By the end of the twentieth century, the US had become the world’s most incarcerated nation, opening on average a new prison every week, mostly in rural areas. My chapter discusses three works of creative nonfiction from the 1980s, “the approximate point,” in James Gilgore’s words, “when all this madness began”: Jack Henry Abbott’s *The Belly of the Beast* (1981), John Edgar Wideman’s *Brothers and Keepers* (1984), and Assata Shakur’s *Assata* (1987). These diverse life-writings—a collection of letters, a collaborative memoir, and a political autobiography—analyze key elements of the emergent carceral system, notably the increased use of solitary confinement and long-term sentences and the suppression of dissent. The works critique the political thinking that offers a cage as a solution and refuse to be, as Paul St. John puts it, “consolation for a civilian audience.” Just as slave narratives call for readers’ active responses to injustice

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and demand attention to multiple audiences, intertextual signals, and veiled omissions, the literature of imprisonment teaches us how to read – and how, to borrow from Edwidge Danticat, to read dangerously.³

In a 1981 speech announcing a new crime initiative, President Ronald Reagan warned of a “human predator in our midst”: “For all our science and sophistication, for all our justified pride in intellectual accomplishment, we should never forget: the jungle is always there, waiting to take us over.”⁴ This jungle ideology contributed to a 1981 death sentence for Mumia Abu-Jamal and a fear of “too much justice” in McKleskey v. Kemp (1987). In 1984, Congress revised federal sentencing guidelines as part of the Comprehensive Crime Control Act (backed by Ted Kennedy and Strom Thurmond), and state legislation followed that established mandatory minimums, reduced or eliminated parole, and created a host of barriers to postrelease life. The war on drugs inflamed the market for illegal substances and expedited the transfer of militarized equipment to police units. Crack became a crisis after Reagan announced the scourge,⁵ and harsh sentencing laws “predated the remarkable levels of violence that now impact poor communities of color so disproportionately.”⁶ The war, in other words, turned out to be a real one.

Abbott, Wideman, and Shakur assess the forces of racism, class violence, and stigmatization at work in the hyperincarceration of black Americans and in the simultaneous divestment from social infrastructure. (Not coincidentally, the first private prison opened in the 1980s.⁷) Mass incarceration, typically traced to the law-and-order policies of Barry Goldwater, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Nelson Rockefeller,⁸

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⁷ In 1984, Tennessee awarded a contract to the Corrections Corporation of America to operate a prison in Hamilton County.

functioned as a backlash against the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Nixon’s chief domestic advisor John Erlichman explained in 1994 that Nixon had two enemies, the antiwar left and black people:

“We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.”

States and the federal government found ways to leverage a criminal justice system against collective claims on freedom, first through a war on crime and then a war on drugs — a campaign announced by Nixon, accelerated by Reagan, and sustained by Clinton.

More than 2.3 million people are now confined in jails and prisons, and another 5 million people are subject to correctional supervision. Angela Davis has remarked that in the 1970s, when she and others were targeted by the FBI, she did not foresee — nor would she have believed — the coming level of lockdown.

This punitive sweep also involved efforts to deny people inside prison access to books and education. “Starting in the 1980s,” Megan Sweeney writes, “prison officials began to characterize libraries as ‘middle class institutions’ that are ‘unsuitable and unappreciated in prison.’” Prison library budgets were eviscerated, and nearly every state passed laws, beginning with New York, that prohibited imprisoned

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11 Angela Y. Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 11.

12 Megan Sweeney, Reading Is My Window: Books and the Art of Reading (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 41.
writers from being paid and, in many cases, from publishing at all. Quentin Miller rightly notes that the “very publication and circulation of this literature compromises the ability of the state to isolate, to suppress, and to deprive prisoners of the rights afforded to all Americans.”

Literary works that survived this threshold decade help to historicize, enliven, and direct the current abolitionist movement.

### The Ontology of a Stone

*The first cut is the deepest.* Do not believe that. The first cut is nothing.

