Beyond Bars and Bias: Unveiling Misogynoir and the Prison-Industrial Complex in Contemporary Black Women's Literature

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BEYOND BARS AND BIAS: UNVEILING MISOGYNOIR AND THE PRISON-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX IN CONTEMPORARY BLACK WOMEN’S LITERATURE

by
Abigail Myers

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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ABSTRACT

BEYOND BARS AND BIAS: UNVEILING MISOGYNOIR AND THE PRISON-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX IN CONTEMPORARY BLACK WOMEN’S LITERATURE

This interdisciplinary thesis examines misogynoir through the lens of contemporary Black women’s literature and the prison-industrial complex, specifically centering on the literary work of Fannie Lou Hamer and Assata Shakur, both formerly incarcerated Black women. Misogynoir, a term coined by Black feminist scholar Moya Bailey, encapsulates the intersection of anti-Black racism and misogyny experienced by Black women, Black girls, and gender nonconforming people. This thesis unites the fields of literary studies, gender studies, critical prison studies, and African American studies to reveal Black women as affected by both misogyny and anti-Black racism in the contemporary prison-industrial complex and beyond. Drawing specifically from the work of critical prison studies scholars Angela Y. Davis and Victoria Law, as well as a range of scholars of Black feminist thought, this thesis argues that Hamer and Shakur’s literary works provide important insights into the experiences of Black women and gender nonconforming people with misogynoir within and beyond environments of incarceration. This thesis consists of two chapters, the first focusing on Shakur’s *Assata: An Autobiography* and the second on Fannie Lou Hamer’s oratory. The first chapter emphasizes Shakur’s counternarrative storytelling as a narrative approach that exposes misogynoir while also reimagining Black womanhood beyond its confines. The second chapter examines Hamer’s persuasive speeches, which convince her audience to care about the issues she presents as well as the individuals affected by them. Hamer’s oratory provides a compelling way to examine the
intersection of anti-Black racism and sexism and incarceration while also providing an avenue of healing for herself and other Black women. The interdisciplinary analyses of these works expand critical understandings about how misogynoir operates while also demonstrating how Black women have long confronted and opposed it, and reimagined Black womanhood beyond its operation. The works of Shakur and Hamer continue to resonate in contemporary justice movements such as the #MeToo Movement and #SayHerName, thus demonstrating their continued relevance in twenty-first-century discussions of misogynoir and state-sanctioned violence.
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INTRODUCTION

I began to become interested in the injustices present in America’s legal system in high school. I have always known that I wanted to go to law school, albeit I did not know the specific type of law I would eventually focus on. As a result of the intention to pursue law, I felt compelled to understand the shortcomings within our legal system. Essentially in order to create any real change or help people, I would need to understand what I was fighting against in the first place. These interests intensified during my senior year of high school, when we had to write a thesis paper on any topic which interested us. I ended up writing about how implicit bias corrupts the integrity of the U.S. court system. I looked into how, on a psychological level, implicit bias impacts a defendant’s ability to have due process when confronted with an unfair or prejudiced system of police, juries, prosecutors, and judges. My paper showed me that, even subconsciously, bias exists and affects America’s legal system and the true ability to be “innocent until proven guilty.” Though I did not really understand terms like misogynoir or white supremacy at the time, that paper was a catalyst that sparked my deeper interest into how exactly bias could affect impartiality and justice in the legal system.

Then, in my sophomore year of college here at the University of Mississippi, I wrote a research proposal for a psychology class final in which I explored how “Afrocentric facial features” impacted criminal sentencing length for women. I gained two main interests from this paper. First, I realized that I was specifically interested in how racial bias affected incarceration and justice overall for Black people. Second, realized that there was a gap in the research when it
came to how the lenses of misogyny and racism interact and overlap for incarcerated Black women.

These interests then led me to enroll in an upper-level English and African American Studies course titled “Prison and the Literary Imagination” during my junior year. In that course, I discovered terms like misogynoir and the prison-industrial complex and also read a book that is a primary source in this thesis: Assata: An Autobiography. Through reading, discussing, and writing about that autobiography, I learned of my interest in specifically exploring incarcerated Black women’s experiences and how misogynoir affects them inside and outside of prisons. I decided that I wanted to explore these concepts more in my undergraduate thesis to prepare me for a law career centered around helping people obtain justice in the legal system.

My thesis, at its core, centers on the concept of misogynoir. Misogynoir can best be defined by Black feminist scholar Moya Bailey as the “anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience, particularly in U.S. visual and digital culture. Misogynoir is not simply the racism that Black women encounter, nor is it the misogyny Black women negotiate. Misogynoir describes the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization” (Bailey 1). Misogynoir is a way to view the intersection of anti-Black racism and misogyny. Many Black women who came to prominence during the racial and gender justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Black women like Fannie Lou Hamer and Assata Shakur, who I focus on in this thesis, have been exploring this intersection for many years. Further, Black women, girls, and gender nonconforming people have been experiencing the effects of misogynoir for even longer. However, despite the long engagement with misogynoir as a
concept, the term itself has only recently been created and therefore engaged. Bailey, who first coined this term, is a twenty-first century Black feminist scholar; as a result, critical discussion of this term across the disciplines is still relatively new.

Because of this term’s relative newness, the scope of its discussion in the context of Black women and the prison-industrial complex still remains somewhat limited. But that is not to say that such discussion does not exist. Black feminist historian Treva B. Lindsey’s work in her recent book, *America, Goddam: Violence, Black Women, and the Struggle for Justice* provides a notable exploration on the intersections between misogynoir and the prison-industrial complex. She specifically points out how misogynoir “often plays a role in violence and other forms of violation against Black girls and women. It’s extant in policing, medical / healthcare systems, and mass incarceration” (Lindsey 21). Her work here exposes the prevalence of misogynoir in prisons and overall in the prison-industrial complex.

My thesis explores misogynoir through the lives and literature of Assata Shakur and Fannie Lou Hamer, two formerly incarcerated Black women freedom fighters. Their works, though not the most contemporary, continue to maintain relevance, given the profundity of their confrontations with and reflections on what we now conceptualize as misogynoir. Again, Hamer and Shakur were both revolutionaries in the intersection of the fields of gender and racial justice movements. Their legacies illuminate the intersectionality of race, gender, and the prison-industrial complex. The impacts of their works can also be traced to contemporary movements like the #Me Too Movement and #Say Her Name.

The #MeToo movement places substantial emphasis on centering survivors’ narratives to both obtain healing as well as to confront sexual violence. Both Shakur’s and Hamer’s works inspired similar concepts. Shakur, with her counternarrative storytelling, centered her opposition
to misogynoir and the prison-industrial complex around the sharing of her and other Black women’s stories. Through this narrative approach, she simultaneously modeled a way to confront and oppose misogynoir while also creating avenues for healing for herself and other Black women by reimagining Black womanhood beyond the confines of misogynoir.

Hamer used testimony to dramatically reenact her and other’s stories in a way to make her audience care about the issues she was sharing, including those related to misogynoir. Much like practitioners in the #Me Too Movement of our twenty-first century, Hamer centered her opposition and confrontation of misogynoir around her own personal narrative in a way that also allowed for healing to occur. Further, both Hamer and Shakur directly oppose sexualized state violence and sexual violence in general. They use their different platforms as a method to say #Me Too before the #MeToo Movement even became an official movement.

As I discuss in detail in the concluding section of this thesis, the #Say Her Name Movement can also be linked to Shakur’s and Hamer’s work. This movement was created to confront the police violence that Black women and girls experience, as well as to interrogate various forms of misogynoir and state-sanctioned violence that Black women and girls endure and resist. This movement specifically developed its oppositional strategy through the purposeful sharing of other’s stories and names. Naming and the purposeful sharing of other people’s stories is a key component of the way that Hamer and Shakur oppose misogynoir, state-sanctioned violence, and the prison-industrial complex. Shakur shares story her as well as others’ personal experiences with anti-Black racism, misogyny, and state-sanctioned violence. She directly confronts the false narrative of being subhuman or just a number through this purposeful method of storytelling. One of the specific ways that Shakur does this is through her story of Eva, which I discuss in Chapter 1. Shakur not only redefines Eva’s womanhood beyond misogynoir, but also
purposefully names her. Shakur’s choice to name Eva directly relates to the #Say Her Name Movement. Shakur’s narrative, just like the narrative approaches that fuel this movement, relies upon the importance of naming and sharing Black woman’s stories, including her own, in a way that reaffirms their humanity and also opposes misogynoir and state-sanctioned violence.

Hamer, though her use of testimony is mostly framed around her own experiences, still distinctly and directly names and shares the stories of other Black women. One instance where she does this is when she specifically names “Miss Ponder” in a speech she delivers in Mississippi in 1964 titled, “We’re On Our Way.” Hamer’s decision to name and share this Black woman’s story asserts her as a figure deserving of respect and fair treatment as much as Hamer herself. Shakur and Hamer’s narrative approaches both illuminate how important affirming Black women’s humanity and sharing Black women’s names is in opposing misogynoir and state-sanctioned violence. As with the #MeToo Movement, Hamer and Shakur were “Saying Her Name” long before the #Say Her Name Movement ever became an official movement.

My thesis as a whole is an interdisciplinary analysis that I perform both through the close reading of two works of Black women’s literature and contextual engagement with the field of critical prison studies. Specifically, I examine Hamer’s and Shakur’s literary works. Both of these women expose misogynoir as a reality for Black women and girls and white supremacy as a reality for Black people as a whole in America. Both of these formerly incarcerated Black women also show how misogynoir exists in and out of the prison system for Black women. My thesis consists of two chapters, with each one honing in on a different author. The first chapter focuses on Shakur and the second chapter examines the life and work of Hamer. From Shakur’s political autobiography to Hamer’s persuasive speeches, my interdisciplinary analyses of both authors’ approaches to misogynoir, white supremacy, and the prison-industrial complex invite an
in-depth and thorough understanding of how anti-Black racism and sexism function together both within and beyond the experience of incarceration for Black women and gender nonconforming people.

This thesis also demonstrates how, beyond simply confronting misogynoir, both of these women also offer a form of healing for themselves and other Black women. Shakur’s narrative itself and her use of counternarrative storytelling within it reimagine Black womanhood beyond misogynoir. Shakur’s narrative approach serves two key purposes: first, it creates an avenue for healing for Black women; second, it directly opposes the existence and effects of misogynoir by asserting that the victims of this anti-Black racist misogyny are human beings with stories and lives that matter. Hamer, through her testimony, persuades her listeners to care about misogynoir and white supremacy as a whole. Her use of testimony, much like Shakur, also provides an avenue for healing for her and other people who have had similar experiences. Hamer’s testimony promotes healing by creating a communal avenue to share trauma and common lived experiences with misogynoir. Further, Hamer’s work, through its emphasis on dramatic reenactments of these experiences, challenges her audience to feel her emotions and the effects of what she has gone through, thereby compelling that audience care about what she shares.

Both chapters of this thesis are informed by critical frameworks that are central to scholarship in critical prison studies, Black expressive culture, and Black feminist thought. Some of the main sources that contribute to my understanding of critical prison studies and misogynoir are: Are Prisons Obsolete? by Angela Y. Davis, Abolition. Feminism. Now. by Davis, Gina Dent, Erica Meiners, and Beth Richie, Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women by Victoria Law, America, Goddam: Violence, Black Women, and the Struggle for Justice by Treva Lindsey, Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women’s Digital Resistance, and From Slave
Ship to Supermax: Mass Incarceration, Prisoner Abuse, and the New Neo-Slave Novel by Patrick Elliot Alexander. These sources are vital to my understanding of the prison-industrial complex, and constitute integral components of my thesis; as a whole, they provide historical, cultural, and contemporary critical perspectives on misogynoir and its relationship to the prison-industrial complex.

I chose to study the work and lives of Hamer and Shakur for a multitude of reasons. Despite these two Black women not being twenty-first century producers of literature, the lessons from their works published or delivered orally in the final decades of the twentieth century still hold up in today’s world, as discussed earlier. Shakur’s chapter comes first because she examines her and other’s experiences with incarceration and very closely and directly engages with misogynoir, the emerging prison-industrial complex, state-sanctioned violence, and white supremacy in ways that are most illustrative of the anti-Black racism and sexism that characterizes the twenty-first century discussions of mass incarceration. Additionally, the form that her work takes, an autobiography, allows for a direct engagement with the language she uses to convey her message. As Shakur’s narrative follows her experiences in and outside of incarceration, the effects of misogynoir on the lives of Shakur and a wide range of Black women and girls living within and beyond the terrain of prison can easily be traced.

