of freedom we have endured all the pains of labor, and our hearts are heavy with the memory of this sorrow. Some of those pains continue even now. Nevertheless, the past is over, and it is the future that beckons to us now…To the people of India, whose representatives we are, we make appeal to join us with faith and confidence in this great adventure. *This is no time for petty and destructive criticism, no time for ill will or blaming others*. *We have to build the noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell* [emphasis mine].[4]

Even as caste hierarchy remained a pervasive reality in the subcontinent, there is a move here to pathologize even the expression of discontent after independence.[5] We can see that both Jefferson and Nehru construct an "unmarked" citizen-subject upon whom liberal freedoms are bestowed and who must in turn conform to the supposed needs of a social order governed by the

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[4] Jawaharlal Nehru, "Tryst with Destiny" (speech, New Delhi, August 14, 1947), American Rhetoric, https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jawaharlalnehrutrystwithdestiny.htm.

[5] The caste system in South Asia is a kind of social stratification characterized by endonomy, hereditary transmission of occupation, and hierarchical social customs based on notions of purity and pollution. Dalit — who were and sometimes still are called 'untouchables' — refers to those who belong to the lowest and most subjugated rung of the caste system. Untouchability was legally abolished when independent India adopted its constitution in 1949. It was also imagined in liberal circles that urbanization as well as affirmative action programs in the postcolonial period would lead to the declining significance of caste. Nonetheless, caste continues to mediate access to resources and economic opportunities as well as vulnerability to communal and state violence. In his introduction to Omprakash Valmiki' autobiography, Arun Prabha Mukherjee writes: "As an identity-marker, *Dalit* came into prominence in 1972, when a group of young Marathi writer-activists founded an organization called the Dalit Panthers ... Dalit is a political identity, as opposed to a caste name. It expresses Dalits' knowledge of themselves as oppressed people and signifies their resolve to demand liberation through a revolutionary transformation of the system that oppresses them." See, *Joothan: An Untouchable's Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), xix.

state.[6] These texts valorize the individual's "[acceptance] of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, [legitimating the institutions] of emergent rights based nation-states."[7] Essentially, these grand proclamations forward a narrative in which the individual (their interests, desires, aspirations) is progressively merged with the state.[8]

What then becomes of subjects who are marked by difference — those who are not only denied liberal freedoms but whose interests are not fully served by freedom defined solely in terms of "universal suffrage, private property, rule of contract law, and the goal of economic [profit]?"[9] Difference here refers not to any sort of natural (biological) variation between people but rather the construction of a "[deviant] or discrepant "minority."[10] The groups and societies positioned as "different" by the modern state are conceived of as "backwards, or disadvantaged, or simply adrift from the 'mainstream' of human history and progress."[11][12] These subjects are treated as "bare life"; they are stripped of all political attributes and engaged with merely as

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[6] Joseph R. Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 94.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Judith Whitehead, Himani Bannerji, and Shahrzad Mojab, "Introduction," in *Of Property and Propriety: The Role of Gender and Class in Imperialism and Nationalism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 20.
[10] Gyanendera Pandey, "Politics of Difference: Reflections on Dalit and African American Struggles," *Economic and Political Weekly* 45, no. 19 (2010): 62.
[11] Pandey, "Politics of Difference," 63.
[12] In "Politics of Difference," Panday references his introduction to *Subaltern Studies and their Histories* (2010) where he comments on the way that differences of caste, race, gender, and sexuality "has long been a way of organizing - and naturalizing - subalternity." Thus, he states, "Men are not 'different'; it is women who are. Foreign colonizers are not different; the colonized are. Caste hindus are not different in India; it is Muslims, and 'tribals,' and dalits who are. White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (we should add: heterosexual) males are not 'different' in the US; at one time, or another, everyone else is. White Australians are not 'different'; Vietnamese boat people, and Fijian migrants to Australia, and, astonishingly, Australian Aboriginals are (63)."

bodies to be governed.[13]

This thesis is concerned with the constitution of citizenship and the politics of difference in the context of transformations that India and the United States underwent in the middle of the 20th century. In what follows I engage with the ways that Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987) and Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life* (2013; trans. 2019) narrate the formation of resistant subjects. These political autobiographies, written by revolutionaries, represent and challenge the state's extension of limited rights to Black Americans and Dalits. To this effect, these texts resuscitate the image of stigmatized social movements and those within them — illuminating the conditions of and process through which political radicalization takes place. Essentially, this thesis constellates Shakur and Byapari's autobiographies to show how they challenge the nation-state's containment of subject formation. I argue that these autobiographies foreground the process through which their protagonists come to recognize that they are marked by difference and, consequently, to exceed permissible forms of agency. The works throw into crisis the normative coming-of-age narrative, represent self-fashioning within peripheral sites of (re)education, and sensitize the audience to their own political commitments. These are utopian texts not only in the sense that they offer an alternative vision of the world but, more importantly, since they present *another way of being* in the world.

Shakur and Byapari represent their politicization from the 1950s to the 1970s – a period marked by renewed promises of inclusion to racialized and casteized subjects in both nation-states. *Interrogating My Chandal Life* opens with the mass exodus of people to West Bengal in the wake of the Partition, during which many of the pauperized, Dalit migrants were

[13] The term "bare life" comes from Giorgio Agamben's theorization in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life,* trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998 [1995]).

settled in refugee camps or rehabilitation projects. While these settlements were part of the state's welfare function and purportedly designed to transform refugees into citizen-subjects, they have often been characterized as "places of banishment" on account of the failure of much of the essential infrastructure to materialize and the institutional neglect to which the migrants were exposed.[14] Byapari's story also shows that, despite the optimism projected onto urbanization's capacity to undermine the significance of caste, Dalit migrants who were compelled to move to cities in search of work continued to experience economic precarity and caste-based violence. Meanwhile, *Assata: An Autobiography* takes place in post-WWII America where the war had politicized the historical violence of white supremacy — foregrounding the links between European fascism, racial segregation, and colonial rule — while the era of decolonization that emerged in its wake positioned racial oppression as a global issue. In light of these upheavals, explicit white supremacy became increasingly residual within official U.S. racial discourse and governance in the postwar era (though it did not entirely vanish), and was succeeded by state sanctioned liberal anti-racisms.[15] This discourse on race "[takes] for granted the benevolence of U.S. global ascendancy and [integrates] the knowledge architecture of state-capital formations (e.g. property rights, free markets, financial deregulation) into what racial equality may signify."[16] A flashpoint in this new order was the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which stressed "desegregation, symbolic equality, and [racial tolerance]."[17] However, even during the time of its emergence, this discourse and legislation proved inadequate

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[14] Debjani Sengupta, "From Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi: Refugee Rehabilitation in Bangla Partition Fictions," in *The Partition of Bengal: Fragile Borders and New Identities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 164.
[15] Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 1.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Melamed, *Represent and Destroy,* 26.

for addressing expanding economic and social inequality, particularly in urban areas that were impoverished and over-policed on account of white flight.[18]

At the same time, these works depict the militant leftist resistance against state power (as well as capitalist and non-capitalist regimes of accumulation) which define the 1960s and 1970s. In *Interrogating My Chandal Life,* Manoranjan encounters various communist parties, ranging from those within the parliamentary left to radical Maoist factions who call for violent resistance. In particular, the autobiography offers a redemptive account of his involvement with the deeply stigmatized Naxalite movement.[19] Meanwhile, *Assata: An Autobiography* charts her time in the Black Power movement that emerged as a reaction to the continued oppression of African Americans, despite the protracted, well-organized, and nonviolent forms of protest associated with the Civil Rights struggle. Assata starts as a member of the Black Panther Party and eventually establishes herself as a leader within the Black Liberation Army, an underground revolutionary organization focused on community self-defence and armed resistance against the state. Shakur and Byapari's autobiographies are committed texts which uncover the demands of grassroots social movements for "non-exploitative economic orders, an internationalism aligned with the Third World, and new powers for new collectivities."[20] Essentially, these works reckon with a time in which the promise of incorporation was formally extended to Black Americans and Dalits, even as race and caste continued to structure social relations. They articulate the resistant subjectivities that emerge in response to and against the state's efforts to appropriate race and caste matters.

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[18] Ibid.
[19] The Naxalite movement originated out of a peasant revolt which took place in Naxalbari, West Bengal in 1967. The Naxalites ascribe to Maoism and encourage violent revolt as well as the elimination of so-called class enemies like businessmen, landlords, and the police.
[20] Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 26.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter considers the way in which these works refuse the normative coming-of-age narrative or the affirmative bildungsroman, which serves as an allegory of the individual's progressive emergence as a bourgeois citizen-subject. Franco Moretti argues that the affirmative bildungsroman is a cultural technology of the modern nation-state; it encourages a merging of the individual with the state by depicting the "the interiorization of [social] contradictions."[21] Similarly, Slaughter suggests that these plots generally involve the taming of the problematic individual.[22] In these formulations, the bildungsroman functions to obscure the exclusions of liberal democratic citizenship. I argue that these autobiographies constitute a fundamentally different kind of bildungsroman. *Assata: An Autobiography* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* reject the narrative of the marginal individual's progressive incorporation into their social order. Instead, they represent the process whereby a racialized and casteized subject comes to recognize how the nation-state marks them with difference, registers them as bare life. I begin by demonstrating how the texts signal these subjects' fraught optimism about the state's promise of inclusion through scenes in which Assata and Manoranjan attempt to adopt (or are made to adopt) the appearances and behaviours of hegemonic social classes during their youth. That these attempts typically end in failure, rejection, or alienation speaks to the inability of these subjects to achieve meaningful incorporation on the terms of the nation-state. Moreover, I discuss how Assata and Manoranjan's recognition of their difference derives from experiences of punishment within state sanctioned sites of education or rehabilitation. Significantly, however, Assata and Manoranjan do not respond to this recognition with complacency but, instead, they adopt various postures of refusal which coalesce into a set of political commitments as they reach maturity. Finally, I engage with

[21] Franco Morretti, "The Bildungsroman as a Symbolic Form," in *The Way of the World: the Bildungsroman in European Culture* (New York: Verso, 2000 [1987]), 10.
[22] Slaughter, pg 94.

the speakers' reflections on their childhoods — particularly, the way they describe it as something *withheld* from them. I suggest that these moments explicitly denaturalize the normative coming-of-age narrative, gesturing to the kind of ideological work that it performs. Essentially, in this first chapter, I insist Shakur and Byapari valorize a kind of coming-of-age in which one does not interiorize, but instead, confronts social contradictions that the nation-state conceals behind the veneer of the abstract citizen-subject.

The second chapter is concerned with these works' representation of the process of revolutionary self-fashioning, which serves as a counter to the ideal of one's emergence as a citizen-subject. It examines the peripheral spaces in which Assata and Manoranjan consolidate their political commitments. The autobiographies resist the ideologically loaded characterization of the militant resistance of the 1960s and 1970s as simply fueled by dogma or naiveté. Instead, they foreground the structural conditions which bring individuals into such collective movements for social-political transformation, as well as these individuals' critical ambivalence towards them. These works demonstrate that, despite their many constitutive tensions, these movements offer alternative visions of liberation which would otherwise be undermined by the nation-state. Through their participation in these movements, Assata and Manoranjan are able to consciously disinvest from fantasies of inclusion and imagine new political possibilities. *Assata: An Autobiography* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* also offer significant accounts of their protagonists' time as political prisoners. This chapter examines how these texts represent the prison as a space of transformation. That is to say, they foreground the possibilities that arise as performances of national identity, solidarity, and belonging, as well as codes of cultural normativity, wither away within the confines of the prison. While their incarceration is undoubtedly traumatic, the autobiographies gesture to how Assata and Manoranjan's time as

political prisoners is marked by the continuation of their literary-intellectual self-fashioning and the formation of generative bonds with others. In this chapter, I show how Assata and Manoranjan pull themselves out of a condition of bare life by seizing political agency.

In the final chapter, I shift my focus to a consideration of subject formation in the context of global commodity culture: how the reader is asked to relate to the resistant subjectivities plotted within these works. Theorists like Lauren Berlant, Joseph Slaughter, and Debjani Ganguly have written about how testimonial practices co-opted by a liberal human rights framework conflate the witnessing of pain with meaningful recognition and redress. With the inclusion of historically marginalized social classes within the literary circuit, these narratives are often subsumed by a "discourse of pity."[23] This discourse of pity relies on the image of bare life — it figures dispossessed subjects as bodies in pain, the "object of aid and protection."[24] How can a marginal subject, whose pain is on display, be represented as possessing meaningful epistemic and political agency? In this chapter, I show that Shakur and Byapari employ various formal innovations in order to reject pity and instead draw the reader into a relationship of complicity. The speakers' explicit directions to the reader, the ways that they vacillate from the individual to the collective voice, and performances of knowledge at critical points in the narratives produce strategic levels of intimacy and distance. Thus, the reader is not only

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[23] Alok Mukerjee, "Translator's Introduction," in *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature: History, Constroversies, and Considerations,* author. Sharankumar Limbale (Orient Black Swan, 2018 [1996]), vii.

[24] This phrase is from Agamben's discussion of the images of refugees circulated by humanitarian organizations: "In the final analysis, however, humanitarian organizations — which today are more and more supported by international commissions — can only grasp human life in the figure of bare or sacred life, and therefore, despite themselves, maintain a secret solidarity with the very powers they ought to fight. It takes only a glance at the recent publicity campaigns to gather funds for refugees from Rwanda to realize that here human life is exclusively considered (and there are certainly good reasons for this) as sacred life — which is to say, as life that can be killed but not sacrificed — and that only as such is it made into the object of aid and protection." In *Homo Sacer*, 63.

immersed in the lifeworlds of subaltern subjects; they are called upon to interrogate and augment their own political commitments.

There has been a long and imbricated history of theorization and mobilization around the intersection of race and caste, across a range of political tendencies.[25] The transnational comparisons drawn between the oppression of lower castes in South Asia and Black people in the United States can be found as far back as 1873 when Jyotirao Phule, an early anti-caste activist from Maharashtra, began his foundational text *Gulamgiri (Slavery)* with a dedication to American abolitionists in the hopes that "[his] countrymen may take [the latter's] noble example as their guide in the emancipation of their Sudra Brethren from the trammels of Brahmin thralldom."[26] Phule's work not only compares the dynamics of the caste system in South Asia to the trans-atlantic slave trade, but seeks to position both "in relation to the control of state power and the materiality of labour practices."[27] B.R. Ambedkar, one of the most prominent Dalit leaders and theorists of caste in the 20th century as well as independent India's first Minister of Law and Justice, also commented on the forms of disenfranchisement experienced by Black Americans and Dalit communities within modern civil and political society. In particular, Ambedkar critiqued the concept of the universal rights of law: "As experience proves, rights are protected not by law but by the social and moral conscience of society. What is the use of the

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[25] For further examples or accounts of this intellectual history see: "Dalit Literature and African American Literature," in *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature,* 82-102.; Manan Desai, "Caste in Black and White: Dalit Identity and the Translation of African American Literature," *Comparative Literature* 67, no.1 (2015): 94-113.; Auritro Majumder, "Caste, Race, and Intellectual History," in *Cross Borders: Essays on Literature, Culture, and Society in Honour of Amritjit Singh*, ed. Tasneem Shahnaaz and Tapan Basu (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson United Press, 2017), 135-146.; Vijay Prashad, "Afro-Dalits of the Earth, Unite!," *African Studies Review* 43, no.1 (2000): 189-201.; Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (New Dehli: Sage Publications, 2014).
[26] Desai, "Caste in Black and White," 100.
[27] Majumder, "Caste, Race, and Intellectual History," 137.

fundamental rights to the Negroes in America, to the Jews in Germany and to the Untouchables in India?"[28] These concerns lead Ambedkar to contact W.E.B Du Bois to inquire about the National Negro Congress petition to the United Nations in 1946.[29] Du Bois affirmed Ambedkar's claims about the relationship of race to caste and declared that he had "every sympathy with the Untouchables of India."[30] Du Bois himself found the category of caste to be useful for explicating race relations in his famous text *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and his three-century survey "Evolution of the Race Problem" (1900).[31] Auritro Majumder argues that "DuBois' use of the term 'caste' to talk about race is a dialectical move": it undermines eugenicist theories which position race as biologically determined as well as liberal notions which restrict race to the realm of individual behaviour rather than viewing it as a social structure through which power is distributed.[32] And finally, one of the most radical instances of this transnational political linkage is the formation of the the Dalit Panthers in 1973. The Dalit Panthers were not only named in honour of the Black Panthers, they also adopted the latter's anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist analysis as well as their ethic of community self-defence.[33] In their Manifesto, the Dalit Panthers declared:

> Even in America, a handful of reactionary whites are exploiting blacks. To meet the force of reaction and remove this exploitation, the Black Panther movement grew. From the Black Panthers, Black Power emerged. The fire of the struggles has thrown out sparks into the country. We claim a close relationship with this struggle. We have before our eyes the examples of Vietnam, Cambodia, Africa and the like.[34]

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[28] Desai, "Caste in Black and White," 101.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Isabel Wilkerson, "American's Untouchables: The Silent Power of the Caste System," *Guardian*, July 28, 2020.
[31] Majumder, "Caste, Race, and Intellectual History," 138.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Prashad, "Afro-Dalits of the World, Unite!," 197
[34] Ibid.