*In the Belly of the Beast,* composed of letters written by Abbott to Norman Mailer, has been praised as a brilliant exegesis on modern punishment and presented in trial as evidence of the incorrigibility of violent criminals. Abbott’s letters convey his personal history and offer unrelenting criticism of capitalist structures, carceral control, and arbitrary power. Robert A. Ferguson calls *In the Belly of the Beast* the “most powerful prison narrative in American literature.” Here is the opening line: “I’ve wanted somehow to convey to you the sensations – the atmospheric pressure, you might say – of what it is to be seriously a

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15 Other works from this decade include Edward Bunker’s novel *Little Boy Blue* (1981); Nathan Heard’s novel *House of Slammers* (1983); Jimmy Santiago Baca’s poems in *Martín & Meditations on the South Valley* (1987); Patricia McConnell’s short story collection *Sing Soft, Sing Loud* (1989); and J. A. Scheffler’s global anthology *Wall Tappings* (1986).


long-term prisoner in an American prison.” Abbott backtracks to stress that this “atmospheric pressure” is inextricable from his childhood in state custody.

As a child, Abbott was placed in foster care and juvenile facilities where he was beaten, stripped, left in darkness, and kept on a starvation diet. During a two-year period in solitary, Abbott grew three inches. In a youth facility (and former military barracks), children in cells “could not see one another, and if we were caught shouting cell-to-cell, we were beaten. We tapped out messages, but if they heard our taps, we were beaten – the entire row of cells, one child at a time.” Abbott learned early the cost of communication and that adults could “do anything to him and not be punished by the law. Do anything to him with the full force of the state behind them.” After being released at eighteen, Abbott returned to prison for writing a bad check. Three years later, he killed another imprisoned man, James Christensen, in a fight.

*In the Belly of the Beast* does not offer a conversion narrative or story of redemption. The collection recounts a war. Leigh Gilmore suggests that autobiography “profoundly concerns representations of citizenship and the nation.” Abbott documents a life stripped of even the fantasy of national protection and belonging. If he were beaten to death by guards, Abbott writes, his “‘past record of violence’ would vindicate my murderers. In fact, the prison regime can commit any atrocity against me, and my ‘record’ will acquit them.” In a prophetic line, Abbott admits that he cannot imagine living outside prison: “Too much has happened, for too long, to me.” After his release in 1981, Abbott fatally stabbed a young man, Richard Adan, outside a New York diner. At the trial, the prosecution read passages from *In the Belly of the Beast*. Abbott was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to fifteen to life. In 2002, he was – how familiar this phrase has become – found dead in his cell.

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19 Ibid., 11.
22 Ibid., 166.
By the time he was thirty-seven years old, Abbott had spent twenty-four years in prison, approximately fifteen in solitary confinement. He writes that solitary altered him more than he wants to admit. In isolation, previously healthy people begin to experience, among other symptoms, paranoia, depression, anxiety, memory loss, headaches, exhaustion, and hallucinations. There is a modern name for this, SHU syndrome, but Guenther points out that the symptoms are “remarkably consistent” across time.

To be denied even the possibility of another’s presence and “an open-ended perceptual experience of the world,” Guenther observes, wears away the intersubjective basis for personhood and creates, as described by people who have experienced it, a sense that their very being is disintegrating. Solitary confinement, Abbott writes, “can alter the ontological makeup of a stone.”

Time “no longer moves forward,” and space, according to Abbott, becomes finite: “I have seen wars take place in the hole. I have seen, as a matter of fact, the most impossible things happen under these conditions.” Trapped in fixed space – “Time descends in your cell like the lid of a coffin” – words and memories lose meaning. Reality lets loose: “The world is nothing. An illusion.” Solitary seems to achieve one of the goals of the modern prison: “One no longer touched the body, or at least as far as possible, and

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23 Ibid., 45.
27 Abbott, Belly, 45.
28 Ibid., 46, 43.
29 Ibid., 44.
30 Ibid., 50.
then only to reach something other than the body itself.”

This something else Foucault calls the soul and Abbott alternately calls the mind and the soul. “They go for your mind in prison today,” Abbott writes, “where before, it was all physical suffering.”

