Angela Y. Davis: Radical Celebrity?

Presentation, Cynthia A. Young  
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Respondent, Carol Wells  
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Meeting Notes, Johanna Blakley  
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Celebrity Politics & Public Life

A presentation to the Celebrity, Politics & Public Life faculty seminar

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The Norman Lear Center

Founded in January 2000, the Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce and society. On campus, from its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the Lear Center builds bridges between schools and disciplines whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. Through scholarship and research; through its fellows, conferences, public events and publications; and in its attempts to illuminate and repair the world, the Lear Center works to be at the forefront of discussion and practice in the field.

Celebrity, Politics & Public Life

Since Fall 2000, the Norman Lear Center has sponsored a popular faculty seminar series on Celebrity, Politics & Public Life. Faculty and deans from over 20 departments convene three times each semester to develop an interdisciplinary analysis of political life in this country as it is shaped by popular culture. The project is co-directed by USC History Department Chair Steven J. Ross and Leo Braudy, Leo S. Bing Professor of English. Our topics have ranged from Elian Gonzales and Timothy McVeigh to Angela Davis, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Edward G. Robinson. The group includes professors and deans from anthropology, art history, cinema-television, theatre, ethnic studies, American studies, German, sociology, business, political science, economics, education, policy and planning, philosophy, gender studies, art history, psychology, communication, journalism, English, and history.
**Participants**

Sarah Banet-Weiser, Communication  
Karen Beavers, Cinema-TV  
Johanna Blakley, The Norman Lear Center  
Leo Braudy, English  
Jack Crossley, Religion  
David Eggenschwiler, English  
Arnold Heidsieck, German  
Randi Hokett, Warner Brothers Archive  
Selma Holo, University Galleries  
Tom Hollihan, Communication  
Judith Jackson Fossett, English  
Lanita Jacobs-Huey, Anthropology  
Heather James, English  
Martin Kaplan, The Norman Lear Center  
Abigail Kaun, Linguistics  
Colleen Keough, Communication  
Martin Krieger, Policy, Planning & Development  
Nancy Lutkehaus, Anthropology  
Richard Moore, Literature & Creative Writing  
Judith Peres, The Norman Lear Center  
Tony Peres, Getty Institute  
Dana Polan, Cinema-TV  
Michael Renov, Cinema-TV  
Patricia Riley, Communication  
Steven Ross, History  
Lisa Sharp, Sociology  
Chris Smith, Communication  
Mary Sutton, Center for the Study of Political Graphics  
Ruth Wallach, Architecture & Fine Arts Library  
Tara Waugh, Cinema-TV  
Carol Wells, Center for the Study of Political Graphics  
Cynthia Young, English  
Mark Young, Accounting

**The Executive Committee for 2002/2003**

Leo Braudy, English  
Selma Holo, University Galleries  
Marty Kaplan, The Norman Lear Center  
Nancy Lutkehaus, Anthropology  
Dana Polan, Cinema/Television  
Steven Ross, History  
Marita Sturken, Communication
Summary of the Paper (excerpted from Young’s paper)

"This paper approaches the question of Angela Davis as radical celebrity by juxtaposing media accounts of her with an analysis of the political, intellectual and cultural factors that produced her as a radical subject and actor on the national and international stage. The paper’s first section analyzes the creation of Davis as a radical activist and intellectual by tracing the influence of U.S. civil rights, Western Marxism and Third World anti-colonialism on her trajectory. The paper then turns to the ways in which the black and white press reported on Davis’s trial and eventual acquittal on kidnapping, murder and conspiracy charges stemming from Jonathan Jackson’s failed prison break attempt.

"In this paper, I am not so much interested in analyzing the media and its various distortions of Angela Davis as I am in asking a series of questions about radical politics, black trans-national identities, and the forms of resistance to racism, capitalist exploitation and First World imperialism, and what the interplay between them might have enabled."

Opening Remarks, Professor Cynthia Young

This paper is a portion of a chapter on Davis in Young’s forthcoming book, Soul Power: Culture, Power and the Formation of the Third World Left; other chapters focus on Amiri Baraka, Paul Robeson, and Charles Burnett. Professor Young suggested that this book grew out of her discovery that the histories written of the ‘60s and ‘70s did not discuss international movements.