This declaration of political comradeship is in keeping with the internationalism of the original Black Panthers who sought to inspire and were inspired by global struggles for decolonization and socialism in the Third World. Though they are not ideologically homogeneous, these analyses of race, caste, and difference developed in the 19th and 20th century go beyond merely identifying superficial similarities in the experiences of Dalits and Black Americans. They foreground the ways in which Black and Dalit subjects critically undermine the "abstract citizen subject of the new national and democratic orders".[35] That is to say, the way these subjects are perpetually marked by difference and yet this difference must be, to borrow Julia Kristeva's phrasing, "permanently thrust aside" in the liberal democratic nation-state's configuration of the citizen-subject.[36]

[35] Pandey, "Politics of Difference," 64.
[36] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 2.

Chapter 1: Troubling the Bildungsroman

In *Assata: An Autobiography* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, the normative coming-of-age narrative unravels when faced with racialized and casteized difference. Shakur's text represents Assata's development from a precocious child living in the South, to a rebellious teenager in New York City, to a self-possessed young woman who rises to prominence within the Black Power movement. Meanwhile, Byapari begins with Manoranjan as a young child living in a decrepit refugee settlement in West Bengal in the wake of Partition and tracks his growing political militancy as he travels through different cities in search of opportunities. For each of these protagonists, youth — the transition from childhood to maturity — is marked by the progressive recognition of their difference as well as the impossibility (and undesirability) of the nation-state's promise of incorporation.

In this chapter, I am interested in how Shakur and Byapari's works, while representing the transition from childhood to maturity, refuse the celebratory image of the rights and duty bearing citizen-subject. Instead, it is the protagonists' disillusionment with the prospect of incorporation which constitutes the formative moments of their development. I begin by examining Assata and Manoranjan's early attempts to mimic normative appearances, behaviours, and practices. These scenes gesture towards a desire for incorporation while, at the same time, signalling the hazards of such desires. Then, I engage with these narratives' representation of scenes of punishment, examining the role of punishment in reproducing spatial-social difference. In these moments, I argue, the protagonists come to recognize their status as bare life — the way in which the nation-state conceives of them as bodies to be surveilled and disciplined. I conclude this chapter by examining the *speakers'* interventions on their childhood — most notably, their

claims that their childhood was something withheld, deferred, or otherwise troubled. I consider these as a commentary on the ideological determinations of the normative coming-of-age story.

The bildungsroman, sometimes referred to as the "novel of emergence," provides an image of "[an individual] in the process of becoming."[37] The affirmative bildungsroman of the 18th and 19th century takes the reader through the protagonist's "often arduous and agonising journey, both physical and psychological, as he confronts many obstacles, challenges the dominant norms of the social order he was born into, and eventually learns to adapt his desires and aspirations to them."[38] This is essentially a narrative of the protagonist's progressive incorporation into their social order, their merging with the state. Furthermore, as Joseph Slaughter argues, the affirmative bildungsroman represents the taming of a "problematic individual"; it depicts a social outsider's moral submission to a community which is explicitly or implicitly represented by the state.[39] Critically, personal development in these narratives often involve the assumption of a sentimental mode of education, wherein reading and writing become a sign of civility as well as a means of earning a place in the public sphere.[40] The affirmative bildungsroman balances modernity's contradictory demands of "social conformity and individual

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[37] Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Bildungsroman," in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 19.

[38] Debjani Ganguly, "Pain, Personhood, and the Collective: Dalit Life Narratives," *Asian Studies Review* 33, no. 4 (2009): 436.

[39] Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.,* 94.

[40] Slaughter elaborates on this sentimental mode of reading (and writing) and the way that it is undergirded by Enlightenment humanist thought as well as how it works to naturalize social hierarchy in the context of modern citizenship: "In a social order constituted even partially on reading acts, the incorporated readers' power to withhold or grant a "reading" (or hearing) may be tantamount to the power to retract or extend the community's franchise — to deauthorize or authorize claims for inclusion ... [There exists] a social and intellectual divide between the enfranchised benefactor-reader and the marginal subject in need of reading..." in *Human Rights Inc,* 305-306.

inclination within the Westphalian parametrics of emergent nation-states."[41] Franco Moretti also suggests that the affirmative bildungsroman also works to transform youth into a figure of capitalist modernity's inherent "dynamism and instability."[42] Youth comes to signify the promise of limitless progress as well as deeper forms of interiority.[43] At the same time, this kind of youth may also have significance with the inevitability of adulthood. Therefore, contradictions like "dynamism and limits, restlessness and the 'sense of ending'" are built into the very structure of the bildungsroman.[44] Not only has the bildungsroman historically deployed the figure of youth to valorize expansive, adventurist growth, the form also instructs readers to repress the contradictions in the world around them. In other words, the affirmative bildungsroman positions the "citizen-subject" as the ideal form of personhood — and something to which all individuals can and should aspire. By extension, it plots a trajectory of personal development which is "suited to a liberal public sphere, in which differences are erased through the universal equivalence of citizens."[45] The ideological objective of the affirmative bildungsroman is to "domesticate the impulse of the revolutionary plot of [collective] rebellion into the less spectacular, reformatory plot of human personal development [and incorporation]."[46]

I insist that both *Assata: An Autobiography* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* constitute a *dissensual bildungsroman*. While these works narrativize the coming-of-age of their

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[41] Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.*, 314-315. Slaughter also suggests that, in an epoch marked by globalization, this simultaneous compulsion towards social conformity and individual inclination is incorporated into international human rights discourse. His work explores how the bildungsroman has become the "literary space in which the hegemonic norms of international human rights are being both naturalized and contested" (315).

[42] Morretti, 5.

[43] Morretti, "The Bildungsroman as a Symbolic Form," 4-5. Morretti is not discussing any innate characteristics of youth. Instead, he is speaking to the way in which modern youth becomes connected principally to "mobility and interiority." The bildungsroman relies on this "symbolic" construction of youth.

[44] Morretti, "The Bildungsroman as a Symbolic Form," 6.

[45] Ganguly, "Pain, Personhood, and the Collective,"436.

[46] Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.*, 91.

protagonists, they are preoccupied with the way that "ideals of socialization, incorporation, and normalization are frustrated by a malformed social order."[47] The dissensual bildungsroman challenges the affirmative bildungsroman's allegory of an individual's unproblematic development into a rights and duty-bearing citizen (or its likeness).[48] It represents incorporation into the social order as impossible and, often, undesirable. It is concerned instead with the exclusions which underlie the imaginary of the public sphere as well as marginal subjects' experiences of alienation from state-sanctioned narratives of subject formation. While the affirmative bildungsroman described by Moretti and Slaughter is concerned with representing the "universal equivalence of citizens," the dissensual bildungsroman works to expose the way certain subjects bear the mark of difference. The notion of difference, Gyanendra Pandey argues, must be severed from "the rather impoverished sense of diversity, of segments or minorities [unproblematically] revolving around a centre (usually the nation-state), a move that assumes that the structure of society, the social organization and political possibilities is always given from the start."[49] Instead, difference must be understood as something that is produced, rather than a demographic or sociological condition, often for the purpose of sanctioning exclusion. *Assata: An Autobiography* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* are concerned with this production of difference and the implications of "minority" existence. These works not only represent the denial of rights to Black and Dalit people, but they also foreground the limitations

[47] Ganguly, "Pain, Personhood, and the Collective,"436.
[48] For extended studies of dissensual bildungsroman, particular in the postcolonial tradition, see: Jed Etsy's examination of how the trope of suspended or stunted adolescence in modernist era novels gestures to a crisis of faith in bourgeois values and discourses of development pertaining to self, nation, and empire, in *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).; Simon Hay's work on how the postcolonial bildungsroman reconciles the imperatives of the *bildung* (education, development, progress) and those of postcolonial emancipation, in "Nervous Conditions, Lukacs, and the Postcolonial Bildungsroman," *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* 46, no. 3 (2003): 317-344.
[49] Panday, "Politics of Difference," 62.

of liberal responses to social hierarchy.[50] In these coming-of-age narratives, Assata and Manoranjan "confront the insularities and cruelties of the social order by wresting, on [their] own terms, the claims of citizenship made by the liberal democratic [nation-state]."[51]

First of all, these autobiographies are marked by efforts to conform to cultural normativity, which ultimately prove to be difficult, futile, and painful. Homi Babha argues that imitation often produces a partial subject — "almost the same, but not quite."[52] That is to say, the imitator is unwilling or unable to fully embody the mannerisms, behaviours, and performances in question. In its very nature, mimicry does not reflect the original material but instead constitutes its *corruption* and, in so doing, throws it into crisis.[53] It is for this reason, Babha argues, that mimicry is often regarded as "at once resemblance and menace."[54] Within these autobiographies, scenes of mimicry — and characters' inability to perform cultural normativity — register the trappings of marginal subjects' optimism about the prospect of incorporation.

Interrogating My Chandal Life starts chronologically with an account of Manoranjan's birth:

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[50] In the introduction, I discuss the way that liberal freedoms are restricted to "universal suffrage, private property, rule of contract law, and the goal of economic [profit]." Moreover, the ideal of the liberal public sphere assumes that differences between individuals can be equalized through the promotion of tolerance, free speech, and debate. While access to liberal freedoms may certainly constitute a welcome change to many marginalized subjects, this conception of freedom does not situate "uneven development" in regimes of accumulation and corresponding configurations of political power.

[51] Ganguly, "Pain, Personhood, and the Collective," 437.

[52] Homi Bhabha, "The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 153-154.

[53] In "The Line and Light," Jacques Lacan distinguishes mimicry from adaptation. Referencing Roger Caillois, he claims that mimetic activity is deployed as part of travesty, camouflage, and/or intimidation. See, "The Line and Light," in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheriden (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978 [1973]), 99.

[54] Bhabha, "The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," 154.

> The elders of our land say that if you give a child a drop of honey on his entry into the world, his life will be sweetened. So when my father arrived, [my mother] asked him to get a little bit of honey for me. This made my father break down in tears. There had been no honey at his birth either. And he knew well the agony, the misery, the humiliation of a life bereft of sweetness. But on that stormy night, honey was an unaffordable luxury. So I got no taste of honey at my birth. My life has not been sweet.[55]

This passage positions the dropping of honey into a new born's mouth not as a superstition, but as a *cultural practice* — something that is articulated, observed, and disseminated by people on the land that the family inhabits. Culture is a system of meaning making that is, notably, shared with others.[56] Manoranjan's mother's desire to observe this practice — a practice which only corresponds to the realities of normative middle class subjects — signifies her desire for belonging. She aspires to transcend the strictures of a caste system, which places her and her family within the periphery of the social order. The promise of inclusion (incorporation of those historically excluded) was extended to lower caste communities by dominant anticolonial nationalisms with their aims of "sovereignty, democracy, justice, progress, and economic redistribution, *for all*."[57] Majumder suggests that dominant Indian nationalisms, signified by the proper names "Nehru" and "Gandhi" — while offering different visions of postcolonial reconstruction — invoked tropes of progressive inclusion while also prompting the "indigenization of capital and capitalist social-relations"[58] A tension inevitably arose between the postcolonial state's support for regimes of accumulation and social-cultural practices which

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[55] Byapari, *Interrogating my Chandal Life,* 4.
[56] Raymond William writes that the term "culture" can be used in two senses: "to mean a whole way of life — the *common* meanings; to mean the arts and learning — the special processes of discovery and creative efforts [emphasis mine]." See, "Culture is Ordinary," in *Raymond Williams on Culture and Society,* ed. Jim McGuin (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2014 [1958]), 3.
[57] Majumder, "Caste, Race, and Intellectual History," 139.
[58] Ibid.

perpetuate the caste system and its promise of inclusion to Dalit (and other minority) communities. In this scene, Manoranjan's mother betrays her belief in the postcolonial nation-state's capacity to transform "outcasts" into citizen-subjects.

However, the family's inability to gather the materials to perform this simple ritual gestures to how the promise of inclusion was to remain unfulfilled. Manoranjan's birth takes place in the wake of Independence and Partition when, as the speaker notes, "the country had been partitioned about four to five years back and people were fleeing to India in hordes."[59] In only a few years after his birth, Manoranjan's family would also cross the border into India in order to escape the threat of communal violence and famine, as well as to search for economic opportunities. The Bengal border remained relatively open until 1952 when migration became more controlled by the state and there emerged more formal distinctions between refugees, aliens, and citizens.[60] At this time, the nation-state once again took a contradictory stance: on one hand, it positioned Dalit refugees as needing rehabilitation in order to be naturalized into citizen-subjects, while also accusing them of claiming illegitimate victimhood and draining national resources.[61] As Manoranjan's father loses composure in response to his mother's suggestion, the narration devolves to a litany of grievances about the deprivation that preceded Manoranjan's life and that awaits him. Thus, this scene ultimately speaks to the tenacity of caste despite the state's promises of inclusion, undermining any sentimental vision of a dramatic break from the past and freedoms to come.[62]

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[59] Byapari, *Interrogating my Chandal Life,* 2.
[60] Haimanti Roy, "Introduction," in *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947-65* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
[61] Ibid.
[62] Refer to Jawaharlal Nehru's "Tryst with Destiny" speech discussed in the introduction.

Similarly, Assata is encouraged by the adults in her life to replicate the supposed speech and sensibilities of white Americans when she goes to elementary school in New York City:

> I was supposed to be a child version of a goodwill ambassador, out to prove that Black people were not stupid or dirty or smelly or uncultured. I carried out this mission as best i could to show that i was as good as they were. White people said classical music was the highest form of music; white people said that ballet was the highest form of dance; and i accepted those things as true. After all, wasn't i as cultured as they were? And everything they wanted, i wanted [...].[63]

Assata is asked to perform bourgeois whiteness (to appreciate classical music, ballet, and so forth) in order to redeem the image of Black Americans.[64] The mimetic impulse is shown to shape even her desires — "what they wanted, i wanted." This scene is emblematic of the national project of social engineering taking place within the United States in the wake of WWII. During this period, the United States responded to pressures like the global struggle for decolonization, as well as the emerging notion that racial violence is embedded in Western-style political democracy and capitalism, by "[portraying] race as a contradiction to [capitalist] modernity rather than one of its structuring conditions."[65] The nation project of social engineering was a principal strategy for incorporating Black Americans into the American mainstream during the early 1940s to the 1960s.[66] It focused on "[eradicating] intolerance" amongst white Americans as well as to presenting "respectable" images of Black Americans

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[63] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 37.
[64] It is important to note that Shakur's identification of classical music and ballet with whiteness is not a biological or anthropological claim. Whiteness (the sets of practices, projects, and human subjects that it encompasses as well as its global supremacy) is historically constituted to further specific class interests. David Roediger stresses the importance of recognizing white identity and practices "as problems needing to be historicized, analyzed, theorized, and countered." See, *Class, Race, and Marxism* (New York: Verso, 2017), 47.
[65] Melamed, *Represent and Destroy,* 9.
[66] Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 22.

through a network of institutions including philanthropies, culture industries, and schooling and university initiatives"[67] However, this was a reformist program which obscured the material and ideological structure of race, foreclosing any consideration of global capitalism as a racial issue. Assata's sense of responsibility for demonstrating that Black Americans can subscribe to the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic dominant speaks to her optimistic attachment to this project which positions racial violence as merely a kind of ignorance requiring education. If we also consider Assata's desire to appear "cultured" through the two aforementioned meanings of the term — a *shared* system of meaning making — we can register in her acceptance of cultural normativity a desire to be incorporated into the hegemonic social order. As in the case of Manoranjan's mother, Assata's mimicry points to a desire to move from the social margins to the center.