Foucault and Abbott recognize that there is no such thing as noncorporeal punishment, but the “age of sobriety in punishment” strives toward an additional order of undoing.

Abbott conceptualizes the zone of assault as the flesh, the border between inside and out. His flesh has “been chopped to pieces by a life of deprivation of sensations; by beatings so frequent I am now a piece of meat and bone; by lies and by drugs that attack my nervous system. I have had my mind turned into steel by the endless smelter of time in confinement.”

Abbott feels “inverted” by solitary: his organic mind is forged into steel, his body reduced to “meat and bone.”

Abbott seizes upon the rhetoric of rehabilitation and satirizes the expected gratitude: “I am supposed to be glad they abolished methodical torture instruments in prison! Glad they ‘abolished’ horsewhipping, corporeal punishment, starvation.”

Like Foucault, Abbott discerns a design at work:

They know what they are doing, even if they never admit it to anyone. They will not even admit it to me. No one expects me to become a better man in prison. So why not say it:

The purpose is to ruin me, ruin me completely. The purpose is to mark me, to stamp across my face the mark of this beast they call prison.

Abbott maintains that the purpose of imprisonment is not to redeem, rehabilitate, or deter; the purpose is ruination. A sincere apology for how he has been treated by a prison official would “devastate” him:

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32 Abbott, Belly, 20.
33 Foucault, Discipline, 14.
34 Abbott, Belly, 37.
36 Ibid., 37.
believe it would alter me radically.” In later letters, Abbott describes improvements in prison – less censorship, better medical care, less exploitative labor practices; “They unchained me from the floor and quit tear-gassing me in my sleep” – but he sees rising levels of racism and violence. He sums up the intent of the new regime: “They want us to kill one another.”

*In the Belly of the Beast* lights up, from the decade that inaugurated a security level beyond maximum, the brutal dimensions of the hole. In the 1980s, prison administrations began to use solitary for reasons other than those cited in the past, for redemption (in the nineteenth century) or behavior modification (in the 1960s and 1970s). At the end of the twentieth century, isolation became an overt means to control, to immobilize, and to coerce a person to adapt to the prison environment. In 1983, the federal prison in Marion, Illinois, went on lockdown after members of the Aryan Brotherhood killed two guards. The prison remained on lockdown for twenty-three years. In 1987, Amnesty International condemned Marion for violating nearly every rule in the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. In 1989, the first supermaximum opened, the Secure Housing Unit at Pelican Bay, which confines more than one thousand people in concrete cells twenty-three hours a day, with virtually no contact with other human beings. Meals come through slots in the door. In 2013, a coordinated hunger strike involving more than thirty thousand people took place across California prisons to protest these conditions.

Theoretically reserved for the worst of the worst (a meaningless phrase), solitary confinement is inflicted on teenagers, political activists, people with mental disabilities, people suspected of gang-affiliation, LGBTQ people, those under protective custody, and, disproportionately, African Americans,

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37 Ibid., 164.
38 Ibid., 150–51.
39 Ibid., 154.
40 Guenther, *Solitary*, xvi.
Latinos, and Muslims. Abbott captured the latitude this way: “I will go to the hole for murder as well as for stealing a packet of sugar.”

Between 1986 and 1992, Dannie “Red Dog” Martin wrote articles for the San Francisco Chronicle on AIDS in prison, the devastation of long-term sentences, and increasingly long pill lines: “It is ironic that men who are spending decades incarcerated for illicit drug activities are now doped up by government doctors to help them bear the agony of their sentences.” Martin was put in isolation because of his writing – and he wrote about that, too.

Abbott’s writing joins a body of global literature that constitutes, in Doran Larson’s phrasing, “a running habeas corpus brief against states that allow prisons to be run as theatres of violence.” A 2014 survey by a public interest program at Yale Law School and the Association of State Correctional Administrations concluded that between eighty and one hundred thousand people are in solitary confinement in the US. In the Belly of the Beast is one testament among many to how the deprivation of a social and natural world violates democratic commitments to human rights and human dignity.