Hamer’s chapter comes second, despite her works’ release to the public before Shakur’s, chronologically. I have made this decision because: 1) Shakur’s work focuses more directly and with greater detail on a longer history of Black women’s experiences with incarceration, and 2) Shakur’s work traces her life journey in relation to her more gradual understanding of the intersections among misogynoir, state-sanctioned violence, white supremacy, and the prison-industrial complex. Hamer’s narrative approach is different; as a persuasive orator, she
accomplishes important care work that appears more frequently in twenty-first gender-inclusive racial justice movements like the #Me Too Movement and #Say Her Name Movement discussed above. Specifically, testimony functions as a form with which Hamer makes her audience care about the issues she is presenting, like misogynoir, as well as the people affected by it. Further, as oratory work was such an integral component of the civil and human rights movements of the latter half of the twentieth century, contemporary discussions of misogynoir and the prison-industrial complex and their connections to multiple forms of expression in the above-mentioned movements also demand critical engagement with the communities that are built through speechmaking practices. In sum, both Shakur and Hamer together offer a fuller examination on how misogynoir truly affects Black women, girls, and gender nonconforming people inside and outside of the contemporary U.S. prison.
CHAPTER I: “I SAW YOUR LIGHT AND IT WAS SHINING”: MISOGYNoir, THE
PRISON-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX AND REIMAGINED BLACK WOMANHOOD IN
ASSATA: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Introduction: Assata as Meditation on Misogynoir in Contemporary Black Women’s Lives

The former Black political prisoner and current political exile, Assata Shakur, describes her life in greatest detail in her political autobiography Assata: An Autobiography, published in 1987. This genre-bending personal narrative chronicles Shakur’s struggles for social transformation, both before and during her time of incarceration during the 1970s, a period in U.S. history in which enduring societal change only came after protest, political repression, and incarceration. Shakur, readers discover, became an iconic Black female member of both the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army. She was convicted for her alleged involvement in the murder of a white state trooper, causing her imprisonment before she ultimately escaped to secure political asylum in Cuba. Regardless of Shakur’s guilt or innocence, I submit that her work offers us more than an illuminating perspective on Black Power-era political activism and its consequences. Assata also provides important insight into the corruptness of the contemporary U.S. prison system, especially as Black women and girls have endured and resisted that corruptness, regardless of their level of involvement in activism. Another well-known formerly incarcerated Black woman revolutionary, Angela Y. Davis, describes Shakur, in the foreword to Assata, through this broader lens as a “compassionate human being with an unswerving commitment to justice that travels easily across racial and ethnic lines, in and out of prison and across oceans and time” (Davis X). Davis says that Shakur
speaks to all of us, and especially to those of us who are sequestered in a growing global network of prisons and jails. At a time when optimism has receded from our political vocabulary, she offers invaluable gifts — inspiration and hope. Her words remind us, as Walter Benjamin once observed, that it is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given to us (Davis X).

What Davis conveys so well here is that despite the sometimes bleak events described in Shakur’s autobiography, she still creates a sense of hope for her readers. Her narrative imagines a Black womanhood beyond anti-Black racial and gender oppression. One example of this is when she reimagines Eva, a Black woman who stands up for Shakur in prison by using her size to intimidate abusive guards, as beautiful. Shakur writes a poem titled “The Rhinoceros Woman” and ends it with saying “I saw your light. / And it was shining” (Shakur 64). Eva, through an anti-Black racist and sexist lens would be viewed as dangerous, ugly, or more. However, Shakur twists the narrative to view Eva through a different lens and views her instead as powerful and beautiful. Throughout the narrative, Shakur demonstrates how Black womanhood exists despite the anti-Black racial and gender oppression that Black women and girls experience inside and outside of prison.

Shakur interweaves stories of her years of incarceration with memories of her childhood and adolescence. She shares multiple encounters she has with good friends and with her family and highlights how constantly pursuing and finding community helps her navigate through a white supremacist world. She finds joyous moments despite the horrific treatment she faces. To reiterate, throughout her autobiography, Shakur centers the experiences of Black women and Black girls, and also uses counternarrative storytelling for two purposes: (1) to fight against her image as dangerous, evil, criminal, and as just a number, and (2) to showcase how white
supremacy—in its racial and gendered forms—is always present and always capable of being undermined in a Black person’s life in the United States. Davis returns to appreciating Assata as a literary work about the specific complexities of Black American womanhood in her landmark work of critical prison studies scholarship *Are Prisons Obsolete?*: “Assata Shakur’s memoirs… reveal the dangerous intersections of racism, male domination, and state strategies of political repression” (Davis 61).

Contemporary Black feminist scholars have helped us to understand that this intersection of anti-Black racism and misogyny is also known as misogynoir. Misogynoir, a term coined by twenty-first century Black feminist scholar Moya Bailey, describes the “anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience, particularly in U.S. visual and digital culture. Misogynoir is not simply the racism that Black women encounter, nor is it the misogyny Black women negotiate. Misogynoir describes the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization” (Bailey 1). Misogynoir manifests the experience that specifically Black women, girls, and gender-nonconforming people experience. It is a term that captures both the anti-Black racism and the misogyny that this group experiences so routinely. The Black feminist historian Treva Lindsey, in her recent book, *America, Goddam: Violence, Black Women, and the Struggle for Justice*, expands upon how misogynoir affects Black women and girls saying that it “often plays a role in violence and other forms of violation against Black girls and women. It’s extant in policing, medical / healthcare systems, and mass incarceration” (Lindsey 21). Misogynoir is not simply a lens from which Black women and girls are viewed. Misogynoir can also affect “intracommunal gender and violence” where even “other Black people” can have “fear and hatred” towards Black women and girls (Lindsey 21). This
chapter examines how Shakur’s autobiography reveals misogynoir as functioning both inside and outside of the prison system. I make the case, in the ensuing pages, that Assata explores how misogynoir affects everything in Black women’s lives, from their encounters with sexualized state violence to their experiences with motherhood. Shakur explores how misogynoir has been detrimental to her life, as well as the ways that she has been able to overcome it. In this way, Assata explores how misogynoir provides insight into both the vastness of racist and sexist harm within the prison-industrial complex, as well as how misogynoir permeates into all aspects of Black women’s experiences in America. Still, throughout her narrative, Shakur continues to reimagine Black womanhood beyond how it is presented through misogynoir, by instead painting a picture of a community among Black women. Shakur describes the ways that she is able to reclaim the narrative of her life, and that of Black women in general, which have been distorted by misogynoir.

Literature Review

Many scholars and writers have explored the life of Assata Shakur and her impacts both as a writer and as a political figure. Some have used Shakur’s work as an example of the importance of studying Black women’s prison literature. For example, Breea Willingham, in her article on the writings of incarcerated Black women, observes that “black women’s prison narratives offer a unique insight into interlocking patterns of oppression that contribute to their incarceration, and how discrimination based on race, gender, and sexuality extends into prison” (Willingham 56). Willingham mentions Shakur’s autobiography as an example of a Black woman’s prison narrative and states that exploring her work provides crucial insight into issues like sexualized state violence and overall abuse of authority. Willingham focuses on Shakur’s
autobiography as a prison narrative which illuminates discrimination related to Black women’s incarceration and prison experiences.

Others, like the critical prison studies scholar Joy James, focus on Shakur’s identity as a revolutionary and a political activist. James explores Shakur’s misogynistic experiences with the Black Panther Party and also focuses on how Assata features counternarrative storytelling to depict who Shakur truly is. James states that “Assata: An Autobiography depicts a public persona hardly compatible with commoditization by those who romanticize political or revolutionary violence. Rejecting the image of violent black revolutionaries, her account offers a complex portrait of a woman so committed to black freedom that she refused to reject armed struggle as a strategy to obtain it” (James 145). James looks at Shakur’s work as rejecting misconceptions about Black revolutionaries, specifically in their relation to violence.

Michael Hames-García is another critical prison studies scholar who focuses on Shakur as an activist and political figure. In his book Fugitive Thought, Hames-García expands upon her time with both the Black Panther Party as well as with the Black Liberation Army. Hames-García also looks at Assata as a women’s slave narrative, saying that:

I propose that Shakur’s invocations of women’s slave narratives and black women’s autobiographies lend structure to her ethical and political arguments. Specifically, Shakur draws from a tradition of black women’s autobiographical narratives in order to adapt basic conventions of autobiography to her objective of exposing racism and economic injustice inherent in U.S. legal and penal system (Hames-García 98).
Hames-García explores how Shakur’s work makes use of “Black women’s autobiographical narratives” in order to expose “racism and economic injustice inherent in U.S. legal and penal system.”

More recently, Jess Issacharoff has explored Shakur’s writings about prison. However, she frames her analysis on how Shakur specifically responds to domestic terrorism. Issacharoff states that Shakur poses as a “triple threat” to “the state, to the conception of the white domestic family, and to the domestic forms of discipline enacted against her during her incarceration” (Issacharoff 115). She further explores how Shakur redefines Black motherhood, Black family, and Black community. Clearly, many scholars, for many years, have offered in-depth analyses into Assata Shakur and her autobiography. They have approached her work from the idea that it is a political autobiography which provides insight into the larger issues of racism and oppression in the U.S. court system and beyond. They have also focused on Shakur’s use of counternarrative storytelling as a tool to counteract racial stereotypes.

**Misogynoir and the Prison-Industrial Complex**

I read Shakur and her autobiography as grappling with the relationship between how the prison-industrial complex functions and the role of misogynoir in its functioning. Concerning the prison-industrial complex, Davis reminds us, in *Are Prisons Obsolete*:

> the term ‘prison industrial complex’ was introduced by activists and scholars to contest prevailing beliefs that increased levels of crimes were the root cause of mounting prison populations. Instead, they argued, prison construction and the attendant drive to fill these new structures with human bodies have been driven by ideologies of racism and the pursuit of profit (Davis 84).
Prisons are an undeniably profitable business. Davis points out how “many corporations with global markets now rely on prisons as an important source of profit” (Davis 85). Incarcerated labor fills a gap in free, or extremely cheap labor, left by the “end” of slavery. Because of the profit made from incarcerated labor, there is a vested interest in maintaining high numbers of people in prisons. Specifically, “in arrangements reminiscent of the convict lease system, federal, state, and country governments pay private companies a fee for each inmate, which means that private companies have a stake in retaining prisoners as long as possible, and in keeping their facilities filled” (Davis 95). The state of Texas, for example, gains more than eighty million dollars annually from these facilities (Davis 95). However, public prisons are also a part of the prison-industrial complex. As Davis notes, though it is true that a major reason for the profitability of private prisons consists in the nonunion labor they employ, and this important distinction should be highlighted. Nevertheless, public prisons are now equally tied to the corporate economy and constitute an ever-growing source of capital profit (Davis 99-100).

Essentially, prisons, whether public or private, exploit incarcerated people and their labor for capital gain. There is even an exception clause in the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution that essentially allows for slavery to continue within the prison system. This clause reads as follows: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United states, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” This Amendment clearly allows for slavery or involuntary servitude to prevail when utilized as “a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted.”
Davis also emphasizes how, following the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, one’s being convicted of a crime often happened by way of racial discrimination:

Particularly in the United States, race has always played a central role in constructing presumptions of criminality. After the abolition of slavery, former slave states passed new legislation revisiting the Slave Codes in order to regulate the behavior of free blacks in ways similar to those that had existed during slavery. The New Black Codes prescribed a range of actions – such as vagrancy, absence of work, breach of job contracts, the possession of firearms, and insulting gestures or acts – that were criminalized only when the person charged was black… Thus, slaves, who had recently been extricated from a condition of hard labor for life, could be legally sentenced to penal servitude (Davis 28-29).

Davis details how, after slavery was abolished, there were laws made specifically to criminalize and target Black people. The laws were extremely arbitrary, and often entailed extremely minor offenses, but they also had the power to be used simply as an excuse to arrest any Black person targeted by white authorities. Again, as Davis reminds us, these arbitrary laws listed acts which were “criminalized only when the person charged was black.” In other words, these laws used the Thirteenth Amendment to make newly freed slaves “slaves” again, highlighting how numerous new ways to continue slavery were established and enforced because of its exception clause.

In her autobiography, Shakur writes of learning about the relationships between the functioning of the prison-industrial complex, this exception clause of the Thirteenth Amendment, and misogynoir when she was imprisoned. When a prison guard told her to snap string beans, to she replied in a manner that sparked a debate:
“How much are you going to pay me?’ I asked.

‘We don’t pay no inmate nothin’, but if you snap these beans we’ll let your door stay open while you snap them.’

‘I don’t work for nothing. I ain’t gonna be no slave for nobody. Don’t you know that slavery was outlawed?’

‘No,’ the guard said, ‘you’re wrong. Slavery was outlawed with the exception of prisons. Slavery is legal in prisons’” (Shakur 64).

Shakur assumes she will be getting paid because, even though she is incarcerated, she still believes that she should be treated like a human being—that she should be paid for her human labor. The fact that the guard is the one to tell her about the Thirteenth Amendment showcases how aware she is of the technicalities. The guard’s decision to refer to prison as legal slavery shows that she is fully aware that what she helps to facilitate is a form of slavery. The guard is thus a representation of the connection between the slaveholding system and the prison system; her expressed awareness of the loophole in the Thirteenth Amendment further reinforces the designed nature and feel of the prison-industrial complex. This interaction between Shakur and the prison guard is also important because of the imbalances in power between both. Shakur feels strongly that she has rights that cannot be violated, as she remarks, “I don’t work for nothing. I ain’t going to be no slave for nobody. Don’t you know that slavery was outlawed?” The fact that the guard both says “you’re wrong” and explains why the law indicates that she is wrong shifts power back over to her. Now, not only has Shakur lost her perceived access to human rights, but she has also lost some of the grounds upon which to defend herself. As such, her pride is wounded.
Shakur later looks up the Thirteenth Amendment and realizes, with frustration, that the guard was right, that slavery was still permitted in prisons under the specific exception written in the Amendment. Shakur also realizes that this exception clause, by permitting slavery in prisons, also permits misogynoir-based treatment of incarcerated Black women. Shakur details her thought process saying: “When Jimmy Carter was governor of Georgia, he brought a Black woman from prison to clean and babysit for Amy. Prisons are a profitable business. They are a way of legally perpetuating slavery” (Shakur 65). Shakur now understands the purposeful way that the Thirteenth Amendment allows for the continuation of slavery in prisons. Specifically, her use of the word “business” is key because it demonstrates both the connection to capitalism that prisons have as well as the way that they are designed not for rehabilitation but rather for capital gain. Additionally, Shakur shows, through her mention of the Black woman who Jimmy Carter “employed,” the way that incarcerated Black women are, as enslaved women were in the past, forced to act as mammies. The historian Deborah Gray White, in her book *Ar’n ’t I a Woman?*, defines a Mammy as “a [Black] woman dedicated to the white family, especially the children of that family. She was the house servant who was given complete charge of domestic management. She also served as a friend and advisor. She was, in short, a surrogate mistress and mother” (White 49). The fact that Jimmy Carter, a Georgia governor and future President, compels an incarcerated Black woman to act as a “mammy” shows the long legacy of misogynoir-influenced labor. The role of the Mammy was a way to perpetuate racist and misogynistic beliefs of the expectations of Black women to serve white families and men in sexual, maternal and economic ways. Shakur’s language exposes how these expectations have become a practice within prisons that Black women endure that continues their labor and from the institution of slavery. Not only is there the Thirteenth Amendment allowing for their unpaid
labor, but there is also a vast difference in power as the Black woman in question is incarcerated and Carter, at the time, was a governor. Further, Shakur specifically says that Jimmy Carter “brought a Black woman from prison.” The specific word choice of “brought” alludes to how Black women’s bodies, in slavery and now in incarceration, were viewed as objects for white men to possess and use as they see fit. Finally, Shakur names Carter and his daughter Amy but just refers to the Black woman as “a Black woman.” This choice serves to simultaneously call out the perpetrators of white supremacy as well as to demonstrate that, because of the Thirteenth Amendment, this misogynoir-based treatment could happen to any incarcerated Black woman.