However, the speaker emphasizes the troubling discrepancy between the culture young Assata is taught to valorize at school and the one which defines her communal and domestic life: "I saved my culture, my music, my dancing, the richness of Black speech for the times when i was with my own people ... In many ways i was living a double life."[68] In other words, this attempt at imitation amounts to a split within the subject, causing her to become alienated from her "intimate and most emotionally felt experiences."[69] This split consciousness is externalized when Assata rejects a romantic proposal from one of her classmates:

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[67] Ibid.

[68] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 37.

[69] In "The Language of African Literature," Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o claims that colonial alienation is the process whereby colonial education (which imposes a set of norms and naturalizes racial hierarchy) estranges a child from the immediate surroundings of his family and the community, and causes him to assume his own inferiority. While Ngũgĩ is describing the psyche of the colonial African, his analysis also applies to the imposition of cultural normativity on the racialized Other within the metropole. See, "The Language of African Literature," in *Post-Colonial Discourse and the Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader,* ed. P. Williams and L Christman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 118-120.

> My tongue became heavy and twisted, I started to stutter. Nothing came out of my mouth. "Why not?" he asked again. I stammered and stuttered and then, with icy bluntness, i said, "Because you're too black and ugly." I will never forget the look on his face. He looked at me with such cold hatred that i was stunned. I was instantly sorry for what i said, but there was no taking it back ... I felt so ugly and dirty and depraved [for having said that]."[70]

Assata's speech starts to break down before she blurts out the insult — "my tongue became heavy and twisted," "I stammered and stuttered" — as if she knows she is going to say something that is wrong and yet goes on to say it anyways. The insult appears to have the quality of a compulsion, of something articulated under duress. This moment reveals the sinister face of state sanctioned, reformist strategies for addressing race matters. The politics of respectability (which carves out space for those historically excluded within normative culture) continue to racially code forms of embodiment, speech, and behaviour. They stigmatize individuals who resist normative culture while leaving the material basis of this culture unchallenged. Essentially, the marginal subject is therefore indoctrinated into a way of seeing which assumes their innate inferiority.

These scenes of mimicry foreground the longings and attendant hazards of inclusion. The state's promise of inclusion — largely limited and reformist in nature — is shown to be vacuous in that it does not ameliorate the material conditions of marginal communities and, moreover, it leaves unchallenged the hierarchical ordering of various forms of life and living. In this same vein, these works also represent the forms of punishment to which young Assata and Manoranjan are subjected through the state's welfare institutions. While institutions of education or rehabilitation within liberal democratic nation-states are intended to transform the (marginal)

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[70] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 72.

individuals into a citizen-subject, they are revealed to be sites of paternalism, surveillance, and exploitation. In other words, while the nation is predicated on the assumption of a horizontal comradeship, the state functions to maintain hierarchical difference and assumes the docility of racialized and casteized subjects.[71] These autobiographies capture Assata and Manoranjan's recognition of the way in which they are marked by difference, and thereby, constituted as bare life. Importantly, however, Assata and Manoranjan are shown to refuse the script of gratitude that is often expected of marginal subjects within these welfare institutions. They register the function of disciplinary regimes and continue to grow wary of the state's promise of incorporation to minority communities.

Interrogating My Chandal Life represents the postcolonial government's punitive response to Dalit refugees who refused the Dandakaranya Rehabilitation Project. Starting in the early 1960s, the Government of India selected the Dandakaranya region (mainly in the regions of Madhya Pradesh and Orissa) to resettle refugees from East Bengal (now Bangladesh).[72] There was widespread opposition to this project as the relatively dry region proved to be difficult to cultivate (particularly since many of the settlers were wetland refugees) and already contained an aboriginal population.[73] Manoranjan is a young child when the project is imposed on the residents of his refugee camp: "Dandakaranya! Rehabilitation! [...] Valmiki had described

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[71] Vladimir Lenin states that "The [modern] state arises when, where, and to what extent that class antagonisms *cannot* be objectively reconciled. And conversely the existence of the state proves that class antagonisms are irreconcilable" (8). Therefore, even in its welfare function, the state remains primarily an instrument of class oppression; corollarily, the state exists not to undermine difference but instead to maintain social hierarchy. See, *State and Revolution* (Eastford: Martino Publishing, 2011 [1917]).
[72] K. Moudood Elahi, "Refugees in Dandakaranya" *The International Migration Review* 15, no. 1-2 (1981): 219-225.
[73] Ibid.

Dandakaranya in his epic. It was a dense forest filled with wild animals and savage monsters[74] ... Rehabilitation! This would be more like re-deportation!"[75] In this opening passage, the speaker gestures towards the way that the postcolonial state used the promise of rehabilitation to place these refugees into a state of perpetual displacement. This invocation of "re-deportation" — a condition of being twice removed — speaks to the way that the casteized refugee is imagined as untethered to the land. Even as it dangles the assurance of citizenship before them, the state readily moves these subjects around in *space*, undermining their belonging to any one *place*.[76] Furthermore, "re-deportation" may also be interpreted as an allusion to (and reworking of) upper-caste Hindu's designation as "twice born." This speaks not just to the persistence of the caste system (wherein an "ascending level of reverence" is necessarily entangled with a "descending scale of contempt"[77]) but also to the way that this hierarchical ordering of society has become "entrenched and *modernized*" in the postcolonial period.[78] The speaker then goes on to represent how the police suppressed protesters by picking them up and dropping them off twenty to twenty five miles away so that they would return home exhausted and hungry. The protesters here are treated as merely biological entities — their bodily functions becoming part of

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[74] This is a pejorative reference to the *adivasi* or aboriginal people who had been living in this region.
[75] Byapari, *Interrogating my Chandal Life,* 25.
[76] Yi-Fu Tuan distinguishes between space and place as modes of perception, experience, and representation. Place refers to a static location that has been assigned a specific value by human beings and with which a community is familiar. Meanwhile, space is undifferentiated and something to be explored and often feared. Tuan writes that, "if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place" (6). See, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
[77] Bhagwan Das, *Thus Spoke Ambedkar, Vol 1: A Stake in the Nation* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2010), 25.
[78] Arundhati Roy, "The Doctor and the Saint," Introduction to *Annihilation of Caste,* author. B.R. Ambedkar (New York: Verso, 2016 [1936]), 37.

the state's political calculations. Over time, the government cut off food and other essential resources to the refugees who refused to relocate to Dandakaranya:

> A huge emptiness haunted us then. There was no food, no medicine, no work, nowhere to go and, very soon, no water to drink ... The entire camp had, as it were, ceased to exist. Not only was the camp erased in the government records but even the sound of the frail coughing or the cries of the infants or the sound of the women who had lined up at the water taps and were arguing amongst themselves — all signs of life — had ceased to be.[79]

Bureaucratic power is shown to not only deny communities their means of social reproduction but also to eradicate whole ways of life. The institutionalized, punitive neglect to which this camp is subjected speaks to the way that the postcolonial state does not intend for all areas to be uniformly developed. Instead, the refugee camp is transformed into a "zone of invisibility."[80] This does not necessarily mean its elimination from public consciousness; it refers to a way of perceiving, conceiving and managing this camp as a space rather than a place.[81] That is to say, the camp is figured as an empty, homogenous, and abstract space from which bodies can be removed without consequence.

Manoranjan does not respond to the state's conditional inclusion with gratitude, but instead comes to adopt a posture of refusal. For instance, the speaker notes the young

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[79] Byapari, *Interrogating my Chandal Life,* 30.

[80] In "The Economic Image-Function of the Periphery," Timothy Brennan theorizes the relationship between periphery and metropole. Brennan examines the way that, in its current phase, capital marks off the Third World for economic activities such as experimentation, extraction, manufacturing, and waste disposal. However, periphery-metropole relations exist *within* postcolonial nation-states as well; it is for this reason that I'm using the term "zone of invisibility" to describe the construction of the refugee camp in newly independent India. See, "The Economic Image-Function of the Periphery," in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond,* ed. Ania Loomba et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 101-122.

[81] Refer again to Yi Fu Tuan's distinction between space and place.

Manoranjan's growing attunement to the ways caste restricts his prospects:

> Why should an honest man [his father] be condemned to such a cruel fate? My young mind could not arrive at any answer. I would run away, I decided … I could not have guessed that, spurned by that world, I would return one day to what I had left behind, disillusioned, and empty-handed. It would not let me remain *disciplined, respectful, and courteous* but would stir up my anger against all that was noble and good in the world [emphasis mine].[82]

The speaker draws attention to Manoranjan's failing belief in the ability of one's individual virtue or merit to exceed the restrictions of caste hierarchy. In this context, Manoranjan's runaway (a common trope in the bildungsroman, which allows the protagonist to engage in novel experiences and establish their autonomy) is not merely an act of individual preservation but rather constitutes an attempt to escape state paternalism — which is shown to be simultaneously life giving and life denying — within the only environment he has ever known. Reflecting on how he rationalized leaving his family to move to the city for better prospects, the speaker claims that "I had no idea what would happen to them but I knew that if I stayed on here, I would die with them."[83] Manoranjan's decision can be identified as an attempt to negate the present conditions of life. Manoranjan acts under conditions of duress — not necessarily knowing what lies ahead — and out of a desire for another way of being.[84] The speaker's later claim that the

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[82] Byapari, *Interrogating my Chandal Life,* 38.
[83] Byapari, *Interrogating my Chandal Life,* 39.
[84] Darin Barney employs the term "politics of withdrawal" to describe forms of dissent that reject dominant forms of recognition, reconciliation, and incorporation. Politics of withdrawal blur the line between doing and being, passivity and action. Within this paradigm, politics is more than just the actions of autonomous, responsible, organized subjects who have in mind a particular objective. See, Darin Barney, "Withdrawal Symptoms: Refusal, Sabotage, Suspension," in *Politics of Withdrawal: Media, Arts, Theory*, ed. Pepita Hesselberth and Joost de Bloois (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 115-133. Jacques Rancière claims that a polity consists of a "disagreement" between those who count and those who do not count. Politics exists when "those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings" violate the current order (even if only momentarily) (20). See, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose

world outside the refugee camp too would harden Manoranjan off from traits like discipline, respect, and courtesy speaks to a rejection of normative morality — the cultivation of which is central to the affirmative bildungsroman. Manoranjan comes to question the use of these virtues within palpable conditions of unevenness. He does not interiorize his misgivings about the nation-state's ability to ameliorate caste violence; he chooses instead to acknowledge and act upon these feelings.[85] Ultimately, Manoranjan comes to understand discrepancies in the logic of the world that he occupies and the world of the upwardly mobile (a discrepancy which exceeds the rural-urban divide). The subsumption of these virtues by the feeling of anger gestures to Manoranjan's emergent desire to violate the social and political order, to reject the terms of inclusion.[86]

Assata is also subjected to various forms of verbal and physical abuse within the public school system in the United States. At the age of eight or nine, Assata moves from the segregated South to attend school in New York. Initially, there is a great deal of hope attached to this transition; her family reassures her that she would get "a better education up North than in that segregated school down South."[87] Despite the North's reputation for progressivism and a greater

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(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). See also Lauren Berlant's discussion of a "mode of politics that does not reproduce the present, ad infinitum (393)," in "The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 3 (2016): 393-419. Berlant characterizes this mode of politics as "transitional" in that it is situated between the present disagreement and a structurally transformed future. She is concerned with how subjects manage the conditions of crisis which mark their daily life, attaching optimism to and risking the future's contingent nature.

[85] Recall the discussion above on how the affirmative bildungsroman narrates the process whereby the protagonist "adapts his desires and aspirations" to norms.

[86] In *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy,* Rancière writes: "Politics does not exist because men, through privilege of speech, place their interests in common. Politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account, by setting up a community by the fact of placing in common a wrong that is nothing more than this very confrontation, the *contradiction of two worlds in a single world* [emphasis mine]" (27).

[87] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography,* 32.

investment in racial equality, the school is shown to be a key site for the reproduction of racial difference. For instance, Assata's third grade teacher makes a point of humiliating her in front of the class whenever she tries to participate:

> My third grade teacher was young, blond, very prissy, and middle class. Whenever i came into the room she would show me all thirty-two of her teeth, but there was nothing sincere about her smile. It never made me feel good…On my first or second day in class she was teaching us penmanship. "Does anyone know how to make a capital L in script?" she asked. Nobody raised a hand. Timidly, i did. "You know how to do it?" she asked incredulously. "Yes," i told her, "we had that last year down South." "Well, come and write it on the blackboard, then," she told me. I wrote my pitiful little second grade L on the blackboard. After looking at me and nodding, she made a big, fancy L next to mine. "Is this what you were trying to make JoAnne [Assata's given name]?" Her expression was smug. The whole class broke out laughing. I wanted to go somewhere and hide.[88]

Stuart Hall comments on how "[fetishistic and stereotypical excess is] required to secure markers of racial difference in a stable equivalence with the [body]."[89] These representations of excess are misrecognized as evidence rather than *markers* of difference.[90] In this scene, the teacher's superfluous correction of Assata's writing — placing a cursive L next to the same letter written in a child's handwriting — constitutes a spectacle designed to attenuate difference. Simone Browne argues that the regulation of Blackness in the United States is marked by various kinds of spectacle — offering the branding of slaves and the rite of lynching as noteworthy examples.[91] Browne urges us to consider the function of these spectacles to be "epidermalization" — or the

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[88] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography,* 32.
[89] Stuart Hall, "The After-life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why Black Skins, White Masks?" In *The Fact of Blackness*, ed. Alan Read (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996), 20.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

"imposition of race on the body."[92] While the violence of this event is not as severe as these practices of branding or lynching (nor is it the most violent event that Assata herself experiences in her life), it constitutes the young Assata's subjection to the power of the dominant (white) gaze. Browne suggests that the significance of such a conquering gaze (that is, the kind of gaze that is inflicted on a young child and has the effect of making her want to run away as well as simultaneously fixing her in place) is that it "claims a power to represent while escaping representation."[93] Essentially, this spectacle inscribes difference upon Assata's body, transforming her into an object to be observed and caricatured.

However, Assata exercises agency against and in excess of these punitive practices. In particular, she observes those in positions of power and uses this knowledge to resist their authority:[94]

> In the fifth grade, i was put in the class of the school's most notorious battle-ax, Mrs. Hoffler ... David [the only other Black child in the class] and i were her favourite targets ... The more she rode our backs, the more rebellious i became. I would sit in the back of the class and make jokes about her.[95]

By sitting in the back of class, Assata renders herself out of sight, avoiding the kind of gaze to which she was subjected in the aforementioned scene. This act is exemplary of a politics of withdrawal, as Assata places herself at the spatial margins of the classroom, evading its disciplinary practices. Like Manoranjan claiming of his anger (and disregarding a mode of

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[92] Browne, *Dark Matters,* 7.
[93] Browne, *Dark Matters,* 49.
[94] Browne calls this kind of quotidian resistance "dark sousveillance" (an inversion of surveillance, which comes from above) and argues that such tactics can be traced back to the fight against slavery. According to Brown, sousveillance constitutes a "way of knowing"; it entails not only observing those in positions of authority but also the "[using] of a keen and experiential insight [of surveillance] in order to resist it (49)."
[95] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography,* 34.

morality which would ask him to uncritically exercise discipline, respect, and courtesy), Assata's willingness to ridicule this woman constitutes a breaking of decorum and a rejection of the normative terms of inclusion. Later on, Assata sees Mrs. Hoffler physically discipline David by "twisting [his ear] until the whole side of his face was red and contorted with pain" and decides that she would not allow something similar to happen to her.[96] When Mrs.Hoffler tries to come after her a couple days after this incident, Assata kicks and hits her in retaliation. Again, we see how Assata observes, predicts, and is consequently able to refuse authority.