41 Abbott, Belly, 12.
46 Robert Hood, the warden of the federal supermaximum in Colorado, explains that the “architecture is the control”: “You’re designing it so the inmates can’t see the sky. Intentionally.” Ray Sanchez and Alexandra Field, “What Awaits Dzhokar Tsarnaev If He’s Sent to Supermax Prison,” CNN, May 16, 2015.
It Ain’t Really Your Time

Alternatives exist. Struggle exists.

– John Wideman

*Brothers and Keepers* emerged from a four-year collaboration between John and Robby Wideman. The dual autobiography walks a painful line between the relative freedom of John Wideman, the Ivy League graduate, Rhodes Scholar, and writer, and the captivity of his younger brother Robby, sentenced to life for second-degree murder in Pennsylvania. If the sensory and mental ordeal of solitary poses one challenge to representation, the life sentence – unending punishment – poses another. John Wideman wrote the memoir to try to understand what happened to his brother and “the whole long skein of our lives together and apart. So this book. This attempt to break out, to knock down the walls.” Since 1984, the year of the book’s publication, the number of people serving life has quadrupled to approximately 160,000. Nearly half are African American. Of the total serving life, one-third have no possibility of parole.

*Brothers and Keepers* is a multivocal text alert to the difficulty of telling a free story about a life sentence. “Be days I wished I was dead,” Robby tells his brother. “Be days worse than that.” As a young man, Robby became involved in the Pittsburgh drug trade and addicted to heroin. In 1975, with three friends, Robby was part of an armed robbery in which a man was killed. Nichola Morena, called Stavros in the text, was shot by Michael Dukes who was also convicted of second-degree murder. Wideman straightforwardly writes in the 2005 preface: Robby is “responsible for his actions and must carry forever the awful

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51 Ibid., 106.
weight of having participated in a crime that cost a human being’s life. None of this alters the fact that
courts and prisons, notorious for their racism, cruelty, and corruption, operate in a fashion that creates as
many problems as they solve.”\textsuperscript{52} Wideman wants neither to minimize the crime nor exonerate the prison
system. He hopes to tell both stories. This is not easy because, as their mother realizes, lines have been
drawn. And because Robby cannot remember Stavros’s face.\textsuperscript{53}

The memoir shifts between narrators and modes of address and offers multiple contexts for the day
of the robbery and murder. Homewood is part of that story. Devastated by economic divestment, an
undermined public education system, easy guns and drugs, the neighborhood was a crime “flourishing in
broad daylight.”\textsuperscript{54} Robby experiences the beginnings of the school-to-prison pipeline when his high school,
in response to antiracist student activism, welcomes police into the hallways. Robby also watches a good
friend die because of medical neglect. Garth’s death sounds no alarms: “The man killed Garth. Couldn’t kill
him no deader with a .357 magnum slug, but ain’t no crime been committed. Just one of those things.”\textsuperscript{55}

As Bette Wideman watches the legal system refuse to recognize the humanity of her son, and as she
connects the death of Garth to the loss of her child— to institutions that do not value black life— she
abandons her once expansive understanding of human behavior. The courtroom distorts and simplifies
Robby to render judgment: “No need here for her questions, her uncertainty, her fear, her love. Everything
was clean and clear.”\textsuperscript{56} If the summary finding of the court is the monstrosity of her child, then she has no
choice; she is on the other side. No more benefit of the doubt. This does not locate her against the victim
and the grief of survivors; she can stand on that “treacherous yet familiar ground” of human suffering. What
she cannot bear is a system that denies the “world of touching, laughing, suffering black people that

\textsuperscript{52} Wideman, preface to \textit{Brothers}, xi.
\textsuperscript{53} Wideman, \textit{Brothers}, 146.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 71.
established Robby’s claim to something more than a number." She emerges from the trial with a capacity
to feel “pure unadulterated hatred” for the prison guard. This was new.