In addition, Shakur demonstrates how anti-Black racism and misogyny prevailed in court cases. Shakur faces racial discrimination and misogynoir in her own case. Shakur does not receive a fair trial or even really a trial at all, as the initial chosen jury already believes that she is guilty. Because she is Black and a Black revolutionary woman, she is deemed guilty before she has even been given an opportunity to prove herself innocent. Shakur remarks that “there were only a few Blacks speckled here and there” (67) among what should have been a jury of her peers. These representational differences, Shakur reveals, are systemically enforced, and do not improve even after the judge honors the request of Shakur’s lawyers for jurors to be selected from a different county: the judge selects a majority-white county. Moreover, not only is the initial chosen jury not representative, but Shakur describes it as “look[ing] more like a lynch mob than a jury” (67). Shakur’s calling the jury a “lynch mob” indicates the racism present as well as the intentional way that the court system perpetuates forms of specifically anti-Black forms of social control from previous eras. Lynching, for instance, was (and is) a way of enforcing the social control of Black people. It created a sense of fear and punishment that spread throughout entire Black communities. Shakur’s later emphasis on the jury “glar[ing] at us, as if they would
kill us if they could” (67) evokes the “lynch mob” and also demonstrates how intimidation of Shakur has continued, even before her trial has begun (67). Thus, Shakur reveals that hers is not a trial to prove innocence or guilt. She was already considered guilty; this trial was merely an attempt to offer the public the image of a legal system that appeared to still function legally.

**Misogynoir as Sexualized State Violence in Assata**

Building on her discussions of how Black women, regardless of their involvement in activism, have routinely experienced harm in the prison-industrial complex, Shakur explores how misogynoir functions in the prison system through sexualized state violence. Literary and critical prison studies scholar, Patrick Elliot Alexander, in *From Slave Ship to Supermax: Mass Incarceration, Prisoner Abuse, and the New Neo-Slave Novel* states that sexualized state violence is a disciplinary holdover from the Transatlantic Slave Trade whose proliferation in women’s correctional settings has resulted from the passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. On the one hand, Title VII paved the way for female correctional officers to be able to work in men’s prisons, but on the other, it sanctioned male guards to oversee women held in state custody—and thus have unsupervised access to jailed and imprisoned women’s cellblocks, restrooms, cells, and bodies (Alexander 21-22).

This violence is committed and condoned by people employed by the state in positions of power, who have been entrusted to uphold the law. While this sexual violence can and does occur to all incarcerated people, it frequently occurs to incarcerated Black women, girls, and gender nonconforming people. Prison guards and other people in positions of power in prisons use their power and the looming threat of harsher and/or prolonged sentences to force these women to accept sexual violence and assault. Sexual assault also takes the form of searches that appear as
needed by prison officials to see if the incarcerated woman is hiding anything. These searches are not only demeaning and violating, but can be more in-depth than needed, and even repeated multiple times despite the guards not finding any contraband.

Whenever Shakur entered a new prison, she had to go through what the prison employees called “the strip and search” (Shakur 83). In addition to showering in a shower without curtains, the incarcerated also had to go through another search, the ‘internal search,’ which entailed a nurse searching, via their fingers, the new prison arrivals’ genitals. In a conversation with the other women in the prison, Shakur details finding out about this invasive search, saying:

“You mean they really put their hands inside you, to search you?” I had asked.
“Uh-huh,” they had answered. Every woman who has ever been on the rock, or in the old house of detention can tell you about it. The women call it “getting the finger” or, more vulgarly, “getting finger-fucked.” “What happens if you refuse?” i had asked Afeni. “They lock you in the hole and they don’t let you out until you consent to be searched internally”’ (Shakur 83).

Davis, in Are Prisons Obsolete?, references how this specific passage from Shakur “exposes an everyday routine in women’s prisons that verges on sexual assault as much as it is taken for granted” (Davis 63). The use of “uh-huh,” a casual and informal response, as the answer to Shakur’s shocked question of “they really put their hands inside you, to search you,” highlights the commonality and dehumanization of this horrible, violating act. Because this invasive search happens to every woman in prison, its commonness amounts to institutionalized violence. Again, the pervasiveness of this sexual violence is further shown by the fact that Shakur recalls that the women say that “Every woman … can tell you about it.”
The invasiveness of this search is shown in the way that the women call it “‘getting the finger’ or, more vulgarly, ‘getting finger-fucked.’” These names for the search are graphic and explicitly sexual. These names give voice to the lived reality of the search: it is sexually violating. Another reason this search has lost its shock value is because the incarcerated women know that they can do nothing to resist it. The reality is that the incarcerated women either give consent for the search at first, or face extreme punishment through time “in the hole” until they ultimately give in. Afeni specifically says that “They lock you in the hole and they don’t let you out until you consent to be searched internally.” The use of “consent” is ironic because, in this imbalanced power dynamic, one cannot truly give consent. The women’s consent is clearly given under duress of punishment which, therefore, nullifies its power. In this regard, Shakur herself “thought about refusing, but [sure] as hell didn’t want to be in the hole” (Shakur 84). Consent under threat of punishment is not actual consent. Again, this invasive search is sexual violence that Shakur and other Black women endure which has been sanctioned and perpetuated routinely by the state. Davis has emphasized what the Australian activist Amanda George has said about this subject: “without the uniform, without the power of the state, [the strip search] would be sexual assault” (Davis 82-83).

To return to Shakur’s autobiography, when Shakur gets searched, she says that she “had an instant, mile-long attitude” and “wanted to punch that nurse clear to oblivion” (Shakur 84). This reaction is a natural, unconscious one to being essentially sexually assaulted. However, because Shakur is incarcerated, she is unable to actually carry out any of her natural reactions. She rather has to be quiet and deal with the sexual violence or else face further consequences.

There are also times when incarcerated Black women are punished for defending themselves against sexual assault from other incarcerated people. A work of critical prison
studies that Davis co-authored with Gina Dent, Erica R. Meiners, and Beth E. Richie titled *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* details the story of Sarah Reed, “a thirty-two-year-old Black woman with a history of psychiatric disability” who died in prison (19). Reed was on remand in Halloway after having been charged with grievous bodily harm because she had attempted to defend herself from sexual assault by a patient in the secure unit of a mental health facility. Although the inquest found her death to be self-inflicted, officials were not persuaded that she actually intended to take her own life. The failure to provide adequate and timely care, and her incarceration in lieu of appropriate health care, were both causal factors in what was ruled a suicide (19-20).

Here, Reed defends herself from sexual assault by another patient and yet still receives additional charges. This assault should never have even occurred in the first place because she was “in the secure unit of a mental health facility.” She was supposed to be getting help there for her “psychiatric disability” and yet she was sexually assaulted and then punished when she defended herself against that assault. Reed’s death was an instance of racialized premature death. There is also the question of whether her death was actually a suicide or if there was some other cause.

Even so, while her death was technically ruled a suicide, it still had key “causal factors” such as “failure to provide adequate and timely care” as well as her actual “incarceration in lieu of appropriate health care.” Essentially, if Reed’s life had been valued and if she had been treated appropriately instead of punished and imprisoned, then her life might not have ended when and how it did. Further, the causes of her death are the direct fault of multiple failures of the legal system.

The Black feminist historian Treva Lindsey details how
“for Black women and girls, the inaccessibility of legalized ‘self-defense’ produces two harrowing options: (1) do not fight back and either continue being brutalized and or risk being killed; (2) fight back and risk being incarcerated for surviving” (Lindsey 110). Lindsey’s thoughts expand upon the harsh reality that Shakur faced amid routine acts of sexualized state violence that seem intensified because she is a Black woman and a revolutionary. Shakur and Black women broadly confront two equally bad outcomes: potential death or more severe forms of incarceration, including solitary confinement. Indeed, as Lindsey states, “These are not viable, just, or humane options” (110). Such institutional cornering of Black women into accepting sexual violence or receiving harsh punishment strips them of their humanity, equity, and freedom.

After Shakur delivers her baby, she is told that she once again has to go through an “internal search.” However, when she refuses this time, she details the consequences she then faced, saying:

When i refused examination, i walked out of the infirmary and they called the goon squad (several large female officers). They all jumped on me and started beating me. They had me on the floor—eventually my arms and legs were chained. They dragged me by the chains to PSA and stopped only when a nurse asked them to please stop. So they put me on a mattress and dragged the mattress. They took me to the observation room and left me, hands and feet cuffed. I had no sanitary napkins, no means to wash myself. The cuffs cut into my skin (the scars are still visible), and my wrists were bleeding. Later i found out that i had received an infraction for slapping an officer in the face when they were beating me (Shakur 144-145).
Here, Shakur is unable to defend herself both from physical attacks and from sexualized state violence. Referring to the officers as “the goon squad” is especially important. A “goon squad” normally means a group, often of criminals, who threaten and/or perform violent and ruthless acts. By referring to the officers in this way, Shakur highlights both how foreboding and terrifying they were, as well as the intent behind their brutal actions. Calling them the “goon squad” seems to indicate that they intended, one way or another, to cause Shakur physical harm. The officers are further established as a threatening gang-like force when Shakur says that “they all jumped on [her] and started beating [her].” The way the officers treat her is so bad that the nurse is compelled to ask the guards to cease their harm—to which they comply and yet still find a way to keep dragging and demeaning Shakur.

Multiple state officials harm Shakur, and do so while she is helpless and already hurt. It is therefore natural that she would defend herself, whether that self-defense was a conscious action or not. Yet, Shakur later finds out that she “had received an infraction for slapping an officer in the face when they were beating [her].” The fact that Shakur is severely punished for her actions, and the officers are not punished for theirs, highlights how, in the criminal justice system, Shakur has no rights and her life does not have value. Shakur has just given birth and yet she is left, after being beaten, with her “hands and feetuffed” and “no sanitary napkins” or a “means to wash [herself],” and, as readers discover later, with no visitation access to her newborn. Her treatment is inhumane and unethical. The fact that Shakur, like other incarcerated people, is criminalized for defending herself against state officials’ countless acts of physical and sexual harm also illustrates how the lives of all incarcerated people do not receive basic protection and fundamental value from the state.
State officials’ physical battering of Shakur is only one form of punishment she endures; she is then held in solitary confinement, which is called Punitive Segregation Area, or PSA. Shakur observes that “after two weeks, they said, ‘If you agree to be vaginally searched, you can go to your floor.’ I did and went to my floor. The next day the captain came down to my cell and informed me that they had decided to lock me up again for refusing a complete physical from the medical staff assigned to Rikers from Montefoire Hospital” (Shakur 145). This was not the first time that Shakur had been vaginally examined. Nor was this the first time that the people in charge had made up one reason or another for her to have to be examined again. This passage highlights the endless cycle of harm incarcerated people, and especially Black women, experience. Shakur is once again threatened into giving consent and then punished again despite her coerced consent. The specific word choice of “again,” when referring to the people in charge deciding to punish Shakur, highlights the endless nature of this cycle of violent assault. Also, this passage clearly shows how Shakur has no choice or agency. Her reality aligns with the one that Lindsey asserts as being routine for Black women and girls: she can either fight back and be punished, or she can avoid fighting back and be “brutalized” (Lindsey 110). Essentially, Shakur is forced to put up with all of the unethical and violent treatment that she faces in prison. The people of all ranks in the prison, from officer to captain, all abuse their power by routinely victimizing and demoralizing incarcerated people without fear of punishment or even accountability.

Further, Shakur shows that, for Black women and girls, routine sexualized violence extends even beyond the prison setting. When Shakur is younger, before she is incarcerated, she is cornered and threatened with sexual assault while being harassed by multiple young men at the same time: “They were pulling up my skirt and taking my blouse off. I cried and screamed. ‘Shut
up, bitch,’ one of them said, slapping my face. I begged them for mercy. I told them i was a virgin. ‘There’s always a first time, baby’ someone sneered” (Shakur 113). As discussed above, when Shakur refuses the examination after she gives birth, male prison officers physically harm her as a punishment for her refusal to endure the sexualized state violence of an internal search. Here, earlier in life, Shakur reminds us that she had also endured the physical aggression of men for refusing to accept sexual assault: after Shakur has “cried and screamed,” she is not only called a “bitch,” but is “slapped.” The men’s removal of Shakur’s skirt and blouse once again evoke the strip searches Shakur endures in prison. In this case, however, these men, instead of forcibly controlling her body and appearance under the pretense of “searching her,” they intend to rape her and tell her so, which results in her “begg[ing]for mercy” and these men “sneer[ing].” Shakur’s juxtaposing of the two images again demonstrates just how much more power the men have than her. Moreover, Shakur’s sexual abuse in prison leaves a lasting reminder on her body because of the scars that her handcuffs leave. In this case, her scar, if the young men are successful in their attempt, will also involve the loss of her virginity. Although virginity is an arbitrary concept, Shakur’s decision to include it specifically, as well as the young man’s response of “there’s always a first time” highlights how this moment would potentially, beyond its horror, last with her as her “first time.”