These encounters allow for Assata and Manoranjan to apprehend the way in which race and caste structures consign them to "bare life". Agamben describes "bare life" as a condition in which one is considered only in terms of the biological fact of life: "He who will appear later as the bearer of rights and, according to curious oxymoron, as the new sovereign subject ... can only be constituted as such through ... the isolation of *corpus*, bare life, in himself. If it is true that law needs a body to force…democracy responds to this desire by compelling law to assume care of the body."[97] In other words, bare life is always an *aspect* of the citizen — the state purportedly concerns itself with the enrichment of the citizen's bodily existence and increasingly includes it in its calculations. However, in illuminating the way that difference is inscribed onto the body and how such a body marked by difference is treated as docile by the state, *Assata: An Autobiography* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* gestures to the way that some subjects are prohibited from *exceeding* the condition of bare life. Assata and Manoranjan's transition from childhood to adulthood is marked by the recognition that their lives are conceived of as inherently precarious — the state seeing them as bodies to be demarcated, regulated, and endlessly moved around. They come to learn that while they are a part of the social order insofar

[96] Ibid.
[97] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 58.

as they are in the purview of the state, they are seen as lacking the capacity for political agency — "included by means of exclusion."[98] Crucially, these autobiographies suggest that even when the state offers inclusion to these subjects, this inclusion (the extension of limited liberal freedoms to marginal subjects) is not intended to rescue them from a condition of bare life. Rather, these forms of inclusion call for aesthetic rather than structural changes. Assata and Manoranjan's recognition of this condition is apparent in the ways in which the speakers choose to refer to themselves. For instance, consider the way that Shakur refuses to capitalize and instead uses the lowercase "i" as the first person pronoun throughout the narrative. Similarly, at arbitrary times in the narrative, Byapari abruptly disavows the first person perspective all together and refers to his younger self in the third person and, significantly, as his pet name "Jeeban." These gestures are, as Kristeva would say, "opposed to I"[99] — the speakers denounce the sovereignty of the abstract citizen-subject. They betray their recognition of how this ideal of personhood remains inaccessible to them. It is Assata and Manoranjan's confrontation with the social contradictions of their world — their recognition of the divide between the citizen and bare life — that leads to their shift from a reformist to a revolutionary outlook.

Assata: An Autobiography and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* are attuned to the way in which they challenge the normative coming-of-age narrative. While the protagonists engage in formative struggles with state power, the speakers of these narratives comment on the ways in which "childhood" was something that was withheld, deferred, or simply different for them. These moments serve as metatextual commentary on the way that the affirmative bildungsroman performs the ideological work of obscuring the ways in which citizenship is both extended and denied to marginal subjects. For instance, early in *Interrogating my Chandal Life,* the

[98] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 3,
[99] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 2.

representation of childhood as characterized by a lack of work is shown to erase fundamental class and caste cleavages: "At the age when other children live in a happy and carefree world, I was pushed by fate into a hard and harsh reality ... People say that morning shows the day. Indeed the circumstances of childhood did send a grim message of my later life."[100] The speaker's recognition of the difficulties of his childhood constitute a structure of feeling; he senses an incongruence between childhood as it is depicted in the affirmative bildungsroman (as a condition of innocence) and his own lived experience, that he has yet to coalesce into a coherent system of thought and practice.[101] However, the speaker concludes the epilogue of the text with a much more committed address to his much younger self:

> Even today, when I shut my eyes, I can see the young child without books to learn from, or marbles to play with, with his shamed hands behind him ... I cannot find it in me to tell him to be gentle and speak of love or forgiveness. I find myself telling him to rebel. To break, to destroy. The fire inside can be assuaged in two ways: either by pouring more kerosene to set it aflame or burn it to ashes. Or by dousing it in water and covering it in ashes. You go ahead and use whichever you have access to, I tell that child. Out of the ashes will arise a new life.[102]

In his rejection of normative morality once again, the speaker throws into crisis the nation-state's ideal of development — the notion that individual maturity is the transition from a state of savagery to civility, at which point a person may use the privilege of speech to participate in the public sphere.[103] He challenges the way that the affirmative bildungsroman asks people to see

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[100] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 31.
[101] "Structure of feeling" is a category theorized by Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128-136.
[102] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 349.
[103] In *Human Rights Inc*, Slaughter suggests that the affirmative bildungsroman reworks the mythology of the civilizing mission. He quotes Pheng Cheah who writes that "[the story that liberal human rights projects for the individual] is itself subsumed in the larger narrative of the

themselves as "benefactors and agents of progress."[104] Instead, in his address to his younger self, the speaker undermines the conception of linear progress and the importance of cultivating virtues that would allow one to transition into the mainstream. Instead, his call to "break and destroy" rejects the reformatory logic coded into the affirmative bildungsroman.[105] The speaker is not urging the child into unorganized and gratuitous violence but instead suggesting that this process of destruction is essential for the advent of a "new life" (or a new *kind* of life).

In *Assata: An Autobiography*, while the speaker often affirms childhood as a state of innocence, this innocence is represented as almost eerie:

> Mostly, when I was young, the news didn't seem real. In fact, my vision of the world was like a comic strip: In China they ate fortune cookies and the men wore braids; in Africa they lived in huts, worse bones in their noses, and were cannibals; in South Amerika they wore big hats, slept in the middle of the day, drank a lot of rum, and danced the cha-cha. The only place, besides, the United States, that i could talk about with anything resembling realism was Europe. And my perception of Europe was almost as unreal.[106]

This account of her conception of the world resembling a comic strip — a medium which typically allows for jarring separations between scenes and often relies on exaggerated appearances and behaviours — speaks to a disjointed form of knowledge. In other words, the speaker comments on how the media to which Assata had access as a child is complicit in fabricating the "[fetishistic and stereotypical excess required to secure [difference]."[107] It is not simply that she is given a false narrative through her formal education and popular media

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civilizing process, the passage from savagery to civility, which is the master narrative of modernity" (107).
[104] Slaughter, 108.
[105] Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.*, 92.
[106] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography,* 73.
[107] Hall, "The Afterlife of Frantz Fanon," 20.

(though this may also be true), but that her knowledge of the rest of the world takes the form of fragmentary, inflated, and discontinuous images with which she is routinely bombarded. The speaker's many references about how the young Assata felt disconnected from the real in her understanding of history gestures to the way in which she is denied any sense of historical process. At the same time, this sense of unreality vanishes when the young Assata is exposed to the civil rights struggles of Black Americans, to which she initially feels more intimately attached: "And each year i would sit in front of that box, watching my people being attacked by white mobs, being bitten by dogs, beaten and water-hoped by police, arrested and murdered. Then the news seemed too real."[108] Unlike in the earlier passage, the child feels an almost overwhelming entanglement in the historical process; history becomes a felt reality as she undergoes the disturbing experience of watching people who look like her being subjected to state violence. Essentially, as a child, Assata vacillates between a feeling of being estranged from and entangled within world-historical events. Childhood once again loses the appearance of blissful ignorance which the individual overcomes to become an engaged and involved citizen-subject. Instead, the child is shown to register socio-historical antagonisms — whether these are purposefully obscured or all too apparent.

Assata: An Autobiography and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* are dissensual bildungsromans in that the most formative moments of their protagonists' development are those which demonstrate how the liberal democratic nation-state produces difference and withholds the conditions for meaningful incorporation. In response to the social contradictions of their worlds, Manoranjan and Assata refuse to morally submit to the norms of a community represented by the state.[109] The autobiographies betray an awareness of how a normative coming-of-age narrative

[108] Ibid.
[109] Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc,* 94.

serves to smooth over difference by positioning an individual's emergence into a citizen-subject as a universal experience. They also undermine the optimism attached to reformist inclusion and valorize forms of living which interrupt the reproduction of the status quo. In what follows, I discuss the ways in which Assata and Manoranjan, having been alienated from dominant trajectories of development, exceed both complacency with marginalization as well as an attachment to the promise of citizenship.

Chapter 2: Self-Fashioning in the Periphery

Assata and Manoranjan forge identities outside the constraints of state-sanctioned ideals of personhood. Identity need not be seen, Stuart Hall argues, as merely that which provides people with "stable, unchanging, and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of [their] actual history."[110] It is not merely something which already exists (transcending place, time, history, and culture) and must be uncovered. Instead, it is produced out of one's encounters with the world as well as the visions one is offered of the past, present, and future — a matter of "becoming as well as being."[111] In this chapter, I engage with Assata and Manoranjan's revolutionary self-fashioning. I argue that these autobiographies represent the process of transformation that Assata and Manoranjan undergo within peripheral spaces. Moreover, they posit a "self" that is itself always "in process." Assata begins her political education within her college campus where she encounters radical organizations made up of racialized students, like the Golden Drums at Manhattan Community College. By speaking to and reading alongside these students, Assata gains knowledge not only about the Black radical tradition within the US but also global struggles against capitalist imperialism. Assata then becomes involved in the Black Power organizing of the 1960s and 1970s, which differed from the Civil Rights struggles of the 1950s in its confrontation of US state terrorism domestically and abroad as well as its endorsement of community self defence. Initially, she joins the Black Panther Party (BPP) where she assists with their breakfast club and propaganda distribution. Then, she leaves the BPP and becomes a member of the Black Liberation Army (BLA), which was an underground Black revolutionary organization with a more concerted focus on building an armed movement against the state. Manoranjan is recruited into the Naxalite movement — a

[110] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, and Difference,* ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence Wishart, 1990), 223.
[111] Ibid.

network of militant communist groups which organizes both rural and urban rebellion and often carries out the eradication of so-called "class enemies" — after displaying his willingness to defend himself and his family against communal, caste-based violence. Manoranjan is intermittently active within the Naxalite movement; he vacillates between valorizing and critiquing their objectives. Meanwhile, he is in and out of various other leftist organizations and becomes a member of the Rickshaw Union. A decisive moment in Manoranjan's involvement with the Naxalite movement is his participation in the bombing of a landowning family which used legal mechanisms to claim ownership of land that had historically belonged to a peasant Bagdi community.[112]

While the affirmative bildungsroman centers on a kind of education which allows one to enter the regime of citizenship, *Assata: An Autobiography* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* foreground spaces which exist outside of the public sphere and facilitate the emergence of political commitments.[113] Raymond Williams defines "commitment" as distinct from "alignment" — where the latter refers to the values and actions one engages in through their internationalization of dominant ideology, while the former involves a reckoning with the

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[112] The Bagdis are a group of aboriginal people found in Bengal and Bangladesh who were declared a 'criminal tribe' under British rule.

[113] I am employing Jürgen Habermas's conception of the "public sphere" which, in its ideal form, is "made up of private individuals gathered together as a public articulating the needs of society *with* the state [emphasis mine]" (176). Critical to the self-fashioning of modern liberal democratic nation-states is the idea that they offer a public sphere to their citizens and that this public sphere keeps the state accountable for maintaining egalitarian social conditions. The public sphere is meant either to affirm or to challenge the legitimacy of the state. This formulation of the public sphere has been criticized because it obscures the presence of gender, race, caste, and class exclusions; exaggerates the power of speech, debate, discussion, and dialogue to produce structural change; and overlooks the way that the state authorizes particular voices and forms of assembly. See, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991 [1962]).

ideological context of one's life.[114] Commitments are those positions and actions which we *consciously* take; they are future-oriented in that they are composed of aspirations for what one's world may one day be. I begin this chapter by considering the way that *Assata: An Autobiography* and *Interrogating my Chandal Life* counter the ideologically loaded caricature of militant social movements as driven by dogma or naivité. They speak to how people are brought into these movements as a result of discontent with the legalistic and rights-based advocacy privileged under the liberal mode of politics. Moreover, these narratives articulate the constitutive contradictions of these movements: the variety of strategic orientations, the problem of leadership, and the tricky navigation of the pressures of state surveillance and repression. However, these spaces are ultimately shown to offer visions of liberation which would otherwise be undermined by the ideological apparatuses of the nation-state. I analyze the experience of political transformations Assata and Manoranjan undergo within these movements — paying particular attention to the way shifts in their consciousness are registered by the body. Finally, I examine the way that these narratives position the prison as a "non-place" — a *transitional* location where the norms as well as the egalitarian pretensions of the nation-state reach their limit. It is for this reason that the prison constitutes a site of literary-intellectual transformation. Ultimately, these autobiographies represent the way that Assata and Manoranjan rise from the condition of bare life and seize political agency.

Assata and Manoranjan become involved in militant social movements that are stigmatized as impractical, destructive, and criminal. *Assata: An Autobiography* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* resuscitate the image of these social movements — valorizing them as sites of knowledge production — by offering an account of the discontents which bring

[114] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 199-205. It is important to keep in mind of course that commitments need not be progressive.

individuals to them in the first place. Shakur articulates her discomfort with the kinds of deference that is expected from marginal social classes within the liberal mode of politics. One of Assata's first experiences with race-based activism is her brief encounter with the NAACP — a civil rights organization that works towards social and legal reform using non-violent strategies — when she visits her grandparents in the South as a teenager:

> And so, when i saw these NAACP people, i was ready to do whatever it was that they were going to do. But they were very confusing. One day i was hanging around in the office and two men were talking about nonviolence and self control. Then he walked around the room and asking people questions.
> "What would you do if they pushed you?"
> "Nothing. I'd just keep on doing what i came to do."
> "What would you do if they kicked you?"
> "I'd pray to the Lord to forgive them for their sins. '
> "What would you do if they spit on you?"
> "I'd just go on singing."
> Well, that was just too much for me. I could take someone pushing me, hitting me, kicking me, but to sit there and let some craka dog spit on me, well, just the idea of it made me want to fight.[115]

At this point, Assata does not seem to have a principled opposition to the use of violence within social movements, as she describes relative tolerance of being pushed, hit, and kicked without retaliation. However, the idea of passively allowing one's self to be spit upon causes visceral discomfort — "every muscle in [her] body, every instinct [she] had, rebelled against it."[116] Like the pain that Manoranjan experiences watching middle class children playing at a distance, Assata's bodily reactions to the prospect of being spit upon constitutes a structure of feeling.[117]

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[115] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 138.
[116] Ibid.
[117] For a discussion of "structure of feeling," refer to previous chapter.

The prospect of allowing oneself to be spit upon represents the forms of submission inherent to a rights-based, nonviolent approach to racial justice. Assata's aversion to this particular form of subjection betrays a growing awareness of the way that a political program that primarily relies on state institutions and appeals to the sensitivities of dominant social classes bypasses the reality of hierarchical social relations and the material practices which undergird them.

Likewise, when Manoranjan sustains an injury as a result of his involvement in the bombing attempt of the landowning family, he enters a dissociative state in which he reflects on what moves the subaltern toiler:

> A labourer who creates a product, or a farmer who nourishes to life his crops, grows conscious of the exploitation underlying the systems of production through his lived experiences … As a result, their anger at the prevalent system is often greater, and their desire to destroy it is often stronger, than the principle-driven political worker. The small or big tribal and peasant rebellions that we have seen in India, which would number about two hundred, were begun by people who had not read *Das Kapital* or the *Red Book*. It was their reality that urged them into rebellion.[118]

While Byapari's autobiography represents a range of political actors and tendencies, here the speaker valorizes the figure of the insurgent who is otherwise stigmatized within the liberal mode of politics with its orientation towards public discussion and legal reform. The speaker suggests that militancy — even when taken to its extreme — is not merely a spontaneous eruption of feeling (a characterization through which it is often discredited) but rather the result of the material conditions of everyday life. In other words, the enactment of militancy — even in contexts where it does not emerge from a direct engagement with literature — is shown to be an urgent undertaking. Essentially, *Assata: An Autobiography* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life*

[118] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 188.

suggest that individuals find their way into militant social movements because their ways of conceiving the material conditions of their lives come to exceed the narratives offered by liberal reformist politics.