Wideman understands, even as he resists, dividing lines. Visiting someone you love in prison, you
have to “pretend a life has not been stolen, snatched away forever.” As he is being processed one day, he
fantasizes about refusing the role of visitor. For an instant, he imagines that “dying with your hands on an
enemy’s throat is better than living under his boot.” It is only a “flash” of rebellion before the brothers sit
down. Wideman questions the sincerity of even his imagined revolt; maybe he needs to recast himself
because he knows “how far from the truth it was.” What he does know is that every visit begins with
compromise, and on the keeper’s turf. The very language of visitation, with its pacific overtones, obscures
the fact that power is “absurdly apportioned all on one side” and that his brother may never come home.

In this passage, the enemy is prison authority, but earlier Wideman must reckon with a different
divide, his own presumption that imprisoned people are “different. Not just different. Bad.” He traces this
logic to its unsatisfactory conclusion – his brother is like him, his brother is in prison, so it could be him in
prison – and he concludes, “If prisons don’t segregate good from evil, then what we’ve created are zoos for
human beings. And we’ve given license to the keepers to stock the cages.” Wideman connects this license
to 1980s politics and, like Abbott, uses the language of war: “What politicians demanded in the free world
was being acted out inside the prison. A crusade, a war on crime waged by a gang of gung-ho guards against
men who were already certified casualties, prisoners of war. The walking wounded being beaten and shot

57 Ibid., 72.
58 Ibid., 75.
59 Ibid., 185.
60 Ibid., 190.
61 Ibid., 191.
62 Ibid., 84.
63 Ibid., 46.
64 Ibid., 48.
again because they’re easy targets.” The wounded in prison are injured again by the state, but the only concern of the public is, as Wideman paraphrases, to keep those people inside: “We don’t care how you do it.” If twenty people are killed in a riot, that is not a disaster. An escape is a disaster. Wideman updates the language of *Dred Scott*: “Prisoners have no rights the keepers are bound to respect.”

In this context imprisonment is a fundamentally violent experience. Robby details the newest restrictions: men doubling up in cells, fewer jobs, educational cutbacks, “no rehabilitation, lock em up like animals.” John Wideman meditates on what it means to “do time” in this historical moment:

> Since a person can’t be removed from time unless you kill him, what prison does to its inmates is make time as miserable, as unpleasant, as possible. Prison time must be hard time, a metaphorical death, a sustained, twilight condition of death-in-life. The prisoner’s life is violently interrupted, enclosed within a parenthesis. The point is to create the fiction that he doesn’t exist. Prison is an experience of death by inches, minutes, hours, days.

This fiction is maintained by barbed wire, long sentences, disenfranchisement, and public discourse, all of which attempt to confer on imprisoned people a “condition of nonexistence.” Robby “understood that he was sentenced to die. That all sentences were death sentences.” John Wideman recognizes that, despite this commitment to hard time, prisons cannot kill time, nor remove a person from time, unless a person is killed: “Many inmates die violently in prisons, almost all suffer in ways beyond an outsider’s comprehension, but life goes on and since it does, miracles occur.” The state can take people from the social order,

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65 Ibid., 80–81.  
66 Ibid., 189.  
67 Ibid., 82, 187.  
68 Ibid., 243.  
69 Ibid., 35.  
70 Ibid., 188.  
71 Ibid., 83.  
72 Ibid., 35.
Wideman writes, “but not from time. Time imprisons us all.” The memoir unfolds within this shared mortal time-space even as it agonizes over the divide created by prison walls.

Robby addresses how difficult it is for him to do certain things, like write down the schedule of a day in prison. He knows it must seem like an easy task, given all the time he has. But he explains in one of the memoir’s most important lines that in prison “it ain’t really your time.” Robby Wideman has been in prison for forty years.

Guided Home

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.

Early in Brothers and Keepers, Wideman reflects on beginnings: “You never know exactly when something begins.” There is not a single point of entry to the story he needs to tell. “The more you delve and backtrack and think,” Wideman writes, “the more clear it becomes that nothing has a discrete, independent history.” In The Belly of the Beast, Abbott also notes, “It is hard for me to begin. Beginnings are like that for me now.” Assata Shakur does not equivocate about where to begin her autobiography. She has just been shot by police.