Further, much like how attempts at self-defense against sexual assault from officials and other incarcerated people in prison become constrained for Shakur, outside of prison, Shakur depicts how Black women and Black girls often confront misogynoir in ways that make self-defense a challenge. Specifically, Shakur details how she is limited in fighting back against sexual assault by damaging items in the home of one of the young male assailants. The young man eventually says “y’all got to get out of here. My mother’s gonna have a fit” (Shakur 114).
Shakur realizes that she is unable to defend herself against a sizeable group of men, as is the case during her imprisonment. Further, she also becomes aware that they will not respond to her repeated pleas to stop. Her only true way to “fight back,” then, is to rebel against something or someone the men care about: in this case, it was the young man’s mother. Importantly, Shakur emphasizes that this was her only way to receive protection from harm: she “couldn’t call the police because the police were looking for me” (Shakur 115). With this additional statement, Shakur demonstrates how she is unable to rely on the state to protect her from sexual harm. Just like in prison, this harm receives no ethical intervention from state officials because of her perceived criminal status.

While rape is an extreme example of the sexual harm that Black women and girls experience, they also experience other forms of harm on a more daily occurrence. Shakur details how

Any Black woman, practically anywhere in amerika, can tell you about being approached, propositioned, and harassed by white men. Many consider all Black women potential prostitutes. In the Village, this phenomenon was ten times worse than elsewhere. It was almost impossible to go from one corner to the next without some white man hissing at you, following you, or jingling the money in his pockets (Shakur 106).

This passage is another that shows how the routine sexual harassment, sexual coercion, and sexual violence that Black women endure outside of the prison context is a direct result of misogynoir. Shakur shows here that white men in America, in particular, view Black women through a lens that allows for the sexualization and sexual abuse of Black women to happen with little or no state intervention. Here, Shakur’s specific word choices of “prostitutes” and “hissing”
connote a continuation of slavery as Black women are once again considered to be a commodity to be bought at whim. Shakur’s decision to spell “amerika” with a “k” further demonstrates the systematic way that Black women’s subjection to white supremacy functions in America as the “k” here and elsewhere in the autobiography invokes groups like the “KKK,” a white supremacist organization. By articulating the sexualization and sexual abuse of Black women as happening “practically anywhere in amerika,” Shakur is showcasing that these issues are not only issues in Greenwich Village, but rather American issues that result from a broad refusal to see Black women in their full humanity. So even though Shakur is not imprisoned at this moment, she demonstrates that misogynoir and routine sexualized violence extends beyond the prison sphere and impacts Black women’s daily life.

**Misogynoir in Confined Motherhood**

Shakur’s autobiography also reveals how there is a long and complicated history of misogynoir shaping motherhood for Black women who endure institutional confinement. The Black feminist historian Sarah Haley, in her book, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, details how “Rape and forced reproduction were techniques of racial terror that targeted Black women’s bodies. The main evidence revealing these techniques is passing references in penitentiary reports and hospital records that evidence childbirth” (Haley 104). By referencing the sexualized state violence that confined Black women endured as slaves in the era of slavery and as exploited imprisoned laborers in the decades following its abolition, Haley reinforces the notion that throughout history, childbirth and motherhood, for Black women, have often not been moments of life to be celebrated. Childbirth has been, rather, another way that Black women—especially confined Black women—have been harmed.
Shakur, however, through her portrayal of confined Black motherhood in her autobiography, reclaims and transforms this narrative of misogynoir-shaped motherhood as she paints it as hopeful and joyous rather than as solely oppressive. Before Shakur herself gets pregnant while imprisoned, she finds out that her imprisoned friend, Simba, is pregnant. Simba, a Black woman and member of the Black Panther Party, shares the news of her pregnancy with Shakur. Shakur details this, saying:

I was glad about her pregnancy and sad at the same time: she was facing twenty-five years. Although I tried to be cheerful, I guess she could see the concerned expression on my face. “Don’t worry,” she told me. “These people can lock us up, but they can’t stop life, just like they can’t stop freedom. This baby was meant to be born, to carry on. They murdered Homey, and so this baby, like all our children, is going to be our hope for the future (Shakur 87-88).

When Assata hears this news of Simba’s pregnancy, she has mixed feelings. While she is happy for her friend, she also thinks about her current situation being in prison. Simba having to remain imprisoned, in one place, because of her sentence is juxtaposed with the birth of her child. Specifically, Shakur mentions how Simba is “facing twenty-five years” while Simba says that her child, “like all our children is going to be our hope for the future.” The reference to the future indicates a life beyond the incarceration both of these women are facing. The freedom the child represents for these women is further highlighted by the phrase “this baby was meant to be born, to carry on.” The phrase “carry on” indicates a sense of intergenerational movement and freedom that is in direct contrast to the years that these women will have to face in prison.

The hope that Simba’s baby provides is one that cannot be controlled or confined by the state. Simba says how “these people can lock us up, but they can’t stop life, just like they can’t
stop freedom.” The repetition of “they can’t stop” highlights the inevitability of both hope and of the coming baby. The baby was “meant to be born” meaning that, no matter what the state has tried to do to control the women, the birth will still happen. Motherhood has now become an avenue of agency for incarcerated Black women. It has become a way for these women to regain control of their own bodies and be able to create life that will outlast their confinement. The use of “they” and “these people” instead of a more specific name or reference shows how what these two women are fighting against is larger than any individual person or group, but is rather the overarching concept of misogynoir and white supremacy. The baby also represents a new generation of life. The corrupt system can kill people like Homey, but it cannot stop the production of new life. Now, instead of their children being used for free labor, like during slavery, the children now represent hope and the continuation of freedom and resistance. Motherhood now allows these women to experience freedom even while being incarcerated, which is reclaiming the joy of motherhood that slavery stole in the past.

When Shakur finds out she is pregnant, she feels such joy: “A person was inside of me. Someone who was going to grow up to walk and talk, to love and laugh. To me it was the miracle of all miracles. And deeply spiritual. The odds against this baby being conceived were so great it boggled my mind. And yet it was happening. It seemed so right, so beautiful, in surroundings that were so ugly” (Shakur 123). Here, the hope that this child brings Shakur is apparent. The phrase “miracle of all miracles” highlights the fact of her pregnancy as both special and rare. Shakur presents motherhood as luck. By considering her experience with becoming a mother in prison as lucky direct contrasts the history of motherhood for Black women confined within the institution of slavery. Davis, in *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, describes how, in enslavement,
special penalties … were reserved for pregnant women unable to reach the quotas that determined how long and how fast they should work. In the slave narrative of Moses Grandy, an especially brutal form of whipping is described in which the woman was required to lie on the ground with her stomach positioned in a hole, whose purpose was to safeguard the fetus (conceived as future slave labor) (Davis 67-68).

Davis highlights how unlucky becoming pregnant could be for Black women confined within the institution of slavery. Enslaved Black women’s experiences of pregnancy and motherhood reinforced their identities as mere vessels exploited for continued capital gain under white supremacy. Shakur challenges this history of misogynoir by demonstrating how having a child on the way helps her, as a contemporary confined Black woman, to deal with the realities of incarceration. Shakur’s use of juxtaposition, her emphasis on how her pregnancy reflecting the “beautiful” within the “ugly,” highlights how time in prison can be transformative. Shakur’s pregnancy provides her with a way to look towards the future while still remaining locked up in a place that causes the current time to be harmful. When Shakur portrays motherhood in her autobiography as lucky, hopeful, and freeing, she inverts the narrative of Black motherhood in confinement from something harmful into something helpful. Shakur reimagines Black womanhood in a way that demonstrates bodily autonomy and agency.

However, even though Shakur reframes the experience of confined motherhood as something positive, she still cannot escape natal alienation. Natal alienation is the systematic rupturing of familial ties that stems from slavery. Joshua Price, in his book, Prison and Social Death, details the historical aspect of this term by describing how the law was changed so that, for slaves, the status of a child was determined by their mother rather than their father: “[T]he
very bloodline of connection between a mother and child now became the determining factor in making the child a separate item of chattel who could be sold away from her mother at the whim of an owner. This set up a legal framework whereby slaveholders could separate even the fetus from the mother” (Price 80). The connection between a Black mother and her child was weaponized against her. Not only was a mother’s fate passed onto her child, but that child could then be separated away from her. It is also significant that the natal alienation specifically stems as a result of a Black woman’s status as chattel. This alienation between mother and child could start when the baby was a fetus. Shakur experiences a dimension of this forced separation from her child as a form of misogynoir. It happens right after she gives birth; for more than twelve hours after delivery, Shakur was not permitted to hold her baby once. She details this experience saying that “Later that day, September 11, they still hadn’t brought me the baby. Dr. Garrett had gone home to sleep and, when he returned, at 6 P.M. that day, i still hadn’t seen the baby. He reminded them that i was supposed to breastfeed her. They told him he hadn’t ‘written a prescription’ for breastfeeding” (Shakur 144). Shakur’s inclusion of “they” and “them” here is crucial; it demonstrates how it is not one person controlling Shakur and her child, but rather a group. Referring to the people this way conveys that her mistreatment is the result of a system working against her. In this way, the fact that “they” are controlling where the infant goes and the infant’s fate relates back to Price’s discussion of how slaveholders, by way of natal alienation, could control the status, body, and movement of a child if their mother was a slave. Shakur’s child has committed no crime, yet she is still punished because of the status of her mother. Further, Shakur’s body is even more controlled by the state upon becoming an imprisoned mother. Specifically, Shakur has to be given a prescription for breastfeeding, something natural that only involves her body and her child’s body. Yet, because Shakur is held
in state custody, becoming a mother means that she is denied access to her child and to her own bodily autonomy in new ways.

This contemporary form of natal alienation continues to affect Shakur and her family during the rest of the time incarcerated, revealing the power of misogynoir in Shakur’s confined motherhood. Shakur specifically details a moment when her daughter and her mother visit her. Shakur says that her daughter is “four years old, and . . . although my mother has brought her to see me every week, wherever i am, with the exception of the time i was in alderson—she has never been with her mother” (Shakur 257). The state still controls the connection between Shakur and her daughter. Shakur can only see her daughter when the state allows it and even then, the meetings are described as painfully brief—“pitiful little visits” (Shakur 257). Further, the state also controls the connection between Shakur and her own mother. Shakur states that she knows that her “mother is suffering too” (Shakur 257). The connection between Black mother and daughter has been severed across multiple generations. Natal alienation produces this multigenerational trauma that continues to affect new generations of Black women and girls.

Further, when children are so young, they are unable to understand why they cannot see their mothers. Shakur’s daughter cries and yells to Shakur that “You can get out of here, if you want to” (Shakur 258). Shakur’s daughter is too young to understand that there is a system in place to prevent her from connecting deeply with her mother. She neither understands that this is not her mother’s fault, nor does she have any control over the situation. Rather, she believes that her mother is choosing to not see her. After Shakur tells her daughter how she cannot open the bars between them, she remarks: “My daughter goes over to the barred door that leads to the visiting room. She pulls and she pushes. She yanks and she hits and she kicks the bars until she falls on the floor, a heap of exhaustion” (Shakur 258). This image is heartbreaking as it shows
just how much the children suffer as a result of natal alienation. Again, the separation between
the two of them is not accidental, but is rather purposefully designed. The doors are made to be
“barred” and are strong enough that someone cannot break through them. So Shakur is not the
only one behind bars. Her daughter is also contained by the same system of white supremacy.
Further, Shakur’s daughter has now experienced firsthand how cruel the world is and how many
immovable walls are standing between her and her mom, due to the enforcement of this system
of white supremacy through misogynoir. When Shakur’s four-year-daughter leaves, Shakur
describes her as “looking like a little adult.” As a result of this form of natal alienation and
misogynoir, Shakur’s daughter loses a mother, as well as her childhood and innocence.

**Misogynoir in Racist and Sexist Stereotypes**

There are many misogynoir-based stereotypes to which Black women are subjected and
have been subjected throughout history. These anti-Black and sexist stereotypes adversely affect
Black women’s lives and are often used to justify bad treatment of them. Lindsey details how

For Black women and girls, specifically, though not exclusively, policing rested
on a demonization of Black personhood. Prior to the U.S. becoming a nation-state
through genocidal violence, laws existed that relied on dehumanizing racial,
gender, and sexual stereotypes about captive Black people. The designation of
Black women and girls as animalistic and monstrous was embedded in laws and,
subsequently, law enforcement during the early eighteenth century (44-45).

Lindsey shows how misogynoir seeps into the laws and into law enforcement. These stereotypes
of viewing Black women and girls as “animalistic and monstrous” are part of the history of law
enforcement and the criminal justice system. Additional stereotypes continue to affect
incarcerated women broadly. Critical prison studies scholar Victoria Law details how misogynoir and other gender-based stereotypes affects incarcerated women:

Incarcerated women who raise their voices face an additional burden: they have already defied societal norms by transgressing both laws and acceptable notions of feminine behavior and morality. While prisons have always been a form of social control, they have also been used to control women’s actions and freedom. The early twentieth century saw the proliferation of reformatories for women. Women were sent to the reformatory for defying societally approved gender roles: being drunk, engaging in pre- and extramarital sex, contracting a venereal disease, or keeping bad company. These women were seen as even worse than the men who committed the most heinous crimes and, until the advent of the reformatory, were seen as incorrigible (Law 9-10).

Law explains how the history of punishment and incarceration of women intersected whenever they defied gender-based expectations. The fact that women were policed for suspicion of breaking social standards rather than actual laws highlights the arbitrary nature of the legal system, as well as the long history of using incarceration as a punishment for women. Law emphasizes that women’s transgressions of acceptable societal behaviors gave rise to the stereotype of the “fallen women [who] [ar]e irredeemable” and face heavy “moral condemnation” (Law 10).