These narratives also present the possibility of engaging critically with the social movements to which one commits themselves. The speakers consistently bring attention to the way that these movements are riddled with various complications: masculinist styles of leadership, opportunism on the part of some individuals, and bureaucratic alienation and exclusion, just to name a few. They also foreground internal conflict with these organizations — from clashes over strategy to the paranoia wrought by state surveillance and repression. However, Assata and Manoranjan are shown to form their political commitments and act as principled political agents, even as they experience feelings of ambivalence. For instance, Assata initially has reservations with the way that Black Panther Party addresses its members, worrying that it would alienate those in the nascent stages of their political development. Despite her criticisms of the Party, she ends up joining because she decides that "[she'll] be good for the Party, and the Party will be good for [her]."[119] The individual and the collective are seen, in this moment, as existing in a productive tension to one another.[120] The individual is not necessarily a reflection of the collective to which she belongs — instead, they fulfill, transform, and challenge one another. Since the individual and the collective apply pressure on one another, they are

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[119] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 207.

[120] Fredric Jameson posits a category of experience called "anonymous bliss," which refers to one's "desubjectification in the utopian political process, the loss of psychic privilege." See, "The Politics of Utopia," *New Left Review* 25 (2004): 40. Similarly, Karl Marx states that "we must avoid postulating "society" again as an abstraction vis-a-vis the individual. The individual *is the social being* ... [His life is] an expression and confirmation of *social life.* Man's individual and species-life are not *different* ... Man, much as he may ... be a *particular* individual (and it is precisely his particularity which makes him an individual, and a real *individual* social being), is just as much the *totality."* See, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959 [1932]), 92.

always *in process.* The text speaks to how movements are not fully formed entities — they are mediated by the actions of those who belong to them or those they come into contact with. In this way, entering these movements is essentially a risk — one does not know in advance the way these movements will unfold or the impact it will have on them. However, as the text suggests, this risk is necessary to the process of political development. Similarly, in *Interrogating my Chandal Life,* the speaker bemoans the many disappointments that Manoranjan experiences during his time with the Naxalites: "I had worked with the fiery Naxalites for many days. But not one of the bombs I had thrown or shots I had fired had touched the body of a 'class enemy.' It had all been wasted on a false war, a futile meaningless squandering of the self."[121] The speaker is referring here to times when political actions are derailed or seem not to produce their intended outcome. However, this disillusionment is suspended in moments like the one in which Manoranjan witnesses the pain of the Bagdi community: "But they did know that they wanted to kill those who had stripped their women and brutalized them ... No hesitation of indecision clouded my mind any longer. If it were a sin to help people concretize their dream of revenge, so be it."[122] This kind of militancy assumes urgency when Manoranjan confronts the concrete struggle of those who have no other recourse. While the text speaks to the inevitability of revolutionary failure, it also suggests that this failure is redeemed in instances wherein these movements offer agency to the dispossessed.

In foregrounding Assata and Manoranjan's ambivalence, *Assata: An Autobiography* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* gesture to David Scott's suggestion that "revolutions are political fields of [collisions of actions] and, consequently, of potential tragedy."[123] Scott argues that

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[121] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 176.
[122] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 177.
[123] David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 22.

tragedy emerges from the fact "that the well-intentioned actions of willing and self-determining agents are pervasively vulnerable to contingency and therefore to outcomes that are never predictable or entirely knowable in advance." [124] In this way, there is always room for accident, subterfuge, and failure within militant movements, as their trajectories are mediated by state repression, ongoing violence against marginal communities, and the inherent uncertainty of the future. It is for this reason that Assata and Manoranjan negotiate a "complex dialectic of cynicism and commitment"[125] — their political commitments are formed alongside doubts about their movements' trajectories and capacity to fulfill their promises. Shakur and Byapari's autobiographies posit the possibility of individuals having a critical (as opposed to a dogmatic) relationship to the movements in which they form and exercise their commitments. Moreover, they suggest that the prospect of conflict, alienation, uncertainty, and ultimately tragedy hovers above all militant struggles — and does not by itself discredit these struggles. Critically, these autobiographies represent a political identity that is not stable but always embroiled in processes of negotiation, struggle, and transformation.

Ultimately however, Shakur and Byapari's autobiographies valorize these movements for their ability to offer visions of social justice that are otherwise undermined by the ideological apparatuses of the nation-state.[126] As discussed in the previous chapter, these texts challenge the

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[124] Ibid.

[125] Toral Jatin Gajarwala uses this phrase to refer to the way that individuals oscillate between commitment to a political program and skepticism surrounding its actualization. See, "The Postman and the Tramp: Cynicism, Commitment, and the Aesthetics of Subaltern Futurity," *Cultural Critique*, no. 108 (2020): 40-68.

[126] Auritro Majumder notes the dominance of petty bourgeois nationalism leading up to and in the wake of Indian independence: "In the concrete case of Indian nationalism, signified by the proper names of "Nehru" and "Gandhi," [what Fanon calls] 'the national middle class's discovery of its historic mission that of intermediary,' accompanied and at times enabled the postcolonial indigenization of capital and capitalist social-relations ... That such a nationalism operated against and *ruthlessly suppressed, coerced, appropriated, or marginalized alternative visions of decolonization and caste and class equality* is also well known [emphasis mine]

nation-state's promise of liberal freedoms such as "equal opportunity, possessive individualism, and normative cultural citizenship"[127] to historically excluded social groups during the middle of the 20th century — foregrounding how its egalitarian pretensions obscure the uneven distribution of political power. They represent Assata and Manoranjan's youth as marked by a *sense* of the fallibility of the nation-state's promise of inclusion. However, it is through their participation within militant movements that Assata and Manoranjan come to formally disavow their longing for citizenship. For instance, in *Assata: Autobiography*, the speaker reminisces about her desire to become "American" during her youth:

> I wanted to be an amerikan just like any other amerikan. I wanted a piece of amerika's apple pie. I believed we could get our freedom just by appealing to the consciences of white people. I believed that the north was really interested in integration and civil rights and equal rights. I used to go around saying "our country," "our president," "our government." [...] And now, twenty-odd years later, it seems like a bad joke.[128]

This passage destabilizes what it means to be "American" — suggesting that this identity is not equally available (or at least not available in the same way) to all inhabitants of the nation-state. Moreover, her satirical misspelling of American — an allusion to the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) — foregrounds the racial violence through which the nation was built, and thus, which necessarily

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(139-140)." Jodi Melamed positions a sociological report entitled *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944), which was commissioned by the Carnegi Corporation, as a watershed text in the emergence of liberal antiracisms after WWII. She writes that this report notably "rhetorically linked liberal antiracism to U.S postwar global ascendancy in the register of nationalism and manifest destiny by, for example, describing the providential purpose for antiracist transformation in which 'America, [saving itself from its racial dilemma], becomes the Saviour of the world'"(20). Melamed also stresses how liberal antiracisms stigmatize individuals and movements that challenge material structures of power, using terms like monocultural, illegal, and notably un-American. Majumder and Melamed speak to the way that the nation-state sanctions limited and non-redistributive forms of social justice.

[127] Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 9.

[128] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography,* 139.

informs national identity. This disavowal of American-ness constitutes a rejection of promises for inclusion that are severed from substantive structural transformations. Moreover, her stated unwillingness to assume the good faith of white people represents an indictment of the aforementioned politics of respectability which center the capricious sentimentality of dominant classes. The speaker's mockery of young Assata for making affirmative statements about "our country," "our president," and "our government" gestures to her waning faith as to whether the nation represents any kind of meaningful community, that all those who legally belong to the nation have the same political interests and access to representation. Similarly, through his involvement with the Naxalite movement, Manoranjan comes to term with the following:

> I had no nation. The circumstances of my life had been such that I had not been permitted to grow roots anywhere. The dedicated study that enables one to comprehend political philosophy and ideology had been prevented by my illiteracy. Yet that day, the burnt scars on my skin had shielded all my lacks, all my ignorances, my incompleteness.[129]

Manoranjan's recognition that he was unable to put down roots for himself in any one place because of economic hardship and precarity gestures to his growing awareness of legal citizenship itself as an abstraction. He realizes that the legal status of a rights and duty bearing citizen does not by itself afford a person meaningful political agency and self-determination. However, the image of Manoranjan's burn scars shielding his supposed lack, ignorance, and incompleteness suggests that involvement in these alternative communities may offer a more substantial sense of inclusion and purpose. Thus, these autobiographies foreground the way in which political radicalization necessarily untethers an individual from fantasies of inclusion — which are exposed as obstacles to personal and collective flourishing.[130] Through their

[129] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 188.
[130] I borrow this phrasing from Lauren Berlant's critical work on a relation called "cruel optimism," which is when "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It

involvement in militant movements, Assata and Manoranjan acquire new objects of optimism and, consequently, new senses of self.

The kind of political (re)education that Assata and Manoranjan undergo in these spaces is shown to not be merely a cognitive but rather a deeply felt experience. In the moments when they are learning or conveying their new ways of seeing their world, the protagonists appear to lose physical composure. Take for instance the time when Assata attends a lecture organized by the Golden Drums and becomes aware of the long history of slave rebellions in the United States:

> The subject of one of the many lectures scheduled by the Drums was about a slave who plotted and planned and fought for his freedom. Right here in amerika. Until then my only knowledge of the history of Africans in amerika was about George Washington Carver making experiments with peanuts and about the Underground railroad. Harriet Tubman had always been my heroine, and she had symbolized everything that was Black resistance to me. But it had never occured to me that hundreds of Black people had got together to fight for their freedom. The day i found out about Nat Turner I was *affected so strongly it was physical.* I was so *souped up on adrenaline i could barely contain myself...* I tore through every book my mother had. Nowhere could i find the name Nat Turner [emphasis mine].[131]

Similarly, Manoranjan is distraught when he hears a member of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) deliver an unimpassioned speech at a political rally in Dandakaranya:[132]

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might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be the fantasy of the good life or a political project (1)." See, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

[131] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 175.

[132] In 1989, Manoranjan returned to the Dandakaranya forest settlement at the insistence of his younger brother. According to Byapari, at this point, the refugees who lived there had developed some infrastructure for themselves: "They dug for themselves wells, planted whatever vegetables grew, and some levelled out the ground to plant the kharif and rabi seasonal crops." *Interrogating my Chandal Life*, 263.

> Where was the fire, the anger, the roar that could lift sky-high the hopes of the toiling man? Where was the vocabulary that could string sentence after sentence, directing them, like the mythical sound-tracking arrow, into the hearts and minds of the audience, amazing them with the defiance of their dreams? This party may be the CPM, but it was a Red Flag-bearing party ... Standing there in the bazaar, I was much pained at the lack-lustre whimpering of his Madhu Malakar. My personal scores with this Party could wait. At this present moment, it was a question of ensuring the deserved respect for the Red Flag ... Nobody had enlisted me, but the historical onus had, as it were, been placed upon my shoulders by this very forest land ... The alcohol I had swallowed was creating havoc inside my belly then ... [In] this market full of people, I went up and grabbed the microphone from Madhu Malakar's hand.[133]

After grabbing the microphone, Manoranjan delivers a prolonged speech drawing from all that he had learned from his Communist friends and leaders: "I think I spoke for over two hours at a stretch. My body was bathed in sweat. My lips were foaming. And the veins in my forehead throbbed."[134] Within these scenes, the protagonists exhibit various forms of bodily excess: Assata's sense of not being able to contain the adrenaline that is building within her or the vivid images of Manoranjan with havoc inside of his stomach and drenched in fluids after his speech. Likewise, the protagonists also seem to no longer possess any kind of physical self control: Assata tears through her mother's entire book collection while Manoranjan launches into an effusive speech which leaves him worn. In these works, transformations in how the protagonists see themselves and their relationship to others is registered by the convulsions of the body.

The figure of excess is also present in Assata and Manoranjan's autonomous reading practice. For instance, the speaker describes the way that James Baldwin's works seem to eclipse the conditions of Assata's everyday life:

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[133] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life,* 274
[134] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life,* 277.

> Looking out at the ocean, I wonder how many of our people lie buried there, slaves of another era. I'm not sure what freedom is, but i know damn well what it ain't ... I get back off into James Baldwin. Me and James Baldwin are communicating. *His fiction is more real than reality* [emphasis mine].[135]

This reading experience is described as having the effect of transporting her body beyond her immediate surroundings — transforming decisive historical moments into felt realities. Moreover, Assata's sense of attaining something more real than what she knows through the works of James Baldwin also speaks to the capacity of these texts to surpass the material limits of her world. Assata's reading practice seems to pierce through appearances and gives her access to the historical process. Meanwhile, Manoranjan has an explosive mental reaction to the works of Mahasweta Devi. Consider, for instance, when he runs into the author as he is working as a rickshaw puller:

> "Do you know me?" [She asks].
> I know you very well, O great writer! That knowledge is born of the blood and sweat of struggle, protest, resistance, and fury. It is the fury with which your pen flashes like a sword for the exploited and defenceless people. Your story Draupadi drove me to hunt for her rapists so I could kill them. If not them, then somebody like them. Of course, all this remained unuttered. I said, "I have read your books."[136]

Manoranjan appears to valorize the body — precisely the body when it is embroiled in action and responsive to the world. In this passage, the body seems to present a critique of the "intellect" — or knowledge produced at a level of abstraction from concrete events. Moreover, for Manoranjan, engagement with Devi's works is not merely an intellectual activity; the value of these texts lies in their ability to move him to action. Assata and Manoranjan's relationship to

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[135] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography,* 155.
[136] Bypari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 221.

these critical texts constitute a reworking of the trope of sentimental education in which reading is positioned as a means of developing deep interiority as well as "[extending] humanity to readers themselves."[137] These autobiographies foreground the way in which political education allows the individual to see past appearances, driving them to violate the hegemonic social order.

This representation of the body becoming unpredictable, unrestrained, and irregular during moments of political education signifies the way that this kind of education allows marginal subjects to disavow complicity in their own subjugation. Silvia Federici argues that modern nation-states seek to "[discipline] of the body"; the body is conceived of something from which irrationalities have to be eliminated so that it may be transformed into "a set of predictable and controllable mechanisms."[138] This is in service of producing a subjectivity which exercises "self-management, self-ownership, and [the rule of law]."[139] This conception of the body — as well as the sorts of the legal regimes and practices which support it — position quotidian and organized resistance to state power as the retreat of reason. Moreover, the ideal of physical composure is intertwined with the "interiorization of social rule" [140]; citizens-subjects are meant to feel morally invested in the maintenance of the status quo and are expected to internalize (rather than react to) social contradictions. In defying the ideal of bodily and behavioural

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[137]Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc*, 274. Slaughter also argues that this sentimental mode of reading is oriented towards "forging collective identities among readers as consumers in the literary marketplace, through mutual imagination as a social practice." It prompts affectively charged connections among distant readers on the basis of shared sentiment and ultimately a sense of shared humanity.

[138] Silvia Federici, "The Great Caliban: The Struggle Against the Rebel Body," in *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Automedia, 2004), 144.

[139] Silvia Federici, "The Great Caliban," 149.

[140] Silvia Federici, "The Great Caliban," 152. It is important to note that the phrasing I am using here — "interiorization of social rule" — comes from Federici's discussion of how the lower classes in Europe, during this transition to capitalism, *did not* easily submit to these disciplinary measures. She writes that: "When the population appealed to reason, it was to voice anti-authoritarian demands, since self-mastery at the popular level meant the rejection of the established authority, rather than the interiorization of social rule."

regularity during the aforementioned moments, Assata and Manoranjan perform a refusal to be governed.

In the same way that *Assata: An Autobiography* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* represent the political education Assata and Manoranjan undergo within militant social movements, these texts also position the prison as a site of knowledge production. Assata is arrested and later convicted for the murder of State Trooper Werner Foerster in 1973 on relatively flimsy evidence. Meanwhile, Manoranjan is incarcerated after a period of being wanted by the government for his participation in various violent political actions. In these texts, the prison is of course a space which is physically, discursively, and legally cast away from the rest of society.[141] However, it is also represented as a space of literary-intellectual self-fashioning and generative social encounters. Within the prison, Assata and Manoranjan witness performances of national solidarity, as well as the nation-state's egalitarian pretensions, wither away. At the same time, the prison allows for otherwise untenable social encounters. These works depict the prison as a "non-place" — a transitional location where subjects are offered an alternative perspective on the norms that dictate social relations on the outside.