As a college student in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Shakur was a member of the Black Panthers and later the Black Liberation Army. Like many others, she became a target of FBI COINTELPRO surveillance.

73 Ibid., 36.
74 Ibid., 230.
76 Wideman, Brothers, 19.
77 Ibid.
78 Abbott, Belly, 45.
and subjected to harassment, threats, and false charges. Shakur went underground and was placed on the FBI’s Most Wanted List. In 1973, Shakur and two friends, Sundiata Acoli (one of the Panther 21) and Zayd Malik Shakur, were pulled over by police for a burned-out taillight. The stop on the New Jersey turnpike led to the fatal shootings of Zayd Shakur and state trooper Werner Foerster. Assata Shakur was shot twice with her hands raised. The autobiography begins with Shakur bleeding on the turnpike, listening to police discuss whether she is dead yet, whether they should kill her.

Shakur was charged in Foerster’s death and faced six additional outstanding criminal charges. Over the next four years, she was acquitted in three cases; three others were dismissed; and in the final one, Shakur was convicted of being an accomplice in the murder of Foerster and of atrocious assault on James Harper, another officer on the scene. Shakur was sentenced to life plus thirty-three years by an all-white jury. Shakur spent most of her six years of imprisonment in solitary confinement. Every time she came out of isolation, she could not speak: “That was one of the things that always happened to me after long periods of solitary confinement: i would forget how to talk.”

In 1979, Shakur escaped from the Clinton Correctional Center in New Jersey. Five years later, she was given political asylum in Cuba. In 2013, on the fortieth anniversary of Woerster’s death, the FBI placed Shakur on the Most Wanted Terrorist List and announced an increased bounty: $2 million.

Assata recalls the visionary energy of radical black organizing and testifies to the full force of the government crackdown. Life-writing by imprisoned and formerly imprisoned people is often prefaced by documents that attest to the author’s veracity. As Paul St. John memorably phrases it, prison writers have the “credibility of elves.” Assata begins with two forewords and a chronology of seven trials between 1973 and 1977. In the first foreword, Angela Davis situates the memoir in the context of political repression, and in the second, her attorney Lennox S. Hinds describes COINTELPRO operatives and the legal system that distorted and invented facts in Shakur’s cases.

79 Shakur, Assata, 83.
80 Paul St. John, “Behind the Mirror’s Face,” in Doing Time, 121.
Shakur plays with the conventional autobiographical subject whose story begins at birth: “The FBI cannot find any evidence that I was born. On my FBI Wanted poster, they list my birth date as July 16, 1947, and, in parenthesis, ‘not substantiated by birth records.’ Anyway, i was born.”81 Her daughter, born while Shakur was in custody, also lacks birth records.82 These female subjects are, from the beginning, outside official history. Shakur’s chosen name “Assata” means “one who struggles,” and she emerges in the text as a curious, searching, and, always, rooted figure. Michael Hames-García sees two forms of autobiographical didacticism at work in her life-writing: the narrative of self-improvement that offers lessons learned and the pedagogy of slave narratives that seeks to educate readers and advocate for a new conception of freedom.83 Assata documents her political education, illuminates the criminal justice and penal systems, and enjoins the reader in a process of shared emancipation.

Shakur alternates chapters between her buoyant childhood and young adulthood in North Carolina and New York and her confinement in prisons that are “antinature, antihuman, and cold to all the senses.”84 This woven chronology prevents Shakur from being enclosed in a captivity narrative – or at least a conventional one. Talking with another imprisoned woman, Shakur suggests degrees of unfreedom: 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 how it feels to be free.”85 Hames-García points outs that Assata defines freedom as a collective process and practice rather than “a possession or a state of being.”86

The first chapter of Assata contains defining elements of Shakur’s life: state violence; her resilience, humor, and strength; the power of books; and a movement toward freedom. Shakur wakes shackled to a

81 Shakur, Assata, 18.
82 Ibid., 273.
84 Shakur, Assata, 208.
85 Ibid., 60.
86 Hames-García, Fugitive, L.
hospital bed and in pain. Her fingerprints have to be taken with the “dead man’s kit” because she cannot move her arm. She is threatened by police and beaten for not responding to questions. Eventually the authorities become more careful about how they hit her because, she assumes, “they don’t want to leave any marks.”