The “fallen woman” stereotype is one heavily ingrained with incarceration. Davis also expands upon this stereotype stating that, “According to dominant views, women convicts were irrevocably fallen women, with no possibility of salvation. If male criminals were considered to be public individuals who had simply violated the social contract, female criminals were seen as
having transgressed fundamental moral principles of motherhood” (Davis 70). This stereotype highlights how reintegration into society for “female criminals” is harder than for male criminals. Being viewed as a “fallen woman” alters a woman’s ability to be a member of a community or a society. This can lead to isolation and hopelessness.

Shakur, however, directly confronts this stereotype and misogynoir through her portrayal of Eva, and Shakur does this important work while she is still incarcerated. Eva is a fellow prisoner who uses her physical size to help Assata out when she encounters abusive prison guards. In a poem about Eva, whom Shakur calls the “Rhinoceros woman,” Shakur says: “Black woman. Baad Woman. / Wear your bigness on your chest like a badge / cause you done earned it” (Shakur 63). In this passage, Shakur depicts how incarcerated Black women fight against both misogynoir, as Lindsey noted, and the broader gender-based stereotype and expectation of women to be gentle, dainty, and delicate. Shakur, in her poetry, shows how Eva’s beauty defies misogynoir and stereotype; she is still beautiful. Shakur not only calls Eva beautiful elsewhere in the poem, but also says for Eva to “wear [her] bigness on [her] chest like a badge / cause [she] done earned it.” Earlier in this scene, Eva used her “bigness” in order to intimidate the guards into leaving Assata alone. This scene highlights how a trait that would isolate one from society, a woman’s size, can also be used for good. Reframing body size as something “earned” puts it into a positive light as something that can be a benefit rather than a negative. Furthermore, Shakur asserts that Eva “earned” being proud of her bigness because she used that bigness to defend Shakur against prison guards who were abusing their power.

Essentially, Eva took something that she has been made to feel ashamed of because of racist and misogynistic stereotypes and used it to resist white supremacy and care for a fellow Black imprisoned woman: Shakur. Shakur also inverts misogynoir and gender-based stereotypes
of incarcerated women when she reframes the meaning of “bad” here. Eva is not “bad” in the sense of being guilty or criminal, in Shakur’s eyes, but Shakur, with a careful alternative spelling, rather describes Eva as “baad” to make a compliment, to celebrate her defiance. Shakur further emphasizes how this is a moment of potential resistance by her key word choice of “badge.” Using the word “badge” clearly invokes images of police and people in legal authority, and yet Shakur shows that a Black woman who state officials despise and harm in prison can still be deserving of the power and respect of a badge. Further, not only does Eva deserve that power and respect, but she actually earned it, unlike the police and prison guards who possess their extreme power as a result of white supremacy. Throughout this passage, Shakur takes something that isolates and makes people look down upon women for their size, and reimagines it in a more positive context. She takes control of dominant cultural narratives about Black women and reframes them by creating a celebratory moment for Black womanhood.

Elsewhere in her autobiography, Shakur demonstrates how misogynoir informs the racist and sexist stereotypes that extend beyond the prison-sphere. Shakur details how these stereotypes affected Black women and girls in her formative years: “We had been completely brainwashed and we didn’t even know it. We accepted white value systems and white standards of beauty and, at times, we accepted the white man’s view of ourselves. We had never been exposed to any other point of view or any other standard of beauty” (Shakur 31). Shakur here recounts a painful chapter in her reality growing up as Black woman. She was never introduced formally to ideas or beliefs that she or other Black girls and Black women could be seen as beautiful. The continuous use of “we” in this passage demonstrates how this feeling of inadequacy applies to all Black women and girls who have been led to believe that they are not beautiful because of their skin color and gender. Shakur’s specific word choice of “brainwashed” showcases how this perceived
inherent lack of beauty because of race and gender is not a reality but is rather something that white supremacy has compelled Shakur and others Black women and girls to believe. Thus “the white man” she mentions here is not a specific person, but rather the system of white supremacy that imposes misogynoir-based stereotypes onto Black women and girls to impact and distort their self-perception. The repetition of “white” in this passage further demonstrates how the definition of beauty that she and other Black women and girls had accepted as fact is not actually representative of themselves, but a reflection of internalized anti-Black racism and sexism.

Internalized anti-Black racism and sexism also guided the thinking of some of the older Black women who Shakur encountered in her youth. Shakur remembered hearing people say that they would not go into the sun at the beach because “they were too Black already” (Shakur 25). Shakur specifically focuses on how misogynoir frames these statements; she recounts how white supremacy constricts Black women’s level of relaxation and recreation at the beach: “One lady always put a paper bag on her head and poked holes in it for her eyes. Some of the women refused to go near the water because they were afraid their hair would ‘go bad’ (Shakur 25). These misogynoir-based beliefs are internalized so much so that Black women alter their lives and behavior according to them. Shakur learns that these women believe what they have been taught: that darker skin is not beautiful. Shakur’s own grandmother said to her “Now, when you grow up, I want you to marry some man with ‘good hair’ so your children will have good hair” (Shakur 31). Shakur said that her “grandmother just said what everybody knew was a common fact: good hair was better than bad hair, meaning that straight hair was better than nappy hair” (Shakur 31). This moment with her grandmother is another key example of how misogynoir is taught to be internalized intergenerationally for Black women and girls. Shakur, in these years before writing a tribute poem to Eva, believes that she has bad hair and is ugly because of this
miseducation about Black women and beauty. The specific word choice of “common fact” exposes how these misogynoir-based stereotypes have become so internalized and passed on for Black women and girls that they had been considered fact rather than mere opinion.

Even before Shakur writes the poem celebrating Eva and Black womanhood, she goes through her own transformation, discovering her own and other Black women’s beauty. In college, she starts wearing her hair natural as a refusal to accept an imposed misogynoir-based standard of beauty. She underscores how significant it is to wear her hair natural saying: “It was a matter of simple statement for me. This is who i am and this is how i like to look. This is what i think is beautiful” (Shakur 174-175). Because of how accepted the false standard of beauty has become, wearing her hair natural is a “statement,” an act of rebellion in itself. This is because Shakur has refused to accept misogynoir as her defining reality. Given the pride that Shakur carries in her appearance, she also upends generational trauma by preparing her future daughter, Kakuya, to look at a reflection of herself with admiration. Throughout this autobiography, Shakur rarely focuses on just herself; however, in this passage, she repeats “me” and “i.” This emphasis on the self highlights how this journey towards self-acceptance models a way for Black women and girls to both privately and publicly refuse to allow enforcers of white supremacy and misogynoir to convince them that they are not beautiful because they are Black women.

Conclusion

Shakur’s autobiography, Assata, provides hope in the face of a corrupt prison system and a broader society shaped by misogynoir. Throughout, Shakur sheds light on how misogynoir and the prison-industrial complex affect the lives of Black women and girls both inside and outside of prison. Shakur frequently challenges racial stereotypes and reimagines Black womanhood in a more positive and hopeful light. She also highlights the importance of creating communities and
reclaiming Black women’s narrative from enforcers of misogynoir. Examining Shakur’s work through the lens of misogynoir highlights how the prison-industrial complex works as a whole and showcases how, in order to truly fix the issues of anti-Black racism and white supremacy in America, looking at the experiences of Black women and gender nonconforming people is crucial and pivotal.
CHAPTER II “NOBODY’S FREE UNTIL EVERYBODY’S FREE”: MISOGYNOIR AND TESTIMONY IN FANNIE LOU HAMER’S ORATORY

Introduction: Testimony as Literary Form of Collective Care Against Misogynoir

The unwavering spirit of Fannie Lou Hamer, who is best known as a formidable force in the fight for civil rights, emerges through her powerful speeches—which scholars have documented and examined in a variety of forms in the late-twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries. Hamer’s journey, marked by her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and in the fight for human rights, as well as her unapologetic activism in its aftermath, provides a unique lens through which to examine the complexities of misogynoir—which I first examined in Chapter 1 on Assata Shakur’s autobiography. This chapter delves into the narrative tapestry woven by Hamer, a Black woman whose commitment to social transformation led her to the forefront of the struggle for justice, as well as for civil and human rights. From her experiences as a child with poverty and sharecropping, to her later experiences with sexualized state violence, physical harm, and incarceration and as an activist for voting rights, Hamer experienced misogynoir in many ways. Much like Shakur’s exploration of the corruptness of the U.S. prison system and the misogynoir that Black women and girls experience inside and outside of sites of incarceration, Hamer’s work as an orator and long-range vision for social justice began with her own experience of incarceration.

Hamer and Shakur both expose misogynoir as a reality for Black women and girls and white supremacy as a reality for Black people as a whole in America. While Shakur uses the
literary form of counternarrative to tell her story and expose the systemic harms of misogynoir and white supremacy and raise social consciousness, Hamer uses testimony in her speeches to express her personal journey and persuade her listeners to care about those harms and the people harmed. Hamer’s reliance on testimony in her oratory promotes collective care and social change, particularly for women who confront state-sanctioned harm. In this chapter, I will examine how testimony in Hamer’s “Testimony Before a Select Panel on Mississippi and Civil Rights” and in Hamer’s “We’re On Our Way” acts as a method of care-building in three key ways. First, testimony, by exposing how misogynoir is present in every aspect of Black women’s experiences, from stereotypes to the treatment of incarcerated Black women, simultaneously affirms one’s humanity and fights against the conscious or unconscious internalization and acceptance of misogynoir in any form. Second, testimony, as group and personal forms of storytelling, compels the audience or reader to care about misogynoir and its effects. Testimony is a persuasive argumentative tool that unites the audience in the collective struggle against misogynoir. Finally, testimony makes Black women’s voices heard and felt, ultimately providing for them an avenue for healing, hope, and purpose.

My examination of Hamer’s skill with testimony in this chapter is informed by the work of scholars of critical prison studies, Black expressive culture, and Black feminist thought. In particular, this chapter is attentive to critical prison studies and literary scholar Patrick Elliot Alexander’s book, *From Slave Ship to Supermax: Mass Incarceration, Prisoner Abuse, and the New Neo-Slave Novel*, which connects testimony to a tradition within African American literary works that unites harms faced by people who confront contemporary incarceration with those that enslaved people endured during slavery:
In this tradition, jailed and imprisoned orators, writers, and intellectuals draw from personal experiences of incarceration, the narrative form of testimony, and the long history of slavery (beginning with the Transatlantic Slave Trade and slavery, and continuing with the Jim Crow racial caste system and lynching) to condemn the existence and expansion of the prison-industrial complex (Alexander 10).

Alexander showcases how testimony is a form with which authors or orators condemn the prison-industrial complex and white supremacy as a whole. Hamer’s use of testimony not only condemns both the prison-industrial complex and misogynoir as a whole, but also pushes her audience to care about these key issues. The Black expressive scholar Geneva Smitherman, in her book, *Talkin’ and Testifyin’: The Language of Black America*, defines testimony with this added attention to its care work, which also shapes my ensuing discussions of two of Hamer’s addresses to the public that she delivered in 1964:

To testify is to tell the truth through ‘story.’ … In the secular context, the subject matter includes such matters [as] … experiences attesting to the racist power of the white oppressor. . . . The retelling of these occurrences in lifelike fashion recreates the spiritual reality for others who at that moment vicariously experience what the testifier has gone through. The content of testifying, then, is not plain and simple commentary but a dramatic narration and a communal reenactment of one’s feelings and experiences. Thus one’s humanity is reaffirmed by the group and his or her sense of isolation diminished (Smitherman 150).

Smitherman’s definition sheds light onto the difference between testimony and simply telling one’s story. A key component of Smitherman’s definition is the phrase “communal
reenactment.” The specific word choice of “communal” illuminates an integral aspect of testimony, the community it forms with the author and the audience. Further, the word “reenactment” highlights how testimony allows a story to be shared in a way that ensures the audience or reader feels as though they too are experiencing the trauma of the orator or author. The distinction of “dramatic” in “dramatic narration” is key as this word choice illuminates the strikingly emotional aspect of testimony that allows for the processing of both the testifier as well as the listener’s emotions. Smitherman thus showcases how testimony acts not only as an argumentative tool, but also as a therapeutic instrument for processing trauma and building a community and hope around experiences with misogynoir. By creating this community, where the resistance to and the processing of misogynoir can occur, care around the experiences of the orator or author is created. Even though Smitherman identified this term in the 1970s, Black women writers in the African American literary tradition continue to employ testimony, as a method of care-building, to this very day, with award-winning authors like Jesmyn Ward using testimony to underscore the power of care in her memoir, Men We Reaped, published in 2013.

In her speeches, Hamer uses testimony strategically to persuade her listeners to not only hear and understand what she is saying, but to also care about it. The Black feminist historian Keisha Blain, in her recent book, Until I Am Free: Fannie Lou Hamer’s Enduring Message to America, further defines how Hamer employs testimony in relation to care work by stating:

For Hamer, one of the strategies for addressing the persistent problem of state-sanctioned violence was the use of public testimony as a mode of resistance and revelation. In this way, the act was driven by both personal and political motivations. A source of empowerment and healing, public testimony also provided a vehicle for Hamer to make her audience ‘co-owners of trauma.’ Those
who listened to Hamer’s testimony bore witness to the pain and violence and were therefore transformed by the experience. If the violence Black women endured from the state at the hands of police officers, white physicians, and others was designed to silence them, Hamer refused to capitulate (Blain 24).

Blain’s definition provides key insight into how Hamer used testimony to compel her audience to care about what she expressed. By making her audience “co-owners of trauma,” that is, through Hamer insisting on their witnessing of and responding to her experiences, Hamer formed a collective among herself and her audience. By using testimony as a persuasive tool for communal experience and engagement around her and their past and present experiences with misogynoir and white supremacy, Hamer and her audience united. Hamer ensured that her audience cared about what she said because she addressed them directly and invited them to feel deeply connected with her experiences, and Black women’s experiences more broadly, as a result of her use of testimony.

