

A Brief Biography of Angela Davis

One of the most famous and polarizing figures of the Civil Rights movement, Angela Davis grew up in a middle class African American family in Birmingham, Alabama. Born in 1944, Davis lived with her parents in a neighborhood downtown called "Dynamite Hill." It was nicknamed this because of the repeated bombings of black families' houses by the Ku Klux Klan. Davis's mother was an activist who had been involved in the protests since the early 1930s.¹⁴ Amidst the cruelty of the era, Davis's parents taught Angela self-respect and pride. In her autobiography Davis noted, "The more steeped in violence our environment became, the more determined my father and mother were that I, the first-born, learn that the battle of white against Black was not written into the nature of things. On the contrary, my mother always said, love hard had been ordained by God. White people's hatred of us was neither natural nor eternal."¹⁵

Even as a child, Davis had a confrontational streak:

When Black families had moved up on the hill in sufficient numbers for me to have a group of friends, we developed our own means of defending our egos. Our weapon was the word. We would gather on my front lawn, wait for a car of white people to pass by and shout the worst epithets for white people we knew: Cracker. Redneck. Then we would laugh hysterically at the startled expressions on their faces. I hid this pastime from my parents. They could not know how important it was for me, and for all of us who had just discovered racism, to find ways of maintaining our dignity."¹⁶

Like all black children growing up in Alabama, Davis experienced the injustice of the Jim Crow system. Unlike many of her friends, Davis also experienced a different reality. She spent time in New York City during the summer, while her mother pursued a masters' degree. In New York, Davis was able to participate in various activities that were closed off to black residents of Birmingham. Davis recognized the injustice at home, but also remained proud of her identity. She dreamed of the day when she could directly oppose racist individuals and institutions. Remembering her youth, she wrote,

My childhood friends and I were bound to develop ambivalent attitudes toward the white world. On the one hand there was our instinctive aversion toward those who prevented us from realizing our grandest as well as our most trivial wishes. On the other, there was the equally instinctive jealousy which came from knowing that they had access to all the pleasurable things we wanted. Growing up, I could not help feeling certain envy. And yet I have a very vivid recollection of deciding, very early, that I would never – and I was categorical about this –to never harbor or express the desire to be white. This promise that I made to myself did nothing, however, to drive away the wishdreams that filled my head whenever my desires collided with a taboo. So in, order that my daydreams not contradict my principles, I constructed a fantasy in which I would slip on a white face and go unceremoniously into the theater or amusement park or wherever I wanted to go. After thoroughly enjoying the activity, I would make a dramatic, grandstand appearance before the white racists and with a sweeping gesture, rip off the white face, laugh wildly and call them all fools.¹⁷

Davis was a brilliant student. At fifteen, she received a scholarship to attend a progressive private high school in New York City. It was here that she first was introduced to radical politics. After high school, she attended Brandeis University. She studied abroad in France and later, after graduating from college, studied in Germany. As a college student, Davis studied philosophy under the Marxist scholar Herbert Marcuse. When she was introduced to communism, she found it immediately appealing.

¹⁴ "Angela Davis." *Activist, Rebels and Reformers*. Ed. Diane Sawinski. Vol 1. Detroit:UXXL, 2001. *Gale Opposing Viewpoints In Context*. Web. 20 May 2012.

¹⁵ Davis, Angela. *An Autobiography*. New York: Random House. 2008. 79. Print.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

The Communist Manifesto hit me like a bolt of lightning. I read it avidly, finding in it answer to many of the seemingly unanswerable dilemmas which had plagued me. I read it over and over again, not completely understanding every passage or every idea, but enthralled nevertheless by the possibility of a communist revolution here. I began to see the problems of Black people within the context of a large working-class movement....What struck me so emphatically was the idea that once the emancipation of the proletariat became a reality, the foundation was laid for the emancipation of all oppressed groups in the society. Images surged up in my mind of Black workers in Birmingham trekking every morning to the steel mills or descending into the mines. Like an expert surgeon, this document cut away cataracts from my eyes...What had seemed a personal hatred of me, an inexplicable refusal of Southern whites to confront their own emotions, and a stubborn willingness of Blacks to acquiesce, became the inevitable consequence of a ruthless system which kept itself alive and well by encouraging spite, competition and the oppression of one group by another. Profit was the word: the cold and constant motive for the behavior, the contempt and the despair I had seen.