Amid this torture, a black police officer quietly gives Shakur the Black Power sign: “That man will never know how much better he made me feel at that moment.” A nurse protects Shakur’s leg, which is swelling from a handcuff, and refuses to let the troopers disconnect the call button. Another nurse gives Shakur three books: a book of black poetry (“Whenever i tired of the verbal abuse of my captors, i would drown them out by reading the poetry out loud”); Black Women in White Amerika (“i felt the spirits of those sisters feeding me, making me stronger”); and Siddhartha (“when i read Siddhartha, a peace came over me. I felt a unity with all living things”).

Shakur is visited by her aunt (and attorney), Evelyn Williams, her mother, and sister. Her mother’s words “spin around me, weaving a warm blanket of love.” The first chapter ends with the certainty that she will live and with this poem.

STORY

You died.

I cried.

And kept on getting up.

A little slower.

And a lot more deadly.

Assata tells part of the story of this uprising.

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87 Shakur, Assata, 8.
88 Ibid., 6.
89 Ibid., 16–17.
90 Ibid., 16.
91 Ibid., 17.
Joy James positions Shakur alongside Harriet Tubman as “one of few black female figures in the United States recognized as a leader in an organization that publicly advocated armed self-defense against racist violence.”\(^9^2\) Shakur’s position on militant resistance was a direct response to massive and unchecked lethal violence against black Americans, from white supremacist terrorist campaigns to FBI and police killings. Shakur’s preparedness for revolutionary struggle is rooted in her family, her intolerance for kyriarchy, and her appreciation of knowledge and the earth. Her grandparents instilled in her a sense of dignity and self-protection. Even though Shakur did not share her grandparents’ valuation of money and social status, they taught her not to let anyone take advantage of her or mistreat her: “the lessons that they taught me, more than anything else i learned in life, helped me to deal with the things i would face growing up in amerika.”\(^9^3\)

Like many politically progressive autobiographies, Assata demonstrates that “revolutionaries are not so much born as made (i.e., by the circumstances of their social milieu and by their exposure to critical pedagogy).”\(^9^4\) Or, in Shakur’s words, “Black revolutionaries do not drop from the moon.”\(^9^5\) At Manhattan Community College, Shakur studied black history, colonialism, and class struggle. She came to recognize the fragmented approach to education that produces “people who don’t have the ability to think for themselves and who are easily manipulated.”\(^9^6\) Although she identified with socialism, she was put off by the white condescension in those groups.\(^9^7\) She was impressed with the Black Panther Party (BPP) and its clarity about who the enemy was; it was “not the white people, but the capitalistic, imperialistic oppressors.”\(^9^8\) In Harlem,
she worked in the BPP news office, taught classes, and helped with the breakfast program. She did not always agree with the BPP and, when tensions escalated, she decided to leave. She knew nothing then about FBI tactics to disrupt and dismantle black movements from within.

The autobiography is propelled by Shakur’s resistance to any authority that stifles freedom — in school, on the streets, in courts, in prison, in her mind. As part of her underground disguise, she wears a wig. On the subway, she realizes that all the other black women are also wearing wigs, a “whole generation of Black women hiding out under dead white people’s hair.” At first she considers only her difference from them — she hates the wig — but she begins to imagine a bridge: “Maybe we are all running from something, living a clandestine existence.” Later she realizes that she has been adjusting personal decisions to accommodate injustice. She had assumed she would never have a child, given levels of racism and violence. During one of her trials, Shakur and her codefendant Kamau refuse to cooperate with the proceedings and are removed from the courtroom. Locked in a room while the trial proceeds without them, they discuss the possibility of having a child. Shakur remembers something Zayd had said to her, “‘While you’re alive, girl, you betta live.’” Nine months later, Shakur gives birth to her daughter, Kakuya. From within a criminal justice system that wreaks havoc on people’s reproductive choices, Kamau and Shakur preserve that freedom.