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[141] I am once again invoking Julia Kristeva's interpretation of the abject as environments, objects, or practices that foreground the frailty of the dominant social order and invoke subjective reactions of repulsion. Kristeva argues that abjection is a kind of "othering"; the abject is ultimately a function of hierarchy and allows a society to maintain its sense of identity. However, the abject is also that which is purposefully erased from the imaginary of the public sphere. In both of these autobiographies, the protagonists' time in the prison is marked by bodily trauma and deprivation. The space of the prison is shown not to be regulated according to normative standards of human rights. However, narratives of public safety are used to sanitize these kinds of violations. In other words, the prison is depicted as a space of routine violence which invokes cultural anxieties around punishment while at the same time being critical to the modern state's promise of protection for its citizens.

"Non-place," derived from the work of Marc Augé, extends the distinction between place and space.[142] Place is a clearly defined territory marked by habitual forms of speech, behaviour, and sociality which create sentimental and material interdependencies between inhabitants as well as a sense of identity connected to said place. However, non-place refers to those spaces which are strictly transitional and directed towards specific ends — for instance, transport, transit, commerce, or leisure. According to Augé, if "anthropological places create the organically social, so non-places create solitary contractuality."[143] That is to say, non-places are defined by the provisional *suspension* of established social ties — familial, cultural, communal, national, and so forth. Non-places also contain instructions for use, which "may be prescriptive ('Take right-hand lane'), prohibitive ('No Smoking'), or informative ('You are now entering the Beaujolais region')."[144] In other words, these are spaces which seek to direct people's appearance, mannerisms, and behaviours often under the threat of punishment. Augé suggests that within non-places the subject experiences the "passive joys of identity-loss, and the more active pleasures of role-playing."[145] He is primarily concerned with those establishments, facilities, and infrastructures which exist in the maintream of postindustrial societies and which people are thought to voluntarily frequent — like grocery stores, hotels, and airports. However, in what follows, I politicize Augé's category, using it to understand the way in which the prison transforms Assata and Manoranjan.

While Assata and Manorajan's experiences of incarceration are by no means "joyful," I insist that the autobiographies represent the modern prison as a "transitional space" in that it is

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[142] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (New York: Verso 2009 [1922]). Revisit chapter 1 for an account of Yi Fu Tuan's interpretation of the difference between place and space.
[143] Augé, *Non-Places,* 94.
[144] Augé, *Non-Places,* 96.
[145] Augé, *Non-Places,* 103.

meant to hold people for a definite period of time for the stated purpose of restoring justice.[146] The prison violently severs Assata and Manoranjan from their daily practices and social affiliations. The prohibitions that prisoners experience, the ways that they are coerced into compliance, and the kinds of people over which the prison has control lays bare the nation-state's egalitarian facade. Thus, their time in the prison continues to shape Assata and Manoranjan's perspective on the nation-state's ongoing promise of liberal freedoms to historically excluded communities and enables them to experience as well as to envision other kinds of collectivities.

One of the many female inmates that Assata connects with during her time in prison is a woman named Eva who had been "in that jail so many times before and [was] known as a hell raiser."[147] During their first encounter, Eva tells Assata that she can "astro-travel":

> "You can go anywhere you want to," she told me. "You just have to project yourself."
> ... "I want to project my mind and body out of here."
> "You'll be in jail wherever you go," Eva said.
> "You have a point there," i told her, "but I'd rather be in a minimum security prison or on the streets than in the maximum security prison in here. The only difference between here and the streets is that one is maximum security and the other is minimum security. The police patrol our communities just like the guards patrol here. *I don't have the faintest idea what it feels to be free* [emphasis mine]."
> Eva told me she knew how i felt.[148]

In the course of her dialogue with Eva, Assata transitions from insisting on the difference between the prison and the world outside to claiming that they constitute a unified whole. She comes to conceptualize the prison not as an aberration but as constitutive of ongoing social

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[146] I am referring here to the way that the modern liberal democratic nation-state constructs the prison within the law as well as public discourse. These autobiographies attest to the fact that what constitutes crime within the law is contingent and politically motivated.
[147] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 59.
[148] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 60.

relations within the United States. That is to say, she recognizes the way that the prison reflects, extends, and fulfills police practices. Moreover, her claim that "she didn't have the faintest idea of what it feels to be free," even outside the prison, throws into crisis the sanctity of the liberal public sphere. The sentimental notion of private individuals gathered together in public is disrupted by the reality of how communities' movements within public space are routinely mediated by carceral violence. As Assata observes the state's disciplinary practices accentuated within the prison, she grows critical of the boundary between consent and coercion. She comes to conceive of the prison as simply one mechanism used to enclose the mobility and resistance of Black people in the United States.[149]

It is worth noting that this insight emerges from her *dialogue* with Eva and that Eva is one of the many women that Assata encounters within her time in prison: "Gradually, i began to know the women. They were all very kind to me and treated me like a sister ... These women hadn't hurt anybody or stolen anything, yet they were sitting in jail ... Their only crime was competing with the state lottery."[150] In a formal suggestion of non-place, the narration registers a polyphony of voices within the prison:

> In spite of it all, those sisters kept the place jumping. They told all kinds of funny stories about their lives, things they had seen and experienced ...
> *Girl, that man was always in my pocketbook stealing my money ...*
> *My husband and me, we used to fight like cats and dogs ...*[151]

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[149] Angela Davis writes: "In black communities, wherever they are located, there exists an ever-present reminder that our universe must remain stable in its drabness, its poverty, its brutality ... The police, domestic care takers of violence, are the oppressor's emissaries, charged with the task of *containing us within the boundaries of our oppression* [emphasis mine]." In "Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation," in *The Angela Y Davis Reader*, ed. Joy James (Blackwell Publishing, 2008 [1998]), 49.
[150] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 53.
[151] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 54.

The speaker then notes that if Assata expected to find so-called "hardened criminals" in this space, she would have been sadly disappointed. Therefore, we see then that the prison allows for social encounters that may otherwise be untenable given the restrictions of place. These connections prove to be transformative to Assata not only in their capacity to sustain her through a grueling period of her life, but also because they undo the specter of criminality's hold on the psyche. In her discussion of the shifting construction of crime in the United States, Angela Davis states:

> [The] fear of crime [had] attained a status that bears a sinister similarity to the fear of communism as it came to restructure social perceptions during the fifties and sixties. The figure of the "criminal" — the racialized figure of the criminal — had come to represent the most menacing enemy of "American society." Virtually anything is acceptable — torture, brutality, vast expenditures of public funds — as long as it is done in the name of public safety.[152]

Davis suggests that the dominant aesthetic construction of the criminal is instrumental not only in the politically driven spending of public funds but also in securing the nation-state's legitimacy. It creates a collective anxiety which makes various kinds of state intervention appear necessary. The banality of Assata's everyday encounters with these women expose this aesthetics as a kind of mystification.

In *Interrogating my Chandal Life,* while he acknowledges the forms of abuse to which prisoners are subjected, Byapari largely expresses gratitude for his time in prison as it allows him to gain literacy. Manoranjan is taught to read and write by a fifty year old man who takes an interest in him and assumes the role of his teacher. This man says to Manoranjan:

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[152] Angela Davis, "Race and Criminalization," in *The Angela Y Davis Reader*, ed. Joy James (Blackwell Publishing, 2008 [1998]), 66.

> Your enemies cannot touch you. Here you are secure. Here you also have all the time you want on your hands ... Learn to read and write ... Forget the world outside. Imagine yourself as having arrived here where you will stay for a length of time. The sooner you can get that other world out of your mind, the better for you.[153]

While the security that the prison affords is clearly an exaggeration, Manoranjan's teacher recognizes the sorts of possibilities — the opening up of time, relative freedom from economic obligation— that arise from Manoranjan's removal from the outside world. Moreover, the prison is also what brings Manoranjan in contact with this man to begin with — it overrides the communal, socio-economic, and geographical differences that would otherwise keep them separated from one another within a highly stratified social order. The prison inadvertently creates the material conditions required for Manoranjan's acquisition of literacy and his subsequent literary ventures.[154] In learning to read and write, Manoranjan also attains a new way of seeing himself:

> You are now travelling," [says his teacher] "from darkness to light. Inching forward, one step at a time, towards the dawn. Write, keep writing. Don't stop."

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[153] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 201.

[154] In his discussion of the differences and need for alliance between the Northern workers and Southern peasants in Italy at the time he was writing, Antonio Gramsci acknowledges that there are discrepancies in the intellectual-political development between different social classes. However, these discrepancies are not biologically nor culturally determined. Rather, Gramsci suggests that they are contingent on communities' access to cultural infrastructure — referring to educational institutions, presses, publications, materials, and spaces for individual or collective study. In *Interrogating my Chandal Life*, it is in the prison where some semblance of this infrastructure exists. While the prison does not provide Manoranjan with these resources exactly, it frees up his time to engage with texts and brings him into contact with people with whom he can partake in study. See, "Some Aspects of the Southern Question," in *Pre-Prison Writings*, edited by Raymond Geuss and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 313-338.

> I seemed to be immersed in a world of dreams. And one night I dreamt of this bright angel-like figure who told me, "What you write on the prison floor are not letters, but your life."

In breaking the generational legacy of illiteracy, Manoranjan is represented as exceeding the possibilities afforded to him by his station in life. Therefore, the proclamation of the angel-like figure from his dream — that Manoranjan is not just writing letters but also his life — betrays his growing desire to acquire a testimonial voice. It speaks to his willingness to assume and intervene in the tradition of Dalit vernacular writing which, to quote Sreya Chatterjee, is "poised between a regionalism that revels in local dialect and the non-transferable specificity of caste conditioning, on the one hand, and a broad universalism that invokes a certain global paradigm of protest (both politically and culturally) on the other."[155] Essentially, it is in the prison that Manoranjan gains his desire to perform knowledge.

Interrogating My Chandal Life also foregrounds the role of Naxalite political prisoners in raising the consciousness of other incarcerated people. While Manoranjan had been sporadically involved with the Naxals prior to his incarceration (and presumably arrested for this), it is within the prison that he becomes further sensitized to the kind of threat that they represent to the state. The speaker describes how the Naxals were constantly engaged in confrontations with prison authorities:

> But the Naxals were different. They took the plate of rice and dal to the Jail Superintendent and asked, "Is this what you are giving human beings to eat?"

[155] Sreya Chatterjee,"Dialectics and Caste: Rethinking Dalit Life Writing in the Vernacular, Comparing Dalit Narratives," *Comparative Literature Studies* 53, no. 2 (2016): 378

> They complained about the medicines and medical treatment too. Though their complaints were largely futile, their courage angered the officials, and provoked their brutality.[156]

The text shows that these prisoners do not passively accept their sentences but rather transform the prison into a site of political struggle. These performances of refusal — the questioning of the forms of deprivation to which prisoners are subjected — surface the fragility of "post-Independent notions of social harmony, government sponsored welfare, and constitutional safeguards."[157] Other prisoners appear transformed by witnessing these spectacles — for instance, Manoranjan's teacher says to him: "Look at these young Naxalites. Aren't they all a bit mad? Insane to the extent that they dare to challenge the might of the state ... And it is to these insane people to whom we look to with hope. Everyone lives for himself. Who lives for others?"[158] The prison paradoxically stages an encounter between those who are dispossessed and those who are struggling for revolutionary change. The autobiography speaks to the way that these encounters cause the former to become critical of national culture and sensitizes them to ways of life and living that are oriented towards transforming social relations.

Assata: An Autobiography and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* represent the way that Assata and Manoranjan purposefully exceed the condition of bare life and seize political agency — developing into what Gramsci calls "organic intellectuals."[159] Gramsci states that while all people have intellectual capabilities, not all of them exercise the social role of an intellectual.

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[156] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life,* 212.
[157] Chatterjee, "Dialectics and Caste," 378.
[158] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life,* 206.
[159] Antonio Gramsci, "The Intellectuals," in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffery Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971 [1948]), 3-23.

Organic intellectuals are distinct from traditional intellectuals in that the latter see themselves as a class that is separate from society even as they often support the moral-intellectual dominant. Organic intellectuals are those who emerge from specific social classes and recognize this fact; they are able and often deputized to articulate the social realities and interests of these classes. These autobiographies show that organic intellectuals do not emerge into the scene fully formed. Assata and Manoranjan undergo cognitive, affective, and aesthetic transformations — unlearning dominant norms and developing new ways of seeing. It is their immersion and encounters within peripheral sites of education — where resistant values are espoused, practiced, and experimented with — which allows them to transform into organic intellectuals and prefigures the writing of these revolutionary works.

Chapter 3: Complicit Readerships

So far, I have discussed how these political autobiographies narrate non-normative subject formation by subverting the logic of the affirmative bildungsroman and representing the process through which their protagonists consolidate their political commitments. In this final chapter, I shift my focus to a consideration of subject formation in the context of global commodity culture. How is the reader asked to engage with these expressly political works? How are they positioned in relation to these resistant subjects? While the autobiographies are attuned to historical injury as well as both individual and collective trauma, I argue that *Assata: An Autobiography* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* reject forms of sympathy that are rooted in pity and instead employ formal innovations to draw the reader into a relationship of complicity. When I speak of "complicity," I am referring to the way that these narratives compel the reader to confront their ideological position, create a sense of immersion in the struggles of marginal subjects, and ultimately direct the reader's political commitments. I insist that these works do not allow the reader to construct a comfortable distance between themselves and marginal subjects, whether it be by detaching from or passively witnessing their pain. I consider how these autobiographies weave various mediums — court statements, original poetry, political speeches — into their narratives. I also examine shifts in these narratives' point of view as well as shifts in the way that the audience is addressed. And finally, I consider Assata and Manoranjan's performances of knowledge at critical points in the narrative. These formal innovations foreground the political stakes of engaging with these life narratives.

The positioning of the reader in *Assata: An Autobiography* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* offers an effective counterpoint to institutionalized multicultural and Anglophone postcolonial cultural production. Much has been written about the exoticism of difference as

formerly excluded social groups are granted some inclusion into the literary field in the age of global commodity culture. Graham Huggan defines exoticism as an aesthetic-political practice which involves "the systematic assimilation of cultural difference, ascribing familiar meanings and associations to unfamiliar things [as well as] an expanded, if inevitably distorted, comprehension of diversity which effectively limits assimilation since the exotic is ... kept at arm's length rather than taken as one's own."[160] Exoticism is essentially a mode of representation that seeks to *contain* difference. Its corresponding texts and reading practices call on the so-called Other to fulfill a metropolitan audiences' simultaneous needs for universality and novelty. At the same time, however, they refuse to entangle audiences within historical struggles nor do they demand that audiences commit themselves to oppositional politics. Melamed writes about the role of institutionalized literary studies in establishing liberal antiracisms in the post-WWII United States. She discusses the way that both literary studies within United States universities as well as popular literary studies outside of universities delineate permissible forms of difference:

> [Dominant notions] about literature and race have helped liberal antiracisms produce and police national culture ... [They] have trained readers, especially those destined to play professional or managerial roles in social orders, to internalize liberal antiracist norms as part of their sense of identity and social mission ... [And], by privileging reading literature as a way for dominant classes to come to know racialized others intimately (racialized because dispossessed by economic orders), liberal antiracisms made it possible to disseminate highly ideological truths and information bits as authentic and substantive knowledge.[161]

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[160] Graham Huggans, *The Postcolonial Exotic* (Routledge, 2001), 14.
[161] Melamed, *Represent and Destroy,* 16.

