Angela Y. Davis: Radical Celebrity?

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Meeting notes by Johanna Blakley

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 even international stage. The first section analyzes the formation of Davis as a radical activist and intellectual by tracing the influence of U.S. civil rights, Western Marxism and Third World anticolonialism on her trajectory. Then it 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 transnational identities and the forms of resistance to racism, capitalist exploitation and First World imperialism the interplay between the two might enable.

English Professor Cynthia Young’s opening remarks

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 Baraka, Robson, and Charles Burnett. This book grew out of Young’s discovery that the histories 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 cute?

Perhaps the main reason Davis earned the title “radical” was due to her membership in the Communist Party (CPUSA). Young's paper provides us with a great deal of information about Davis' upbringing, but does it explain 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. Why did Davis join when existing members were leaving in droves due to the crisis in Czechoslovakia – a crisis that Wells sees 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 remembers feeling very troubled about Davis' connection to the CPUSA. He felt there was an enormous disconnect between her apparent political stance and her affiliations. 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. The media has always been tempted to distill complex issues into iconic images. If they can find one face to represent a complex problem, they will focus their attention and their coverage on one person. And if she happens to be incredibly photogenic, as Davis obviously 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 concerted 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 with anyone her racial family history. 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 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 mightily 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 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 were very supportive, and even black churches got 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). Hegel proposed that world historical individuals such as Napoleon and Alexander emerge from history and reshape the State when their own passions happen to line up with an unconscious Spirit of the people. 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. 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 earned a reputation for being uncooperative and 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 Condoleezza 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.

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 Holli, 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
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Michael Renov, Cinema-TV
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