As Shakur documents attempts to defy repression, she also testifies to the reach of the state into the most private spaces of women’s lives. At Rikers, women “had trouble seeing gynecologists and having their most basic needs met, medical or otherwise. Since we were a tiny minority of the prison population, our needs were ignored.” Shakur reports on a friend who, returned to prison on a parole technicality, died from undiagnosed cancer of the uterus. For three months during her pregnancy, Shakur was in solitary in a men’s jail. When she was taken to the hospital for complications, she was shackled with guns trained on her.

99 Ibid., 239.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid., 93.
102 Ibid., 210.
Once she went into labor, the hospital refused to admit her doctor. Evelyn called a press conference to publicize the ordeal. After a traumatizing exam by a resident, Shakur stated, convincingly, that she would give birth to the baby herself. Her physical defiance coupled with a protest outside the hospital compelled the officials to relent. Her doctor was admitted, and the birth “was peaceful and beautiful – out of sight.”

In one of the most painful silences in the text, Shakur does not describe the separation from her baby. In a 2001 interview, Shakur said, “It’s only been recently that I’ve been able to talk about it. I had to just block it out, otherwise I think I might have gone insane.” Back at Rikers, Shakur she refused an exam, and officers restrained her: “They had me on the floor – eventually my arms and legs were chained. They dragged me by the chains to PSA [punitive segregation area] and stopped only when a nurse asked them to please stop.” Shakur received an infraction and spent two weeks in isolation. She refused to eat so her breasts would stop hurting. A psychiatrist asked if she was depressed. A Kafkaesque disciplinary meeting was held, and she was given another fourteen days in isolation. Before she could return to general population, she had to submit to a vaginal search. Shakur concludes this harrowing chapter with a poem:

“Aafter the bars and gates / and the degradation / What is left?” The poem enumerates the losses and asks “where is the sun? / where are her arms and / where are her kisses?” She knows the “foot on my neck is part / of a body” and that her song “is part / of an echo.” She is sustained by her love of “losers and laughter,” “freedom and children,” and she knows she is left with truth as a compass.

At the end of the memoir, Shakur describes a visit with her four-year-old daughter. Kakuya begs her mother to come home and shakes the bars, testing their strength. Shakur recalls, “I hold and rock and kiss her. There is a look of resignation on her face that i can’t stand.” After her daughter leaves, “her face clouded and worried, looking like a little adult,” Shakur makes a decision: “I go back to my cage and cry until

103 Ibid., 144.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid., 146.
106 Ibid., 147.
107 Ibid., 258.
I vomit. I decide that it is time to leave.”

It is a singular line in the history of US imprisonment literature. In the pantheon of political prisoners, there are, as James notes, few remembered women. Shakur is also unusual because she was not released; she escaped.

The postscript begins with the word “Freedom.” The girl who fell in love – for life – with the beauty of beaches becomes a fugitive on an island, a maroon. Once there, she is “flooded with the horrors of prison” and, using language similar to Abbott’s, describes how “chunks of steel and concrete had worked themselves into my body. I was cold.” She leans on friends who act “like medicine” and is reunited with her daughter, mother, and aunt. Although Shakur looks to the future (venceremos), the autobiography is haunted by the death of Zayd Shakur. Sundiata Acoli, forty-three years later, remains in prison, and Shakur is threatened with extradition. Freedom, Assata teaches us, exists in the struggle.

Conclusion

In the 1980s, imprisoned and formerly imprisoned writers labored to expose torture and a prison regime that elicits, like the protocols of visitation, public cooperation. Abbott’s only hope appears to be far-off revolution. Brothers and Keepers stakes different ground in the route between home and prison, in the mortal space that connects lives, and in political reform. Assata offers a maroon subjectivity forged in a vision and practice of collective freedom. The 1980s bequeathed, beyond the politics, this significant body of literature that refuses to cede the earth and our imagination to a cage.

Ibid.

James, “Framing,” 141.

Shakur, Assata, 266.