In the texts that it valorizes and the kinds of reading practices that it encourages, institutionalized multicultural literature seeks to make the racialized Other legible and sympathetic to a metropolitan audience. In other words, this field of literature and literary studies positions this racialized Other as an object of knowledge. Its main preoccupation is not embroiling the reader in the contradictions that constitute racial capitalism in the United States. Rather, it seeks to facilitate the self fashioning of individuals from dominant classes, who use these texts to develop their tolerance of difference as well as to learn how to manage racialized antagonisms. Moreover, readers are taught to see the act of reading itself as tantamount to effecting meaningful social change. Chaterjee discusses similar tendencies in Anglophone writing from postcolonial South Asia, in which the experiences of the normative, enfranchised citizen-subjects are positioned as representative of the postcolonial condition. These writings undermine the "constitutive unevenness within the periphery," erasing the experiences of those subjects who the state's ideological and repressive apparatuses actually marks with difference.[162] She claims that what distinguishes Dalit life writings like Byapari's from these texts is its "formal critique of nationalist culture and its normative citizen-subject —the individual, upper-caste, bourgeois male."[163]

These fields of literary studies intersect with a mode of relationality Lauren Berlant calls "national sentimentality":

> "National sentimentality operates when relatively privileged citizens are exposed to the suffering of their intimate [others], so that to be virtuous requires feeling the pain of flawed or denied citizenship as their own pain ... [In] the discourse of national

[162] Chaterjee, "Dialectics and Caste," 395.
[163] Chaterjee, "Dialectics and Caste," 378.

> sentimentality, identification with pain, a universal true feeling, would thereby lead to structural social change."[164]

Institutionalized multicultural and Anglophone postcolonial cultural production — which privileges the acceptance of limited forms of difference over discomforting ideological-structural transformation — tends to encourage sympathetic identification with narratives of pain. The liberal metropolitan reader's extension of pity towards the dispossessed (or those they perceive as such) allows them to pursue an image of their own benevolence. National sentimentality conflates an aesthetics of witnessing trauma with meaningful recognition and redress for harm. The marginal subject is once again reduced to a condition of bare life — they are conceived of as only a body in pain, to be rescued through state sanctioned humanitarianism. This sort of cultural production denies these subjects substantial epistemic and political agency, and forecloses the possibility of the audience engaging with them on the basis of accountability and a recognition of common interests.

Assata: An Autobiography and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* refuse the discourse of pity first and foremost through the ways that they guide the reader into the narrative. Shakur's narrative starts and ends with original poems — "Affirmation" and "The Tradition," respectively — which aesthetically entangle the reader in collective struggle. "Affirmation" juxtaposes Shakur's experiences of carceral violence with the utopianism which animated the Black Power

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[164] Lauren Berlant, "The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics," in *Left Legalism/Left Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 35. In the context of this paper, it is worth noting that the kind of sentimentality Berlant describes can also be experienced on a transnational level.

movements of the 1960s and 70s.[165] The poem represents the dire situation of the political prisoner in the US through lurid descriptions like "I have eaten crow and blunder bread/and breathed the stench of indifference" or "I have been locked up by the lawless./Handcuffed by the haters./Gagged by the greedy."[166] However, this chronicle of bodily pain is punctuated by this nonchalant assertion at the end of the text: "And, if i know anything at all,/"It's that a wall is just a wall/and nothing more at all./It can be broken down."[167] This passage — which deflates the power of an oppressive structure with an ease of action — interrupts the feelings of pity that a reader may have been indulging up to this point. As the poem concludes, attention is shifted away from pain and towards the possibility of transformation. Meanwhile, "The Tradition" — which tracks Black radical tradition in the United States — moves at a pace which undermines the development of pity:

> In classrooms. In churches
> In courtrooms. In prisons.
> We carried it on.
>
> On soap boxes and picket lines.
> Welfare lines, unemployment lines.
> Our lives on the line,
> We carried it on.[168]

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[165] Here I am relying on Jameson's definition of utopianism as a "peculiar suspension of the political ... a certain distance from political institutions which encourages an endless play of fantasy around their possible reconstructions and restructurations." In "Politics of Utopia," 45. "Affirmation" is exemplary of the kind of literary text which seeks to imagine new horizons of possibility outside and against the exigencies of the present moment.
[166] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 1.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 264.

We can see here how the poem *compresses* the totality of the Black radical tradition by listing signifiers, as opposed to offering illustrative accounts, of racialized struggle. The poem tells the story of a collective "we," thereby foreclosing an attachment to a single subject. Moreover, it strategically refuses access to these subjects' interiority. Instead, they are more often characterized by the sites of struggle which they inhabit — like the classroom, courtroom, church, prison, and so forth. Essentially, "The Tradition" refuses to offer the reader an image of pain onto which they project their pity.

These poems also delegate to the reader the work required to sustain the struggle for racial justice. The aforementioned passage in "Affirmation" — "a wall is just a wall/and nothing more at all./it can be broken down" — is a call for action. The speaker foregrounds the task of dismantling the boundaries that constitute the nation-state and those which exist in its confines. It is worth noting that the reader does not witness another subject performing this task; the poem seems to offer this task to the reader themselves. Likewise, the final stanza of "Affirmation" — "And i believe that a lost shop/steered by tired, seasick sailors,/can still be guided home/to port" — concludes the poem with the valorization of collective struggle.[169] The image of sailors engaged in a common task also represents relations based on a recognition of intertwined interests.[170] Meanwhile, "The Tradition" repeats the demand to "carry it on" or to "carry on a

[169] Ibid.

[170] Much has been written about how critical literature emerging from or rooted in the experiences of subaltern communities may offer a general critique of capitalist modernity. In "Dialectics and Caste," Chaterjee describes Dalit literary and intellectual movements — exemplified by groups like the Dalit Panthers and thinkers like Namdeo Dhasal — which were "attentive to the totality of structural conditions producing caste as lived experience ... [and situated] the Dalit question in relation to and at the heart of anti-colonial national-liberation struggles against US imperialism in the late 1960s and 1970s" (380). Similarly, Angela Davis has written on how the mechanisms of social control intended for slaves in the United States have evolved into the contemporary policing and prison system which target other populations as well. She writes with regard to the dealth penalty: "Though this may seem counterintuitive, I would argue that the death penalty is something akin to a "return of the repressed" racism of slavery, now let loose on whomever happens to be caught in its grasp, whether they're racialized as

Black Tradition," referring to the importance of sustaining the knowledge that is produced through Black people's history of struggle in the United States — knowledge that is crucial for understanding the structure of American governance and how best to oppose it.[171] The repetition of this phrase — particularly, three times at the end of the poem — constitutes an attempt to interpellate the reader. The poem urges the reader themselves to engage with and maintain this body of knowledge and practice of revolt. Essentially, these poems which begin and end Shakur's life narrative foreclose sympathetic identification with the pain of the racialized Other and instead figure the reader as an accomplice. The reader is offered an aesthetics and politics of coalition — the *conscious* commitment to a struggle against capital and the state.

Meanwhile, *Interrogating My Chandal Life* starts with a preface that explicitly addresses the metropolitan reader through the use of the second person narration. The preface asks this reader to remain attuned to their everyday encounters with the casteized Other. Moreover, this preface constructs Manoranjan as a composite character. He is described as any one of the many dispossessed subjects that may be encountered in both the rural and urban landscape — a cowherd, a tea stall worker, a young adult carrying luggage in a railway station, a rickshaw

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black, Latino, Native American, or white. The most compelling explanation of the endurance of capital punishment in the U.S.—the only advanced industrialized nation that executes its citizens routinely—can be discovered in its embeddedness in slavery and in the way the racism of slavery caused it to be differentially inflicted on black people." In *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 97. A systemic analysis of this kind does not suggest that the class interests of social groups are always congruent, that the intersections of struggles are apparent, and that there are not significant material and ideological barriers to engaging in collective struggle. Rather, it asks for an attunement to the way structures of capital as well as legal and political institutions produce a world that is unified and yet uneven. This paradigm allows one to understand commonalities between different forms of exploitation and to recognize overarching systems of social control. As Fred Moten colloquially puts it: "The coalition emerges out of a recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already realized it's fucked up for us. I don't need your help. I need you to recognize that this shit is killing you too, however much more softly." See, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 140.

[171] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 263.

puller, an insurgent fighting the police. In other words, Manoranjan becomes the face of otherwise anonymous figures: "I know all these Manoranjans," says the speaker, "they are all within me."[172] Before the narrative of Manoranjan's life starts, this preface seeks to defamiliarize the reader's conception of the spaces that they are assumed to routinely occupy:

> Here I am. I know I am not entirely unfamiliar to you. You've seen me a hundred times in a hundred ways. Yet if you insist that you do not recognize me, let me explain myself in a little greater detail, so you will not feel that way anymore. When the darkness of unfamiliarity lifts, you will feel, why, yes, I do know this person. I've seen this man.[173]

The speaker then goes on to guide the reader through various locales in which the latter may have encountered him:

> Human memory is rather weak. So I would not press you to remember the forgotten days. But take a look at that green field outside your window. You will see a bare-bodied goatherd running behind his cows and goats with a stick ... That is me ... Now come outside your house for a while. Look at that tea stall that stands at the corner of the road where your lane meets the main road. That boy whom you see, uncombed hair, wearing a dirty, smelly, torn vest with open sores on his hands and feet ... that there is my boyhood.[174]

The speaker scans the so-called "excluded landscape" through which he claims the reader moves without always taking notice.[175] He materializes the subjects as well as the forms of labour which

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[172] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, xi.
[173] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life,* ix.
[174] Ibid.
[175] Denis Cosgrove states that the landscape is a "specific way of seeing" that composes the external world into a visual unity. Applying Raymond William's account of dominant, residual, emergent, and archaic forms to the study of the landscape, Cosgrove argues that the way this visual unity is constructed is always value laden. "Dominant landscape" refers to the way that space is conceived as a cohesive unit by and for dominant classes. Notably, across a range of disciplines, dominant landscapes typically minimize the figure of the labourer and erase the kinds of work through which built environments are reproduced. Cosgrove uses the term "excluded landscape" to describe the totality of spaces and spatial practices which constitute the

supposedly are erased, repressed, or dismissed by such a reader in the course of their everyday activities. At the same time, it is significant to note that the speaker effectively *imposes* these locales onto the reader — *placing* the reader in a home with a green field outside, *moving* them to a tea shop at the intersection of two roads. In this way, the speaker simultaneously guides and confines the reader; he stages intimate confrontations with the casteized Other. In other words, the reader is not given the option of looking away from the structures of caste and class oppression — of disappearing into the dominant landscape where they feel most comfortable. Despite his playful politeness at the beginning of the preface, the speaker abruptly adopts a combative tone towards the reader as he states:

> Every individual is admirable in his or her own judgment. But to your ears, the sound of my crackled, splintered, and pittied drum may sound a rhythm that irritates you because you belong to this time and society of which I am about to draw a picture. Who knows when my accusing finger may at some stage point towards you?[176]

The speaker gestures to the way that a reader may internalize cultural normativity, with its paradigm of liberal reform, such that they privilege certain kinds of speech and agency while stigmatizing others. The reader once again is not given an option; they are forced to confront the way that their judgements are shaped by their social-political contexts. While the opening of the preface invites the reader to look beyond themselves, the threat of the speaker's "accusing finger may at some stage point towards [them]" calls on the reader to let these insights transform the way that they see themselves. Rather than pursuing an image of their own benevolence by assuming their capacity to tolerate difference, the liberal metropolitan reader is called on to

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lifeworld of marginal subjects. See, "Geography Is Everywhere: Culture and Symbolism in Human Landscapes," in *Horizons in Human Geography*, ed. Derek Gregory and Rex Walford (MacMillon Press LTD, 1989), 118-135.

[176] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life,* x.

consider their entanglements and tacit support of systems of exploitation. Therefore, this autobiography, which positions itself as an "interrogation" of the life of a nomadic Dalit labourer and insusrgent, actually begins with the interrogation of the reader. The preface does not allow the reader to passively witness the pain of subaltern subjects. It draws the reader into intimate contact with these subjects and it compels them to reckon with their own collusion with structures of capital and state power.

While these autobiographies are focalized from the perspective of Assata and Manoranjan, they also contain moments where the speakers channel the collective voices of the communities within which these protagonists find themselves. That is to say, these narratives are punctured by what Saidiya Hartman calls "utterances of the chorus."[177] In these moments, the speakers aim to capture the "the vision, language, and rhythms" of the aforementioned communities."[178] These collective utterances function as a testament to the political agency of these groups. They offer a counter-narrative that is free from the "judgment and classification that subject [these people] to surveillance, arrest, punishment, and confinement."[179] They allow the text to "recover [rather than undermine] the insurgent ground of these lives; [untethering] waywardness, refusal, [and rebellion] from their identification as deviance, criminality, and pathology."[180] These utterances are critical for submerging the reader into the struggles of subaltern subjects — that is, the ways in which they understand, negotiate, and oppose their subjugation.

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[177] Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), xiv.
[178] Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, xiii.
[179] Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, xiv.
[180] Ibid.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the account of Assata's incarceration is marked by the stories of other women inmates. These stories are told verbatim and appear in italics in the text:

> They told all kinds of stories about their lives, things they had seen and experienced. Some had a natural knack for comedy. What amazed me was the way they told the saddest stories in the world and made everyone laugh about them.
> *Girl, that [man] was always in my pocketbook stealing my money. And all he did with it was blow it on the racetracks. Girl, that man spent so much money on the racetracks, he made me wish i was a horse.*
> *... My husband and me, we used to fight like cats and dogs. And he was jealous as the day is long. Chile, we went to the bar this night and [he] got all high, and started thinkin' i was messing with some dude at the bar. As soon as we got outside, boy, he jumped on me like a gorilla jumps on a banana. Don't you know that man hit me so hard he knocked my teeth out of my mouth. "Now hold on a minute!" i told that fool. "We can fight later. I ain't got no 'nother four hundred dollars to spend on no false teeth."*[181]

The women with which Assata is incarcerated speak in jest about marital strife and domestic violence; they do not disclose their pain in any apparently transparent way. This does not necessarily mean that these women are resistant to pain. Instead, these women are *narrating* these lived experiences in ways that will allow them to form bonds within the social world of the prison.[182] These women's utterances eschew normative assumptions about the trajectory of trauma; their comedic renditions of these violent events are instead critical to their self

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[181] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 56.

[182] György Lukács differentiates between description and narration. He claims that those who use description "reduce life to *still life*" in that they catalogue details without delineating the significance of different events. In the descriptive mode, details take precedence over the actions and interrelationships of characters. On the other hand, narration is attuned to the meaning that events hold for the protagonists as well as the dynamics that exist between characters. Whereas description positions the reader as one who observes, narration positions the reader as one who experiences. See, "Narrate or Describe," in *Writer & Critic and Other Essays,* ed. and trans. Arthur D. Kahn (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1970), 110-148.

fashioning. Once again, the text refuses the reader access into the interiority of marginal subjects, foreclosing any sort of indulgence in their pain. Rather than offering seemingly unmediated access into the intimate lives of the racialized Other, this moment in the narrative compels the reader to engage with the ordinary ways in which these women may imagine, understand, and disseminate their experiences. Moreover, the way that these utterances appear in the text — as a polyphony of voices that are not tethered to specific individuals, on the vernacular register — also disrupts normative testimonial practices. The text registers only *narratives,* which may belong to any one or many of the incarcerated women. It does not prop up individuals who may embody specific tragedies, thereby transforming them into objects of pity. These utterances constitute what Bakhtin calls a kind of "social speech type" which articulates a specific point of view on the world.[183] The reader is not left merely witnessing the plight of these women, but is instead compelled to adopt their vantage point.

Similarly, as Manorajan prepares the explosives for the attack on the landlord family, the speaker increasingly focuses on the consciousness of the villagers. At first the speaker articulates what he imagines is the significance of the action for them: "They had just dedicated their minds, their hearts, their bodies to a dream. None of them knew anything about politics ... But they did know that they wanted to kill those who had stripped their women and brutalized them."[184] Eventually, the focalization shifts from Manoranjan's individual first person perspective to that of the villagers' collective perspective:

> As they watched me at my job, I could sense their intoxication mounting. Will kill them all. They have a lot to answer for. All I had taken was a bunch of bananas, and they beat

[183] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, trans. Michael Holoquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).
[184] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 178.