Respondent, Carol Wells, Center for the Study of Political Graphics

Young’s paper prompted Carol Wells to ask what a radical celebrity really is. Would Davis have become a radical celebrity if she weren’t so beautiful? Would Che Guevara have become the icon he is if he weren’t so striking? Wells suggested that perhaps the main reason Davis earned the title “radical” was due to her membership in the Communist Party (CPUSA); she added that Young’s paper provides us with a great deal of information about Davis’ upbringing, but questions whether it explains why she joined the Party as a grown woman in the Summer of 1968. Davis was clearly a Marxist, but the difference between being a Marxist and being a member of the Communist Party must have been as obvious to her as it was to most other “radicals” at the time. Wells asked why did Davis join the CPUSA when existing members were
leaving in droves due to the crisis in Czechoslovakia, a crisis that Wells saw as initiating the split between the Old and the New Left in the US? And why did Davis gravitate toward the old version of the Party instead of the new? In 1970, Davis needed all the support she could get, and the CPUSA offered an unwavering hand to her. The Party was invigorated by her plight and turned Davis into its poster girl. But why did she wait until 1991 to leave?

**Group Discussion**

Accounting Professor Mark Young was also interested in probing Davis’ rationale for CPUSA membership: as a member of Asian-American activist groups in the 70s, Young remembered feeling very troubled about Davis’ connection to the CPUSA – he felt there was an enormous disconnect between her apparent political stance and her affiliations, and that when it came to believing in violent vs. peaceful revolution, Mark Young felt that the battle lines were very clear. Cynthia Young suggested that the lines were not so clear at all, that there was a great deal of internal debate in these organizations about the means to revolution; even Davis’ position on violence was never clear.

Communication Professor Tom Hollihan took issue with Young’s interpretation of Davis’ media coverage: where Young saw signs of structural misogyny, Hollihan saw capitalist imperatives instead. As he pointed out, the media has always been tempted to distill complex issues into iconic images, and if they can find one face to represent a complex problem, they will focus their attention and coverage on one person; if she happens to be incredibly photogenic, as Davis was, the coverage will only intensify. The effects, of course, are problematic: on the one hand, issues are dumbed down and misrepresented by this distillation, but on the other hand, issues that may not have found an audience are suddenly familiar to the masses. Davis’ iconization had a huge effect on fashion and culture at the time, and the allure continues for youth culture today.

Cynthia Young argued that the consumerism that Hollihan discussed actually came much later, and while black youth today may be familiar with the “Davis look,” it’s doubtful they know a lot about her politics. With her Afro and her mini skirts, Davis became emblematic of an entire
fashion movement, even though she wasn’t the first to adopt the look, and she did not make a
cancelled effort to embrace this persona and use it for her own benefit. Unlike the Panthers, with
their leather jackets and berets, Davis tried her best to avoid discussions about her appearance.

English Professor Judith Jackson Fossett asked Professor Young to analyze the transformation of
Davis’ persona as it appeared in photos in the mass media, and to address in much more detail
Davis’ class and color: Davis’ repudiation of her middle-class standing and her light-skinned
privilege is an important aspect of her character and her story. Professor Young agreed that the
color issue in particular was crucial for Davis: she was very sensitive to the fact that she was a
light-skinned black, and she was reluctant to discuss her family’s racial history with anyone. When
the Black is Beautiful movement developed, there was a certain backlash against Davis’ image in
the black press; Young felt this was one reason Davis adopted the Afro.

English Professor Leo Braudy mentioned how celebrities cannot help but be implicated in the
image-creating systems that define them, but Professor Young disagreed. She argued that both
the mainstream media and the CPUSA were eager to turn her into an icon, but Davis resisted this
at every turn.

Planning Professor Martin Krieger suggested that Davis was really far less exotic then she
appeared in the American press. She was part of a long American tradition, but that was not the
way the press represented her. Krieger argued that Americans generally don’t like to acknowledge
their traditions, but prefer to be surprised by the next new thing. Krieger also suggested that
Davis was an oddly contradicted figure: on the one hand, she was a star student, someone for
whom a professor like himself would write a glowing recommendation. He could imagine a long,
boring academic career for someone like Davis, had she stuck to the purely academic path. For
her to enter the public stage in 1968, speaking the highly technical language of Marcuse and
Marx, was truly an oddity.

Religion Professor Jack Crossley mentioned how explicit Davis had been about her effort to
change the world through teaching: her activism and her academics were never at cross-purposes,
and her mentor Marcuse was the first to laud her effort to combine theory and praxis for the purposes of social change.