Hamer addressed her audiences in different ways in her testimonies, and that approach depended on their demographics. In her two speeches that I will examine in this chapter, for example, she engages two very different audiences. Hamer speaks—and has to speak—differently to an audience of Black women than to an audience of white people. Black feminist scholar Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, in her essay “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition,” details the unique position that Black women like Hamer occupy:

Through the multiple voices that enunciate her complex subjectivity, the black woman writer not only speaks familiarly in the discourse of the other(s), but as Other she is in contestorial dialogue with the hegemonic dominant and
subdominant or “ambiguously (non)hegemonic” discourses. These writers enter simultaneously into familial, or testimonial and public, or competitive discourses—discourses that both affirm and challenge the values and expectations of the reader. As such, black women writers enter into testimonial discourse with black men as blacks, with white women as women, and with black women as black women. At the same time, they enter into a competitive discourse with black men as women, with white women as blacks, and with white men as black women (Henderson 119-120).

Henderson precedes this explanation with a statement regarding how Black women are in a unique position that informs the way in which they write and interact with other groups. She specifically says that Black women “speak from a multiple and complex social, historical, and cultural positionality” (119). The inclusion of “social, historical, and cultural” helps to showcase why Black women are in that unique position. Their writing is different from all other groups because their experiences in the world are different and have been different for centuries. Hamer and other Black women, for instance, have been uniquely impacted by misogynoir. How they in turn talk about misogynoir will be impacted by their own unique social, historical, and cultural experiences. Not only that, but when Black women speak to different audiences, the dialogue will change. Henderson points to this idea when she says that “black women writers enter into testimonial discourse with black men as blacks, with white women as women, and with black women as black women.” Here, Henderson is exposing how Black women, like Hamer, because of their unique experiences informed by both their gender and their race, can relate to different groups in different ways. Hamer’s speeches had a different impact with women than with men as well as with Black people than with white people. Henderson also states that Black women
“enter into a competitive discourse with black men as women, with white women as blacks, and with white men as black women.” This sentence really explains how the fact that Hamer is a Black woman allows her to use testimony to confront different people’s internalized beliefs, thereby directly opposing and confronting misogynoir.

Henderson later details how Black women, when they speak and write, have multiple different voices that they use at different times saying: “As gendered and racial subjects, black women speak/write in multiple voices—not all simultaneously or with equal weight, but with various and changing degrees of intensity, privileging one parole and then another” (Henderson 137). For Hamer, just like with other Black women, who her audience is matters because she draws on different argumentative tools in her testimony in order to drive her point across. Henderson shows that Black women have “multiple different voices that they use at different times” meaning that, depending on the audience, different voices will be required. Therefore, Hamer, in her testimonies, alters her specific voices and argumentative devices to best fit and convince her audience to care about misogynoir.

The Limits of Testimony: Hamer’s Narratives of Misogynoir and Forced Sterilization

Forced sterilizations and hysterectomies remained a large issue for Black women in the South during Hamer’s lifetime, and were also, on occasion, a subject that helped Hamer subtly convey the impact of misogynoir on her life and others Black women’s lives, regardless of their experiences with incarceration. Blain describes how these nonconsensual sterilizations occurred: “Deemed ‘unfit’ to reproduce by white physicians and other state officials, Black women who entered hospitals for routine procedures ran the risk of being sterilized—and with little recourse to challenge the fact” (Blain 36). Blain illustrates how these forced sterilizations were another form of state-sanctioned harm and violence. White doctors were perpetrators of white supremacy
as they controlled and maimed Black women’s bodies based on their own racist beliefs of whether those Black women were “fit” to reproduce. This notion of one being “fit” or not to reproduce clearly ties back to slavery in the way that Black women’s bodies and their ability to become mothers was also controlled.

Hamer herself experienced a forced hysterectomy. Blain details how, “After two failed pregnancies during her forties, Hamer was hospitalized in 1961 to remove a noncancerous ‘small uterine tumor.’ Without Hamer’s knowledge or consent, the white doctor conducting what was supposed to be a minor procedure decided to remove Hamer’s uterus, rendering the activist infertile” (Blain 34). Here, Blain touches on how Hamer became a barren woman permanently simply because her white doctor decided to do so. Furthermore, Hamer had no knowledge, and therefore no ability, to consent to the hysterectomy. Hamer trusted her doctor to do what the doctor had promised to do, remove a uterine tumor. However, the doctor decided to remove Hamer’s uterus too.

The historian Chana Kai Lee, in her book, *For Freedom’s Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*, details the effects this forced sterilization had on Hamer, stating:

Although Hamer was toward the end of her reproductive years in 1961, the sterilization was still represented as a loss. She lost not only her capacity to reproduce, but everything that it symbolized for women, especially Black women living in a desperately poor, rural environment and possessing nothing that was truly theirs, save faith and their own bodies. Physically, she had been robbed of an important aspect of her creative capacity, and this must have affected her view of self, especially her gendered, sexual self. (Lee 81)
Lee highlights the lasting psychological effects of these forced sterilizations. Not only were Hamer and other Black women losing their physical ability to reproduce, but they were also losing hope and bodily autonomy. For Assata Shakur, for example, having a child in prison was a key point of hope for both herself and for her future, as I discussed in Chapter 1. Even though Shakur was confined while she was pregnant and later separated from her child, she still felt some mental freedom as a result of creating and having her child. Even before her experience with incarceration, Hamer’s bodily autonomy, as well as her control of her legacy were forcibly taken away from her. Motherhood is highly intertwined with femininity and a woman’s perceived value in society. However, as Blain and Lee reveal, for Black women especially, the ability to meet societal expectations as well as their own desires were forcibly removed because of misogynoir-influenced doctors.

The historian Danielle McGuire, in her book, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*, observes that this practice of forced sterilization for Black women was “so common that blacks often called it a ‘Mississippi appendectomy’” (McGuire 192). McGuire elaborates on how a lack of bodily autonomy for Black women was ingrained in Mississippi and in the South as a whole by detailing how Hamer grew up learning about the horrors that her mother and grandmother experienced during and after slavery: “Hamer’s mother and grandmother taught her the painful truth that in the Mississippi Delta, if not the entire South, a ‘black woman’s body was never hers alone’ (McGuire 191-192). McGuire reveals here that, for Black women, the legacy of loss of bodily autonomy dates back to slavery and prevails across generations of Black women. This terrible legacy is shown to start with Hamer’s grandmother, then persists with Hamer’s mother, and then finally is passed on to Hamer herself. While
Hamer’s mother’s and grandmother’s stories tell of how a Black woman’s body was property, Hamer’s forced sterilization exposes how the legacy of slavery and reduced bodily autonomy for Black women continued to reinforce the idea of Black women as state property in mid-twentieth century U.S. culture. Hamer’s mother’s ability to choose when and with whom she had children was taken away from her when multiple men raped her. Though Hamer’s forced sterilization is not the same as her mother’s experiences, she still endures denied autonomy over her own potential motherhood. Therefore, Hamer’s confrontation with misogynoir through forced sterilization carries with it a long history of regulated bodily autonomy and generational trauma.

However, as with Hamer’s grandmother and mother, for Hamer and other Black women facing forced sterilizations, obtaining justice was not an easy feat. McGuire asserts that “Hamer, like other black women who received the same procedure, had little recourse. If she had called a lawyer, [Hamer] said, ‘I would have been taking my hands and screwing tacks into my casket” (McGuire 192). Legal methods of obtaining justice were simply not an option for these Black women affected. Not only was their harm thus state-sanctioned and protected from legal retribution, but, as Hamer observes, even attempting to seek out a lawyer could be a death sentence. So Black women suffered permanent bodily harm, and were also threatened with further harm and even death if they chose to seek out legal aid.

Therefore, Hamer, and other Black women had to use other means to obtain justice and redress for their forced sterilizations. Hamer speaks out about the forced sterilizations happening in an attempt to get justice in the only way that she can. Blain describes this attempt, highlighting how Hamer “used her growing visibility and national platform to share those experiences and denounce the actions of violence against Black women through forced sterilizations” (Blain 24).
Hamer, directly engaging Harvard research psychiatrist Dr. Robert Coles, during her “Testimony Before a Select Panel on Mississippi and Civil Rights” which she delivered in Washington, D.C. in June 1964, described the history of forced hysterectomies in Mississippi as follows:

One of the other things that happened in Sunflower County, the North Sunflower County Hospital, I would say about six out of the ten Negro women that go to the hospital are sterilized with the tubes tied. They are getting up a law that said if a woman has an illegitimate baby and then a second one, they could draw time for six months or a five-hundred-dollar fine. What they didn’t tell is that they are already doing these things, not only to single women, but to married women (Hamer 41).

Although Hamer’s public dialogue on this panel is termed a testimony, this moment is, arguably, not one that reflects testimony in the ways Smitherman and Blain have outlined, for two key reasons. First, Hamer is not telling her own personal story of struggle against forced sterilization, but is rather framing the narrative that she shares about this harm around other unnamed Black women. Second, Hamer does not, at this pivotal moment in her public dialogue, offer a dramatic narrative inspiring emotional responses, but rather relies on facts and statistics to tell this difficult story of collective harm. That this moment does not demonstrate testimony in the ways Smitherman and Blain have introduced does not hurt Hamer’s argument, but rather adds to its overall impact. To begin with, this moment is a part of her larger “Testimony Before a Select Panel on Mississippi and Civil Rights” in 1964. As a panelist speaking to various forms of injustice in Mississippi, Hamer uses testimony to speak of different forms of police brutality that she and others experienced in her home state.
Throughout the fuller testimony, though, she does perform testimony in ways that recall Smitherman’s and Blain’s definitions. She details her own experiences with acts of injustice by using emotionally charged, narrative-based storytelling. However, Hamer includes the reference cited above about forced sterilization at the very end of her testimony. By structuring this moment differently from the rest of her testimony, Hamer not only draws attention to the need to oppose forced sterilizations, but also creates the question of why this moment cannot be one of a more fully expressed testimony, in the conceptions of Smitherman and Blain.

As discussed above, Hamer had previously mentioned that directly trying to obtain retribution for these forced sterilizations would be a death sentence. Therefore, Hamer’s use of testimony about this subject, in the senses that Smitherman and Blain discuss, could have put herself and others—especially Black women—at risk of additional harm. To be clear, had Hamer framed the issue of forced sterilizations around her own experiences, or even mentioned those experiences, she would be articulating her harm so directly that it would approximate her issuing a call for legal retribution and thus inviting her own endangerment. Hamer knows that these forced sterilizations are state-sanctioned: white doctors make the decisions for the Black women as Black women’s bodily autonomy does not matter. Therefore, Hamer attacks this issue at the level of principle and proposed law, not through the form of Black feminist testimonial expression, as Smitherman and Blain describe.

Hamer’s approach to testimony, in this regard, recalls Alexander’s attention to the form’s tendency to include outright indictments of institutions when it becomes difficult for speakers or writers to condemn individuals for state-sanctioned harm. Hamer first uses statistics that demonstrate how many Black women have been affected by this issue. She states that “six out of the ten Negro women that go to the hospital are sterilized with the tubes tied” (Hamer 41).
Framing the statistic as a percentage instead of an actual number of Black women that have been victims of forced sterilization not only preserves the anonymity of these women, but also presents the effects, and the indisputable fact that the practice has occurred and continues to occur. Hamer does not state that a certain number of Black women have been sterilized against their will at the time of her address, but rather emphasizes that “six out of the ten Negro women… are sterilized” (41) on a regular basis, by way of the Mississippi appendectomy. Hamer’s use of the present tense verb “are,” combined with the mathematical discourse, makes it clear that this issue is predictable and will keep harming Black women unless enforcers of federal power do something about it. Hamer also uses specific names where possible to adopt some dimensions of the form of testimony while still remaining safe. Because of the level of risk involved here, Hamer focuses her naming practices on the places of state-sanctioned harm rather than on any particular person who enacted that harm. She mentions not only the name of the county where this occurred, but also the specific name of the hospital, stating that this happened “in Sunflower County, the North Sunflower County Hospital.” Hamer could have just mentioned the name of the hospital, as that name includes the county name; however, she decides to include both names. Doing this not only draws attention to the indicting power of the naming practice, but also ensures that the blame is placed accordingly—at the institutional level. Hamer is sure to call attention to the responsibility of the hospital itself for the forced sterilization of and enforcement of misogynoir against all of these Black women.

Hamer also exposes the hypocritical nature of the lawmakers. She observes how “they” are trying to create a law, but are already working outside of the law. She says “they” instead of naming anyone in particular, both to avoid repercussions as well as to place the blame more broadly. Hamer does not just interrogate the lawmakers attempting to pass the new law, but also
views as culpable everyone involved in enforcing white supremacy and misogynoir in ways that allows the forced sterilizations of Black women to occur in a systemic way. Further, Hamer specifically mentions how “they are already doing these things, not only to single women, but to married women.” At one level, Hamer’s point is that the performance of forced sterilizations, which the new proposed law seeks to render as legal, already happens illegally. Further, Hamer observes that white doctors also enact this to married women, women who, at the time, would have had more of a right to have children: if these women were married, then their children would not have been “illegitimate.” Therefore, under the law that lawmakers and white officials were preparing to propose, these women should have been protected from nonconsensual sterilizations. The fact that these married women were also sterilized against their will highlights the arbitrariness of this law and also exposes that the motivations for its establishment was more about enforcing misogynoir than about providing care for women or wellbeing of legitimate children.