> me for a whole day. And then threw me in jail. I rotted there for seven years. My wife ran away, unable to bear the hunger. Will get them now.[185]

Here the speech is also untethered from a specific individual; it may reflect the experience of any one or number of people within this community. It is ambiguous whether the fragments constitute a cohesive whole or if each one refers to a separate incident. Therefore, they have a similar effect of producing a polyphony of voices. Once again, the text does not position the reader as a passive witness but instead replicates the experience of finding one's self in the midst of a crowd. It is worth noting that, unlike the women from Assata's prison, this crowd of people have an actively combative posture. This is not only evident at the level of content ("Will kill them all") but also at the level of form as the abrupt, short, declarative statements almost seem to attack the audience. Significantly, these utterances elucidate the kinds of conditions which produce insurgency. The speech of the villagers begins and ends with "Will kill them all" and "Will get them now," respectively — however, most of the speech is concerned with those experiences of "surveillance, arrest, punishment, and confinement" to which their insurgency is a response. In other words, the reader is again wedged into the historical process which leads to these moments of insurgency.

These "utterances from the chorus" are not meant to represent the monolithic, authentic voice of marginal subjects.[186] I insist that they constitute a formal technique that produces for the reader a sense of being *embedded* within these communities. This kind of immersive experience

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[185] Byapari, Interrogating My Chandal Life, 179.

[186] Gayatri Spivak has written extensively about how the desires and interests of subaltern classes cannot always be assumed to align. Moreover, she has discussed how scholars who assume that the subaltern will make her experiences readily apparent to them fail to fulfill their own theoretical responsibilities and interrogate their structural position within the international division of labour. See, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988).

undermines the possibility of these marginal subjects being reduced to objects of pity. The reader is compelled to confront the way that they conceive of their own experiences of violence and resistance — even as this may not align with hegemonic codes of morality. Moreover, the reader's own identity position is momentarily suspended and they are forced to dissolve into a collective made up of those who may otherwise be seen as the Other.

And finally, *Assata: An Autobiography* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* represent occasions wherein Assata and Manoranjan employ the form of the "discourse" — notably, a written account of Assata's opening statement during one of her her court trials and Manoranjan's impromptu speech at the political rally organized by the Communist Party. A counterpoint to the aforementioned "utterances from the chorus," the discourse constitutes a monologic, as opposed to a dialogic, form. The speaker of the discourse typically articulates decisive claims about the progression of history as well as a call (though not necessarily a program) for action. Critically, the discourse is a performance of knowledge; its speaker (re)claims epistemic and political authority. The discourses that Assata and Manoranjan deliver are not concerned with evoking the audiences' sympathy. Instead, they seek to activate the reader's consciousness of their own agency.

Assata: An Autobiography represents the many trials that Assata is subjected to during her time as a political prisoner. During one of these trials — in which she is accused of a bank robbery based on an unclear surveillance photo of a Black woman — Assata is given the opportunity of delivering an opening statement to the jury herself. In this statement, Assata not only calls into question her own persecution but also delivers a tirade against the legal construction of crime in the United States:

> [I] have never liked speaking in public, but i tried my best to express to the jury some of what i was feeling:
> *Judge Thompson, Brothers and Sisters, men and women of the jury.*
> *I have decided to act as co-counsel and to make this opening statement, not because i have any illusions about my legal abilities, but rather, because there are things i must say to you. ... When we were sitting in this courtroom, during the jury selection process, i listened to Judge Thompson tell you about the amerikan system of justice… His words were like a beautiful dream in a beautiful world. But i have been awaiting trial for two and one half years. And justice, in my eyesight, has not been the amerikan dream. It has been the amerikan nightmare ... [What] about the 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 justice for them?*[187]

Assata contextualizes her own political persecution, gesturing to the discrepancy between legal institutions' discursive valorization of the principle "justice" and the material conditions of the working class in America. In starting this statement with the announcement that there are things she *must* say to her audience, Assata not only asserts her own authority — countering the ways that she has been systematically discredited as an intellectual through state-controlled media and popular culture — but also invokes a sense of urgency. This move once again undermines the positioning of the audience as passive witnesses or neutral arbiters; the audience is instead bestowed with some kind of responsibility to act on the information they are about to hear. It is worth noting that Assata counters ideological construction of crime and justice with rhetorical questions, each beginning with "what about?" Through this repetition, Assata ushers the audience into a practice of suspicion; she demands that they become sensitized to what is

[187] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 166.

excluded, marginalized, or repressed within nationalist mythologies. Moreover, Assata assumes the hesitation of her audience (speaking on their behalf) and then responds to these concerns: "Why, you are probably asking yourself, would this government want to put me or Ronald Myers in jail? In my mind, the answer is very simple: for the same reason that this government has put everyone else in jail who spoke up for freedom, who said give me liberty or give me death."[188] Again, in normative testimonial practices, the audience is positioned as an entity which observes and assesses the stories of marginal subjects. However, Assata compels the audience to confront the problem of agency in two ways: she draws attention to the way that the audience's response to her and those like her are always mediated by hegemonic constructions of justice, while at the same time assigning to them the responsibility of interrogating and opposing these forces of mediation.

While *Interrogating My Chandal Life* does not offer a transcription of Manoranjan's speech at the political rally that he interrupts, the speaker registers its scope and rhythm:

> Like an actor in a countryside jatra, I narrated all that I had learnt from my Communist friends and leaders all these years, raising and lowering my pitch as the occasion demanded ... After completing this story, I went over to the story of Jan Sangh. And for that I travelled back four thousand years to the Rig Veda and the verse in its tenth mandala that supported verna or discrimination based on birth. This verse was such a favourite of the Germans that they translated the Veda into their own language, to later become an inspiration for Nazism. Nazism brought in Hitler. The superiority of the Aryan blood and consequent hatred towards non-Aryan blood. The Holocaust. The World War. Axis power versus the Allies. Attack on Soviet Socialism. Hitler's defeat. Guru Golwalkar's attempt to take up Nazism to begin the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh ... Partition. Independence. Nehru family's dominance. Emergency. Massacre of the Naxalites and the present time ... I ended my speech with, "You are all intelligent people.

[188] Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 167

> I am certain I will not have to tell you whom you should vote for — who will take care of your needs. Be careful whom you choose, for it is you who will have to pay the price."[189]

Manoranjan overwhelms this audience with a sense of historical continuity — foregrounding connections across time and space. And the way that the text shifts from full sentences to inundating the reader with only the title of historical events also has the effect of producing a sense of urgency. The reader is called to confront the unceasing nature of historical developments and to acquire new ways of seeing contemporary phenomena as they are situated within their respective contexts. Whereas the relations of national sentimentality demand a myopic focus on a single travesty, this speech plunges the reader into the historical process. Like Assata's opening statement, Manoranjan's speech reveals the way that individual agency is historically mediated and foregrounds the importance of disrupting the progression of history as such. Thus, the speech ends with a reminder of the significance of political decisions — **"**be careful whom you choose, for it is you who will have to pay the price." The reader is once again called upon to take a political position and warned of the gravity of the position that they assume.

Assata: An Autobiography and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* refuse to position their readers as witnesses to the pain of marginal communities. These autobiographies not only narrate non-normative subject formation, but also demand a different mode of relating to these subjects. They produce this sense of complicity, as opposed to passive witnessing, by forcing the reader to confront alternative social perspectives, simulating the experience of being in struggle with marginal subjects, and demanding that they choose a political position. These autobiographies thus render transparent the political stakes of engaging with their accounts of subject formation and subjectivity.

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[189] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 179.

Conclusion

Assata: An Autobiography and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* tell the stories of revolutionaries who depart from permissible ways of being — what Pierre Bourdieu calls *habitus*. Bourdieu suggests that the objective structures (of law, governance, production, etc.) of a social order are internalized by individuals in the form of "durable dispositions."[190] These dispositions, of which individuals are not aware and instead come to pass as sensible, function "at every moment as a matrix of perception, appreciations, and actions."[191] Habitus is what coordinates individual and collective practices, producing conditions of continuity within a social order. It is essentially the weight of history on the present moment; it constitutes the assignment of value to certain attributes over others in ways that appear natural but are actually historically determined. Critically, Bourdieu foregrounds the "structural lag between opportunities [for social transformation] and the dispositions required to grasp them."[192]

Shakur and Byapari's autobiographies reckon with how marginal subjects, who not only experience exploitation but are marked as outcasts within their social order, may assume or aspire to forms of perception, appreciations, and actions which are at odds with their conditions of existence and which were never intended to serve them. These works challenge optimistic attachments to normative trajectories of development, in which an individual is incorporated into the community by developing liberal-reformist responses to the contradictions of the world around them. Thus, they disrupt the valorization of the rights-and-duty bearing citizen-subject as the ideal form of personhood. The protagonists of these autobiographies instead adopt dispositions which violate the so-called sensible. They come to reject fantasies of inclusion as

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[190] Pierre Bourdieu, "Structures and the Habitus," in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013 [1977]), 72-96.
[191] Bourdieu, 83.
[192] Ibid.

they enter spaces which allow them to imagine a radical reconfiguration of social relations. Essentially, these autobiographies represent the transition from one kind of disposition to another.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I showed how these works subvert the script of the affirmative bildungsroman, which Morretti and Slaughter position as a cultural technology of the liberal-democratic nation-state in the way that it idealizes the figure of the citizen-subject. Whereas the affirmative bildungsroman narrates an individual's transformation into this citizen-subject (or its facsimile), these autobiographies gesture to how the mark of difference (of race, of caste) frustrates this transformation. Assata and Manoranjan come to understand the insidious manner in which the liberal-democratic nation-state simultaneously promises and denies citizenship to marginal subjects. Significantly, Assata and Manoranjan's coming-of-age is marked by the recognition of their status as "bare life" — the way in which the state sees Black and Dalit communities as bodies to govern as opposed to subjects with political agency. The second chapter discussed these works' representation of "self-fashioning" — the construction of the self against the grain of dominant culture. This chapter focused on the *conditions* in which revolutionary intellectual-political self-fashioning takes place. It argued that these autobiographies valorize peripheral spaces — spaces of collective action, incarceration — for their ability to offer the kinds of encounters and visions of liberation which would otherwise be suppressed by the state. And finally, the third chapter engaged with the formal innovations of Shakur and Byapari's autobiographies. For Byapari and Shakur, the valorization of a resistant subject is not only an aesthetic project but a political one. Their texts refuse to merely lay bare the pain of marginal subjects for consumption, for the reader to conflate the witnessing of pain with meaningful recognition and redress. Instead, they foreground the political stakes of

engaging with life narratives of struggles. I demonstrated how Byapari and Shakur reject the "discourse of pity" and to draw the reader into a relationship of complicity. Specifically, I argued that these texts simulate engagement in collective struggle and perpetually draw the reader's attention to their own agency. In this way, these are committed texts that demand that the reader interrogate where they stand.

Assata: An Autobiography and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* throw into crisis the egalitarian pretensions of liberal democratic nation-states, by exposing the violent antagonisms that constitute their social relations. I have sought to understand these works' shared representation of *difference* — the ways that the difference is simultaneously authorized and obscured by the state as well as the way that subjects marked by difference resist their marginalization. Critically, a comparative study of these texts sensitizes us to an essential contradiction of liberal democratic governance: the valorization of individual freedom (and conversely responsibility) alongside severe restrictions on the way people may construct themselves. However, as I have argued, Shakur and Byapari's works show what it means to exceed permissible forms of agency.

These autobiographies penetrate the mirage of abstract "freedom," "democracy," and "progress" at a historical moment when the nation-state sought to legitimize itself by offering limited inclusion to marginal communities. In destabilizing the narrative of an individual's journey of upward mobility in which they eventually find their place in the world, the texts complicate the notion of a singular, universal modernity — gesturing to "the perception that [progress] itself is unequally distributed the world over."[193] However, Shakur and Byapari do not position this unevenness as an aberration or an oversight. They do not conceive of race and caste oppression as merely a vestige from the past that have somehow found their way into the present

[193] Majumder, "Race, Caste, and Intellectual History," 135.

— though they are products of history and have assumed different forms as institutions have emerged and withered away.[194] Instead, these works position race and caste oppression as, to quote Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death [and injury]."[195] They articulate the way in which the state — while it may try to tantalize those within and outside its jurisdiction with the aesthetics of horizontal comradeship — is not fundamentally interested in the advancement of all, if such a thing is even possible within the present political dispensation. Shakur and Byapari autobiographies represent the winding process whereby the protagonists come to realize that the social groups to which they belong constitute reserve populations which are set aside for use or disposal. While individuals within these groups may of course achieve normative success, and these groups may be granted certain formal concessions, these narratives show Assata and Manoranjan's recognition of the way that meaningful incorporation — the movement from the margins to the center on the economic, political, and cultural registers — remains the nation-state's unfulfilled promise.

In comparing these life narratives, I do not intend to suggest that race and caste have an identical role within their respective social formation, nor am I proposing the existence of a ready-made kinship between Black Americans and Dalits. Instead, I seek to make a case for the possibility of global solidarity. Prashad notes, in his discussion on the emergence of the Dalit Panthers, that "solidarity" was the watch word of the 1960s and 1970s.[196] That is to say, many revolutionary movements of this time assumed that resistance to exploitation — the division of

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[194] In her writings on racism and the prison industrial complex in the United States, Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes that "hierarchical relationships [persist] across time [and undergo], as we have seen in the case of prisons, periodic reforms." See, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.
[195] Ibid.
[196] Prashad, "Afro-Dalits of the Earth, Unite!," 197.

the world into core and periphery — necessitates that those who are historically subjugated understand linkages in their experiences and, on that basis, engage in relationships of political comradeship. The pursuit of these linkages could be seen as engendering, to borrow Wahneema Lubianos's phrasing, a "jolt of recognition."[197] That is to say, it allows subjugated classes to become conscious of their own condition as well as its institutional reproduction. There existed a deeply entrenched belief that struggles for liberation could not be myopic in their scope and importance should be placed on identifying transnational systems and structures of hierarchy. Majumder describes the waning of global solidarity under the sign of "Afro-Asia," the "Bandung Spirit," and "Non-Aligned" internationalism and the emergence, in their place, of "globally oriented, race and caste-based solidarities."[198] This study of the ways that these texts engage with the matter of difference — specifically with regard to the formation of the self — works towards the project of uncovering linkages between those who remain dispossessed under modernity.

In the decades since the events recorded in *Assata: An Autobiography* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life,* neoliberal capitalism has only amplified conditions of unevenness through the erosion of social programs as well as the increasing deregulation of the market. The expansion of the state's repressive machinery, the onslaught against struggles for progressive social transformation, and the rise of reactionary, populist movements for cultural restoration have created a sense of living in the aftermath of political catastrophe, in which time feels "less yielding, less promising than we [would expect] it to be ... [and] what we are left with are *aftermaths* in which the present seems stricken with immobility."[199] Moreover, neoliberal capitalism has led to the "fracturing of social identity and the politics of resistance"[200] —

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[197] Cited by Prashad in "Afro-Dalits of the Earth, Unite!," 196.
[198] Majumder, "Race, Caste, and Intellectual History," 141.
[199] Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, 2.
[200] Majumder, "Race, Caste, and Intellectual History," 143.

especially in the way that it co-opts and domesticates emancipatory terminology and aesthetics. Whereas *Assata: An Autobiography* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* contend with the figure of the citizen-subject, this new dispensation valorizes the cosmopolitan "citizen of the world." It employs a system of what Melamed calls a differentiated model of citizenship where "*mobile* individuals with human capital exercise citizenship-like claims in *diverse* locations, whereas other citizens are devalued and vulnerable, in practice unable to exercise many rights and subject to the state's disciplining and civilizing/ disqualifying regimes."[201] In other words, neoliberalism offers an ideal of personhood — and obscures conditions of unevenness — in a subject who is able to freely traverse, navigate, and exercise economic agency across borders.

What is the value of these works from a different time — and representing political potential that seems to no longer be on the horizon — in a drastically altered global order? I want to conclude this thesis by suggesting that these works afford us access to subjective and collective histories which the present dispensation ruthlessly seeks to occlude. They foreground the relegation of communities to a state of bare life — a perspective which allows us to see past liberalism's continued insistence on the "equality of man." They narrate a self — forged at the margins — which goes against the grain; a self which is attuned to the contradictions of their world. *Assata: An Autobiography* and *Interrogating My Chandal Life* propose that other ways of being are possible and, under the right conditions, may be imminent. At the level of content and form, these life writings confront that which many of us in the global metropole are taught to thrust aside, in order to live.

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[201] Melamed, *Represent and Destroy,* 138.

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