Communication Professor Sarah Banet-Weiser attended the Third World College at UCSD and could testify to the intense nostalgia that lingers there for Davis and the hey-day of left politics (although there seems to be no hard feelings about the demise of the CPUSA). The University has proudly claimed Davis as its own, and has fixed their image of her in 1974. Banet-Weiser asked if these dated images of Davis are being kept alive in African-American youth culture today, and if their use of her is anything like hip-hop’s invocation of the Black Panthers – occasionally their purposes are explicitly political, sometimes it’s just a fashion statement. Young agreed that Davis’ image is most often frozen in the ‘70s, despite her involvement in health activism in the ‘80s and ‘90s, and her current identification with the prison abolitionist movement; Young was quick to say, though, that Davis always resisted “fashion politics.”

Carol Wells expressed frustration with the fact that people tend to paint the '60s with one brush, assuming that every person interested in politics at the time was a hippie. The obfuscation is rampant in the media, and the film Forest Gump mightly contributed to this reductive vision of the '60s.

Professor Polan argued that issues of fashion and style were more fraught for celebrities in the '60s than they are now. Marcuse’s book The Aesthetic Dimension marked his attempt to restore aesthetics to Marxist analysis: celebrities seized fashion as a way to be heard, as a way to be political. Susan Sontag’s popularity was driven by an interest in her look and her style; the cover of Against Interpretation was part of what brought her to national attention. Her second book, Styles of Radical Will, dealt head-on with the issue of "style." Popularity gained in those years through fashion and style cannot simply be described as "selling out:" even Faye Dunaway’s performance in Bonnie and Clyde represented an incredibly seductive radical subjectivity. Young agreed that fashion has been used as a political tool, though it often cuts both ways: sometimes a radical group’s fashion statements can alienate them from their own larger community, which
may not react well to a rebellious style that may seem pretentious to members of the middle and working class.

Carol Wells suggested that Davis may have received less support from the African-American community than O.J. Simpson did; Young said it was a mixed bag: black unions had been very supportive of Davis, even black churches had gotten involved. The one thing that the black community basically agreed upon was not Davis’ political positions, but the fact that she should be allowed to post bail.

German Professor Arnold Heidseick asked whether Young had tried to analyze Davis as an example of a Hegelian “world historical” figure: Hegel’s belief in the possibility of the rational comprehension of everything was appealing to both sides of the ideological spectrum here in the United States (Marcuse’s first book was on Hegel); he also proposed that world historical individuals such as Napoleon and Alexander emerged from history and reshaped the state when their own passions happen to line up with an unconscious spirit of the people, though they are often morally dubious people who just happen to have some sense of the things to come.

Professor Polan found this approach intriguing, and asked Young whether Davis was ever seduced by her image: she must have had some reaction to the proliferation of Davis copycats all around her. How did she feel about them, and did she think that they were helping her to accomplish her work? Young admitted that Davis certainly wanted bail in 1970, and so she was willing to play the media game in order to get it, but generally, she has not cultivated her celebrity since. Currently, instead of cooperating with the media, Davis tends to be withdrawn (she has not yet agreed to be interviewed by Young either); she’s most likely more cooperative with the international media, because she probably approves of their coverage.

Davis has also earned a reputation for being difficult: Young heard Davis speak at a recent conference on the state of black studies, but Davis didn’t address the topic at all; instead, she made a statement about why she is a prison abolitionist. Professor Braudy joked that this behavior
seems similar to Bob Dylan, whose celebrity persona is partly defined by his touchy relationship with the media.

**Suggestions for the Chapter**

- Provide a definition of “radical” and “radical celebrity”
- Further explore Davis’ position on violent vs. peaceful means to social change, and compare the activities in Asian-American political movements in the '70s.
- Provide a reading of Davis’ evolving image through photographs of her in the mainstream and the black press.
- Discuss Davis’ color and class in more detail. Compare Davis’ trajectory with Condoleeza Rice, who grew up in the same period in Birmingham.
- Consider how the “tragic mulatto” tradition applies to the media narrative that developed around Davis.
- Analyze Davis as a “world historical” individual.
- Further explore Davis’ relationship to domestic and international media. What did she do in order to “manage” her image?
- Compare Davis to other celebrities who were her contemporaries. How was she treated differently?
- Provide more detail about her involvement in the Jonathan Jackson case.