In sum, Hamer, by framing her narrative about forced sterilizations as misogynoir around statistics and the harm that married Black women experience, ensures, without directly sharing her own struggle with this harm, that her audience has the greatest chance of caring about her message. To recall Henderson’s essay on Black women and expression, Hamer’s decision to share her narrative with her audience through statistics and through a consistent exposure of misogynoir through an institutional-level indictment of hospitals and the law, and those who enforce these institutions’ power was a strategic style of testimony.
Humor and Embodied Discourse as Care in Hamer’s Testimony Before Fellow Black Mississippians

Hamer delivered a speech entitled “We’re On Our Way” to an audience of rural Black Mississippians and Black sharecroppers in September 1964. The main goal of this speech—which adopted the form of testimony—was to compel Black Mississippians to vote, something that Hamer frequently emphasized as a fundamental human right. Hamer also openly revealed her own experiences with misogynoir while she was incarcerated as well as in her daily life. As a result, this oration demonstrates how Hamer also used the form of testimony to cultivate collective care and combat misogynoir in the in-group ways that Smitherman and Blain have outlined.

Hamer uses humor in “We’re On Our Way” as an integral part of her testimony in order to make her audience care about her message. Humor is not just a way in which Hamer connects with her audience; it is a method of care. Moments of collective laughter deeply unite the audience. When people laugh together, they more fully experience Hamer and her address, and are therefore caring together, with Hamer, for her, and for one another. Hamer’s strategic use of humor in the form of testimony allows Hamer to influence her audience to care about the harm that both white supremacy and misogynoir create. In this regard, the first key moment of humor in this speech occurs when Hamer details her experiences with riding a bus that was the “wrong color.” Blain details this moment; she writes:

In reality, the stop had nothing to do with the color of the bus. Given the visibility of Hamer and her colleagues—the notoriety associated with their attempts to register to vote—the police officer knew why the activists were traveling from Indianola. Hamer later pointed out that she had seen the officer earlier in the day
while attempting to register. Yet he had used his power as an agent of the state to remind the activists they were living in the Jim Crow South, with all of its insulting indignities that could quickly escalate to state-sanctioned violence (Blain 29).

As Blain explains, Hamer’s reference to the harm that aspiring Black voters endure on a bus is one that exhibits white supremacy. The activists are not punished because of the bus’s color or because they broke any law, but because they are Black people actively trying to vote. The criminalization of the bus’s color was simply an excuse, and a poor one, to justify arrest. The fact that this thinly veiled act of white supremacy was allowed to pass without legal retribution demonstrates how frequently state officials’ acts of harm were state-sanctioned.

Hamer testifies about this experience in her speech using humor as an argumentative tool, saying that:

During that time that we was on the bus, the policemens kept watching the car—the bus—and I noticed a highway patrolman and the policeman, and was ordered back to come to Indianola, Mississippi. When we got back to Indianola, the bus driver was charged with driving a bus the wrong color! This is the gospel truth, but this bus had been used for years for cotton chopping, cotton picking, and to carry people to Florida, to work to make enough to live on in the wintertime to get back here to the cotton fields the next spring and summer. But that day the bus had the wrong color (Hamer 47).

Hamer exposes white supremacy at this moment in her address. However, she does so in a covert way, and with the focus on obtaining care and empathy from her audience through her simultaneous inclusion of wry humor. First, Hamer describes how a mass of state officials,
including the highway patrolman and the policemen, “kept watching the car.” Hamer’s framing of state surveillance of the bus rather than of herself prepares the audience’s attention for the upcoming joke, rather than the more immediate recollection of the Black activists’ dehumanization by way of the state’s enactment of white supremacy. Hamer even repeats the word “bus” twice before offering the punchline of her joke. Hamer, having ensured her audience’s focus on the appearance of this bus, declares, “When we got back to Indianola, the bus driver was charged with driving a bus the wrong color!” In the audio recording of this speech, the audience’s extended response—loud, affirming laughter—is heard following this line. In short, Hamer, before discussing white supremacy in full in this moment, establishes collective care through inspiring shared laughter. Further, throughout the moments leading up to the joke as well as in the joke, itself, Hamer uses the language of “we” to further reinforce the moment of collective knowledge and experience.

After the audience laughs together, Hamer proceeds to delve further into how this is a moment of white supremacy. Hamer lists the ways in which the bus was used to facilitate Black people’s sharecropping work “for years” and yet the color had never mattered. She specifically mentions how it had been used “for cotton chopping, cotton picking, and to carry people to Florida, to work to make enough to live on in the wintertime to get back here to the cotton fields the next spring and summer.” The connection between these events, though Hamer does not directly say it, is that they all involve sharecropping and specifically the profit white people acquire from the racialized economic exploitation that fuels it. Hamer here shows how, in the case of transportation used to accrue capital gain from the labor exploitation of Black people, the bus’s color did not matter. However, concerning the matter of valuing Black people as legal citizens seeking to practice their voting rights, rather than a means of profit, suddenly the bus’s
color becomes a means of control. In this regard, Hamer’s repeated inclusion of the word “cotton” further reinforces how this crop is valued more than the lives of the Black people who pick it.

Hamer establishes collective care both through inspiring and sharing in laughter and contextualizing the harm that the above-mentioned acts of white supremacy presented. Hamer later reestablishes a mode of humor as care by returning to the bus as possessing a criminal color, with very similar phrasing: “But that day the bus had the wrong color.” Once again, loud, affirming laughter erupts from the audience. Hamer thus conveys a double meaning with her repeated references to the bus’s “wrong color”: the only thing that state officials truly saw was wrong, Hamer implies, was the color of the activists. While Hamer does undercut her humorous moment by the seriousness of white supremacist harm, she revisits the humorous moment to cultivate an atmosphere of collective care. Hamer’s moment of repetition here ensures that, even if her audience does not notice it in the moment in which they laugh, they will later have an opportunity to think back on what she said and realize anew the severity of the moment.

Another key moment where Hamer uses humor in her testimony is when she mentions white people’s hypocritical view on integration. Hamer states:

Some of the white people will tell us, ‘Well, I just don’t believe in integration.’
But he been integrating at night a long time! If he hadn’t been, it wouldn’t be as many light-skinned Negroes as it is in here. The seventeenth Chapter of Acts and the twenty-sixth verse said: ‘He has made of one blood all nations.’ So whether you black as a skillet or white as a sheet, we are made from the same blood and we are on our way! (Hamer 49).
Hamer once again exposes the force of white supremacy through the care work of humor. As before, Hamer is framing an experience with white supremacist harm in the form of a joke. The punchline this time is “Some of the white people will tell us, ‘Well, I just don’t believe in integration.’ But he been integrating at night a long time!” When Hamer makes this proclamation on the audio recording, the audience is again heard laughing loudly. Hamer then, as previously, proceeds to reinforce her joke, saying “If he hadn’t been, it wouldn’t be as many light-skinned Negroes as it is in here.” Once again, loud laughter erupts from the audience. The specific language that Hamer uses acts to further reinforce the collectiveness that her humor creates. Hamer not only uses “us,” a unifying term, but also says “light-skinned Negroes as . . . in here.” By saying “in here,” Hamer connects past acts of white supremacy with the people present at her address. This moment recalls two key components of testimony. First, by mentioning acts that directly affect the audience, Hamer creates a “communal reenactment” of her and other’s feelings and experiences, as Smitherman articulates in her definition of testimony. Further, by doing this, Hamer invites her audience to care about her message as “co-owners of trauma,” to recall Blain’s definition of testimony.

From this point of connection, Hamer exposes the hypocritical nature of white supremacy. She mentions how “white people” will say that “I just don’t believe in integration” while simultaneously “he been integrating at night a long time.” Hamer juxtaposes what “white people” say in public and what they do or condone at night time. Hamer not only exposes white supremacy here, but also misogynoir. She intimates both that Black people have historically only been valued for the capital gain they produce, and that Black women, specifically, are valued for economic and sexual purposes, but not as people. Further, Hamer’s use of “he” emphasizes the history and legacy of sexualized state violence as a race and gender issue, an issue of not just
white supremacy, but also misogynoir. Additionally, as before, when Hamer mentioned how the bus was used for other purposes “for years,” she here exposes the longevity of sexualized state violence by stating that white people have been “integrating at night” for “a long time.” “Integrating at night” has been happening for so long, in fact, that “light-skinned Negroes,” as she mentions, are present at this very speech. In short, Hamer implies that there are new generations of mixed-race people in the twentieth century who are denied rights both by society and by their fathers, as during the era of slavery.

After telling this joke, Hamer then quotes the seventeenth Chapter of Acts and the twenty-sixth verse, saying that “‘He has made of one blood all nations.’ So whether you black as a skillet or white as a sheet, we are made from the same blood and we are on our way!” Hamer directly opposes the misogynoir she has exposed by alluding to the Bible, and conveying that, as white and Black people are made of “one blood,” they should therefore be treated equally. Hamer further enforces unity with the language of “same blood” and use of “we.” When Hamer declares “we are on our way,” there is collective applause and cheering. She has already established unity with the audience through the language of her testimony and by key moments of humor. They are now cheering together and with Hamer. To recall Henderson’s work, Hamer has spoken to her audience as a fellow Black person who can relate to their struggles and their frustrations. Moreover, by referencing the Bible in this care-building moment, she shows her audience that God is on the side of those fighting for interracial unity as they continue to resist white supremacy collectively.

Hamer further uses humor to expose misogynoir, not just in the white community, but also among Black people. She does this by saying:
Because actually, I’m tired of being called ‘Aunty.’ I wondered in life what actually time would they allow for me to be a woman? Because until I was thirty-six I was a girl: ‘Girl this.’ And now I’m forty-six and it’s ‘Aunty.’ But I want you to know tonight: I don’t have one white niece or nephew. And if you don’t want to call me Mrs. Hamer, just call me plain ‘Fannie’ because I’m not your aunt (Hamer 55).

The punchline this time is “But I want you to know tonight: I don’t have one white niece or nephew.” When Hamer says this, the audience can be heard collectively laughing very loudly. The punchline of this joke, unlike the previous ones, comes after Hamer has exposed a lot of white supremacy. Hamer exposes how intensely misogynoir is present in these comments because she highlights the way that she is treated as less than a full woman: she is still called “girl” until she was “thirty-six.” Hamer’s being referred to as “girl” as a grown woman infantilizes her; because of her race and gender, she has been treated like a girl. When Hamer is labeled a “girl” despite her being thirty-six years old, has been deemed less capable than other people her age.

Further, Hamer exposes how, now that she is forty-six, she is called “Auntie.” Auntie is a direct reference to the Mammy stereotype. Black feminist scholar Riché Richardson describes Aunt Jemima, the previous logo for the popular maple syrup company, as “based on a ‘mammy’ character” (Richardson quoted in Kesslen). A Black woman presented as an “Aunt” or “Auntie” figure can just be another way of presenting her as a “mammy.” Richardson adds that a Mammy also “eagerly nurtured the children of her white master and mistress while neglecting her own” (Richardson quoted in Kesslen). In the previous chapter, Shakur’s discussion of incarcerated Black women’s forced domestic labor for the state in her autobiography presented an example of
the continued use of the Mammy for the purpose of social control. Hamer’s address here also explores Mammy as a persistent stereotype, though not in the context of forced labor for the state. The Mammy stereotype is detrimental because of two key reasons. First, it presents a Black woman as being willing and happy to sacrifice the well-being of her own family for that of white families. Secondly, this stereotype is harmful is that it presents a Black woman as being happy and content with her status. She is shown as having no issues with the way that she is treated or the inequalities that she faces. She merely accepts being treated as less than others because of her gender and race. The Mammy stereotype is clearly one influenced and created by misogynoir. Hamer directly opposes the way that this stereotype has been placed upon her saying: “I don’t have one white niece or nephew.” Hamer humorously refuses to be identified by this stereotype. Instead of detailing the white supremacist and misogynoir-based aspects of this stereotype that she rejects, she rather attacks the literal meaning of “auntie,” having nieces or nephews, rather than the understood connotations.

Hamer uses testimony in two ways in this moment that recall Smitherman’s and Blain’s definitions. The first way is one that she performed earlier as well: she makes her audience laugh and therefore care together. However, the second way is new. Hamer also uses humor to subtly call out her audience for their own acts of misogynoir. While Hamer originally addresses white people, she starts using the word choice of “you” during the punchline of her joke and afterwards. She ends this section saying “and if you don’t want to call me Mrs. Hamer, just call me plain ‘Fannie’ because I’m not your aunt.” The use of “you” here shows how Hamer is also addressing this message towards her audience. She address not only being referred to as a Mammy, but also about people refusing to call her Mrs. Hamer, a term of respect. Hamer exposes how Black people have belittled her and even had low expectations of her because she is
a Black woman. Hamer shows that the use of the term *auntie* is an issue rooted in misogynoir that can be experienced in both interracial and intraracial ways.

Towards the middle of this speech, “We’re On Our Way,” Hamer notably shifts away from her use of humor. Hamer’s approach must change as she begins testifying about the physical and sexual abuse that she and others experienced while they were incarcerated for pursuing the right to vote. Hamer also discusses this exact moment in her televised and widely cited speech “Testimony Before the Credentials Committee,” which she had delivered previously, at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. While the audience for that speech was the Democratic Party’s Credential Committee, including President Lyndon Johnson, the audience for “We’re On Our Way” was Hamer’s fellow rural Black Mississippians. Therefore, I focus on Hamer’s discussion of her experience of state officials’ acts of harm in “We’re On Our Way” because this supportive audience allowed Hamer to feel safe to disclose more details and personal feelings than she did in her “Testimony Before the Credentials Committee.”