Davis has remained a committed member of the Communist Party throughout her life. In 1980 and 1984, she was the CP's vice-presidential candidate.

In the mid-1960s Davis became involved with new Black Power organizations in California. She worked with the Black Panthers and SNCC, which was becoming more and more radical under the leadership of James Forman. Davis admired these groups' stance towards white institutions of power, but she was dismayed by the sexism that often bubbled up.

I became acquainted very early with the widespread presence of an unfortunate syndrome among some Black male activists – namely to confuse their political activity with an assertion of their maleness. They saw – and some continue to see – Black manhood as something separate from Black womanhood. These men view Black women as a threat to their attainment of manhood – especially those Black women who take initiative and work to become leaders in their own right.¹⁸

The Black Panther Party continued to work out its attitude toward feminism. Eventually women like Elaine Brown and Kathleen Cleaver became powerful and respected leaders within the group.

Davis burst onto the public scene in 1969. Davis had been teaching philosophy at UCLA. Her classes were popular with students. Controversy struck when the *Los Angeles Examiner* published an article stating [accurately] that she was an enrolled member of the Communist Party¹⁹. The Board of Regents did not renew Davis's contract. This move was publically hailed by Ronald Reagan, then governor of California.

The controversy exploded in 1970. Davis had been publically supporting three African American Black Panthers who were being held at Soledad Prison in Salinas, California. These men were accused of killing a prison guard, despite lack of evidence. Davis and others were convinced the three men were being targeted because they had organized a communist revolutionary group at the prison. Like the Black Panthers, Davis believed that the American judicial system was inherently unjust. Crime in the African American community was a result of the systematic lack of opportunities black people faced. The court system was a racist institution set up to keep blacks out of power. Davis helped create an organized movement began to free the "Soledad Brothers." She explained her convictions and goals in her autobiography. "What had to be emphasized was that the Panther prisoners would be freed by the actions of a *mass movement*. The militant protests of a movement of masses, the determined thrust of thousands of people, could force our enemy to release the sister and brothers upstairs. Rather than waste our energies giving vent to our frustrations, we should be trying to organize ourselves into a permanent movement to defend our fighters and to defend ourselves."²⁰ Davis was particularly close to one of

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 161.

¹⁹ "Angela Davis." *American History*. ABC-CLIO, 2012. Web. 3 June 2012.

²⁰ Davis, 239-240.

the imprisoned men, George Jackson. Davis also became friends with Jonathan Jackson, George's brother, who was not in prison.

In August 1970, Jonathan Jackson attacked a California Courthouse using two of Davis's guns. 4 people were killed, including a judge. In the weeks that followed, Davis went into hiding and the FBI placed her on its 10 Most Wanted List. After two months she was captured in New York City. Davis insisted that she had not conspired with Jonathan in the courthouse attack. She faced an uphill battle in the legal system and with public opinion. Most Californians already had a negative opinion of Davis because of her Communist association. Davis wrote "Our survey demonstrated that the majority of the people in Marin County, who were both white and wealthy, believed me guilty of kidnapping, murder and conspiracy. But even worse – of being a Communist, of being a Black woman."²¹ Despite her fears, Davis was acquitted of all charges. She immediately resumed her writing, teaching, and activism.

Over the last three decades, Davis has supported a variety of different movements, including gender equality and gay/lesbian rights. Most of her research and leadership focuses on the injustice of American prisons. In a 1998 interview, she wrote, "Almost two million people are currently locked up in the immense network of U.S. prisons and jails. More than 70 percent of the imprisoned population are people of color....Imprisonment has become the response of first resort to far too many of the social problems that burden people ensconced in poverty. These problems are often veiled by being conveniently grouped together under the category 'crime.'"²² In other words, Davis suggests that prisons themselves are symptoms of injustice, rather than a necessary part of our justice system. In a recent book, she asked directly "Are Prisons Obsolete?" Ever the radical, Davis continues to challenge the fundamental political, legal, and social structures of our society.

²¹ Davis, 321.

²² "Angela Davis." *Activist, Rebels and Reformers*