Within this safer space, Hamer testifies about her and other’s experiences with sexualized state violence in a way that centers the Black female body through “embodied discourse.” Black feminist scholar Brittany C. Cooper, in the prologue of her book, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*, states that “embodied discourse refers to a form of Black female textual activism wherein race women assertively demand the inclusion of their bodies and, in particular, working-class bodies and Black female bodies by placing them in the texts they write and speak” (Cooper 3). Hamer deliberately focuses her testimony of state-sanctioned violence in a way that centers her and another on Black women's bodies. Cooper details the effects of “embodied discourse” saying that
Though many Black women practiced a culture of dissemblance in public, in their
textual work and on the lecture stage, they frequently pulled back the clock of
Black female pain and frustration, exposing the personal nature of the struggles
they experienced, even as they worked to make the world safer for Black women.
. . . The audacity to talk about how they felt about racism indexes an implicit
belief that Black women’s embodied and affective experiences of racism and
patriarchy mattered in the project of Black female knowledge production (Cooper
9).

In “We’re On Our Way,” Hamer includes both a discussion of her body, as well as her thoughts
and feelings about the state-sanctioned harm she and others experience. This addition to her
testimony opposes state-sanctioned violence and harm in a way that reclaims the Black female
body as a site for hope and redress. Much as Shakur confronts misogynoir-based stereotypes
with her portrayal of Eva in her poem “Rhinoceros Women,” as I discussed in Chapter 1, Hamer
here achieves care work through the use of “embodied discourse” in her testimony.

Before Hamer speaks about her own experiences with state-sanctioned violence, she
details another woman’s experiences, saying:

“Can’t you say ‘yes, sir,’ n-word?” And I could hear Miss Ponder’s voice said,
“Yes, I can say ‘yes, sir.’” “So, well, say it.” She said, “I don’t know you well
enough. And I would hear when she would hit the floor again… after a while,
Miss Ponder passed my cell. She didn’t recognize me when she passed my cell.
One of her eyes looked like blood, and her mouth was swollen, and she was
holding up by propping against the back of the brick cell (Hamer 51).
Hamer’s embodied discourse here centers on Annell Ponder’s Black female body and her way of using it to resist state-sanctioned violence. Hamer starts off by detailing the prison guard’s attempt to diminish and verbally attack this Black woman to whom she consistently refers to with a title, Miss Ponder. In a clear power play, the guard tries to make Miss Ponder subservient to him by verbally acknowledging his power over her by saying “yes, sir.” He demands this show of respect from Miss Ponder while disrespecting her by calling her the N-word. Notably, however, in this other-centered testimony, Hamer makes the conscious decision to include Miss Ponder’s name, not only her title, while leaving the guard nameless. This act of naming Miss Ponder serves as a form of counternarrative storytelling which shifts the respect and power away from the guard and towards Miss Ponder. Further, Hamer says “[she] would hear when [Miss Ponder] would hit the floor again.” Shifting the action from the guard to Miss Ponder hitting the ground serves two purposes. First, it frames this moment as one of active resistance rather than as just a moment of victimhood. Second, Hamer demonstrates the limitations of her testimony as she tells this story from her limited point of view. Hamer further frames this moment as one of her own story and testimony by inserting herself into the narrative. She does this by repeating what she could hear. By repeating “I could hear,” Hamer also creates a more emotional testimony as, while she shares Miss Ponder’s story, Hamer still ensures that her thoughts and feelings are considered.

Hamer also describes Miss Ponder’s physical body in detail. She talks about how both her eyes and mouth have been affected by the violence as well as her physical stature as Miss Ponder is now propped up against the back of the brick cell. The inclusion of multiple detailed descriptions of Miss Ponder’s body further humanizes both Hamer and Miss Ponder. Also, including the description of Miss Ponder’s body alongside descriptions of how she resists and
opposes state-sanctioned violence reframes this narrative of harm so as to humanize and reaffirm Miss Ponder’s bodily autonomy. These realistic and detailed descriptions ensure that this moment is not simply Hamer sharing her or other’s stories. Rather, it is a moment that clearly reflects the key aspects of testimony that Smitherman defined. First, the detailed descriptions of Miss Ponder’s body invite the audience to feel and care about Hamer’s overall message. Second, Hamer’s testimony here consists of what Smitherman calls “dramatic narration and a communal reenactment” (150). All of these factors combine to make the audience a community, united in and against state-sanctioned harm and misogynoir.

Hamer continues in this mode of care-building testimony through her use of embodied discourse to speak of her own experiences with state-sanctioned violence:

I was led out of that cell and to another cell where they had two Negro prisoners. Three white men in that room and two Negroes. The state highway patrolman ordered the first Negro to take the blackjack; it was a long leather blackjack and it was loaded with something heavy. And they ordered me to lay down on my face on a bunk bed. And the first Negro beat me. He had to beat me until the state highway patrolman give him orders to quit. Because he had already told him, said “If you don’t beat her, you know what I’ll do to you.” And he beat me I don’t know how long. And after a while, he was exhausted and I was too (Hamer 51).

Hamer here describes how she, while incarcerated, was beaten by both fellow prisoners and by white state officials. She emphasizes her harm through the repetition of the word “beat” throughout this passage. The word “beat” is a visceral term that also indicates the one-sided nature of this assault. Hamer renders this beating graphically by doing what she does not do when describing it at the Democratic National Convention: Hamer names the instrument used in
her initial assault, and then provides detail when describing it. By taking the time to say “it was a long leather blackjack and it was loaded with something heavy,” Hamer ensures that her audience can properly visualize, understand, and engage empathetically with the harmed Black woman speaking before them. This brutality is further enforced when Hamer accounts for the number of people in the cell harming her: five. Hamer conveys to her fellow Black Mississippians that this abuse was designed not only to physically harm her, but to also smother her spirit and discourage any future attempts of securing voting rights. Hamer underscores this point when she adds, “they ordered me to lay down on my face on a bunk bed.” Hamer’s being made to position herself face-down on a bed places her in a precarious position in which she is postured physically as at risk, and also deserving of shame.

Hamer does draw attention to the fact that incarcerated Black men are the ones who beat her. However, Hamer portrays them as fellow victims rather than as callous abusers. Hamer makes it clear that the people at fault are the white officials and that incarcerated Black men have as little choice and power in this situation as she does. Hamer emphasizes the lack of control that the incarcerated Black men have through her word choice. Hamer says that “they ordered me to lay down on my face” and that the Black prisoner “had to beat [her] until the state highway patrolman give him orders to quit.” Hamer’s careful use of the word “order” demonstrates how Hamer and the incarcerated Black men both have the same lack of power. White prison guards control them both in similar ways; they are both therefore both victims of white supremacy.

Hamer not only shows her physical abuse, but also alludes to the sexual abuse that she experienced while incarcerated too. She states: “My dress worked up from this hard blackjack and I pulled my dress down, taking my hands behind me and pulled my dress down. And one of the city policemens walked over and pulled my dress as high as he could” (Hamer 52).
Even though an incarcerated Black man holds the blackjack that Hamer describes, she places the blame onto the object itself. By doing this, Hamer portrays the blackjack as a vessel of white supremacy that the white state official controlled, rather than the incarcerated Black man. Her sexual abuse is also traceable to the actions of white officials, rather than those of the incarcerated Black man, who holds the weapon. Alexander expands upon this idea:

Hamer calls to mind the institution of slavery in her testimony through the emphasis that she places on incarcerated Black men striking her with blackjacks under the command and overseeing presence of sadistic white male authorities. [My incarcerated] students insist that while these white men are obviously patrolmen, they act like nineteenth-century slave masters: they yank up Hamer’s dress and—as Hamer reveals in later speeches—fondle her without fearing the slightest threat of punishment… These white patrolmen were not only acquitted of conspiracy charges. They were also protected from any punishment by law, because state policemen had coerced Hamer, at gunpoint, to sign a confession stating that she had been harmed not by the patrolmen but by her fellow Black activists during their confinement in the Winona, Mississippi, jail (Alexander 9).

Alexander details the connection to slavery in not only the specific actions of the white officials, but also in the way that they are immune to consequences. He argues that Hamer’s mistreatment goes far beyond what she even mentions in this moment. This moment of white supremacy and misogynoir is designed to harm both Hamer and the other Black people who are also incarcerated. While Hamer does not mention directly the specific sexual abuse that she receives in this instance, she still showcases the sexual threat and harm that she experiences. Hamer repeats that she “pulled [her] dress down” to reinforce how much she attempted to fight back,
save her dignity, and prevent assault. Despite her efforts, she later remarks how outnumbered she is: “Five mens in this room while I was one Negro woman” (Hamer 52). Hamer does not differentiate the men by race at this point. She shows that, even though some of the men are not acting of their own free will, she is still one woman harmed by a group of five men. Hamer conveys the extent of this injustice by making note of her sole method for pursuing justice and redress in this moment: “at no point did I attempt to do anything but scream and call on God” (Hamer 52).

The goal of this assault, just like the physical assault, is to break down Hamer’s spirit. Critical prison studies scholar Angela Y. Davis, in her book *Women, Race, and Class*, examines how the past and present use of state-sanctioned rape and sexual assault as punishment and as a method for breaking down a Black woman’s spirit has ties to slavery. Davis states: “Slaveowners encouraged the terroristic use of rape in order to put Black women in their place. If Black women had achieved a sense of their own strength and a strong urge to resist, then violent sexual assaults—so the slaveholders might have reasoned—would remind the women of their essential and inalterable femaleness” (Davis 24).

Rape was a tool of control in the institution of slavery. It was a way to stifle a Black woman’s spirit and stop her from rebelling. Following Davis, Hamer has acted against what is expected of her as a Black person, and also as a Black woman. By fighting for her rights as a citizen, Hamer has directly opposed misogynoir-based expectations of her as a Black woman. White officials therefore punish her for defying these expectations and are attempt to correct her behavior through physical and sexual abuse.

Hamer’s use of testimony here achieves two key purposes that call to mind Smitherman’s and Blain’s outlining of the term. First, Hamer’s strategic employment of testimony compels her
audience to care about the issues that she is presenting. By providing a detailed account of her experience with state-sanctioned harm as a Black woman, Hamer humanizes herself and invites her audience to more closely encounter misogynoir and white supremacy in a jail context. Second, Hamer also not only reveals harm, but also reclaimed her body and her power by directly testifying about her sexual abuse. As McGuire states, by “testifying publicly about physical and sexual abuse, black women reclaimed their bodies and demanded to be treated with dignity and respect” (McGuire xxi). The goal of the white state officials was both to harm and silence Hamer, yet by Hamer’s testimony about her jail experience and that of other jailed Black women who state officials harmed over the course of her oratorical career, Hamer demonstrates that the state was not successful. Hamer was not and cannot be silenced. The officials had the power to harm her physically, but they did not stifle her spirit or stop her from achieving what she intended as an activist and as an orator.

Conclusion

Before misogynoir was an official term, Hamer made its reality a felt one through her speeches. Hamer’s use of testimony as a powerful tool for social change and self-advocacy continues to remain relevant in the contemporary context. Her ability to draw her audience into her address, to invoke Blain’s words, as “co-owners of trauma,” made her way of using testimony a transformative force—a force that fostered empathy, unity, and collective understanding. Today, testimony remains a crucial instrument in the ongoing fight against systemic issues. The specific issues Hamer confronted in her speeches—misogynoir, white supremacy, and state-sanctioned violence—persist, albeit in evolving ways. In a society in which marginalized voices continue to be silenced and overlooked, testimony acts as a catalyst for social change.
Testimony is a method by which Black women and girls continue to speak out in a way that garners public attention and support. McGuire details the lasting impacts of testimony, saying that: “Decades before radical feminists in the women’s movement urged rape survivors to ‘speak out,’ African-American women’s public protests galvanized local, national, and even international outrage and sparked larger campaigns for racial justice and human dignity” (McGuire xx). Hamer’s testimony served as her method for publicly protesting against the misogynoir and white supremacy that she and others faced daily. Today, movements like the #Me Too Movement and #Say Her Name can be seen to have clear ties to testimony. These movements rely on the public sharing of personal experiences, much like what Hamer did, in order to make people care.

On its website, the #Me Too Movement states: “As a global, and survivor-led, movement against sexual violence, we are dedicated to creating pathways for healing, justice, action and leadership.” The distinction of the “healing, justice, action, and leadership” as “survivor-led” is a key link to Hamer’s care-building approach to testimony. Hamer used testimony to frame the narrative around herself and other people’s stories and used those stories to directly oppose misogynoir as well as create avenues for herself and others to heal. Testimony, as with the aims of the #Me Too Movement, is centered around the people personally affected, as it is their own stories and feelings that are shared. As Hamer adopted embodied discourse within her testimony, to show, in a personal way, the reality and effects of sexualized state violence to generate care around the issues, the #Me Too Movement serves as a way for people to testify of their own experiences in order to generate care in our contemporary moment.

Hamer also specifically named and shared the stories of others through her testimony. #SayHerName, a movement created to speak about the effects of police violence on Black
women and girls, directly opposes misogynoir and state-sanctioned violence through its support of the sharing of others’ stories and names in a way that calls to mind Hamer’s testimonial addresses. Hamer intentionally named and shared about other Black women’s experiences with misogynoir and state-sanctioned violence when testifying about her own as a way to bring about awareness and to generate care. In many ways, she anticipated #SayHerName.

When the contemporary criminal justice system fails people, victims and activists have turned to forms like testimony to get their stories out and to gain attention and care. On social media in particular, people use testimony to share the stories about themselves and to cultivate empathy, promote collective care, and achieve social change. Testimony, as a form, can help to create a caring collective, and in today’s world, that collective is more powerful than individuals. Once people care about the same issues, then they can use their combined voices to more readily and effectively achieve change. Moreover, testimony transforms statistics into real people with real stories. When testimony is delivered as Hamer delivered it, it demands attention and care from its witnesses, which can lead to greater awareness of misogynoir and white supremacy, and new methods of social activism.


Davis, Angela Y., Gina Dent, Erica R. Meiners, and Beth E. Riche. *Abolition. Feminism.*


Issacharoff, Jess. “Domestic Terror: Women’s Prisons and Assata Shakur’s Abolitionist


