Angela Y. Davis

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CTM: So, we are talking to Angela Davis. It's the 27th of February 2016 and we are really pleased, Linda and I, to have you here for this conversation. So, should we begin?

AYD: Well, I know we've been talking about this for a very long time and I can't believe it's finally happening.

CTM: Happening, I know. Well, we're all three in the same place after a while.

LEC: So Angela, we'd like to start by you telling us a bit about—we're not asking for your entire trajectory of feminist activism—about how you got into feminism and feminist activist work specifically.

AYD: Well, it's kind of a complicated story because I, it took me a while to actually begin to positively and critically identify with feminism, even though as I look back now I have been doing feminist activism for a long time. At that particular time—and I'm speaking specifically about the late 1960s—when I was doing work on women's rights and black women and a whole range of issues, International Women's Day…but I considered feminism to be bourgeois…white and bourgeois. So I did not identify with feminism. As a matter of fact when I first…when I wrote *Women, Race and Class* I was kind of shocked that everybody began to refer to it as feminist. No, no, no, no, I'm a communist. I'm a black woman revolutionary and that would be oxymoronic but as women of color feminism began to develop, I began to quite comfortably identify with that feminism. I suppose I had to recognize that there are different feminisms, multiple feminisms and there are some feminisms with which I still absolutely hesitate to identify.

CTM: So, who would you kind of identify as the feminist voices, the women of color feminist voices that felt the most like a space that you could interact with at that time. So you're talking sort of late 70s early 80s now?

AYD: Yes, yes, yes. Well, I was fortunate to be able to hang out with people like bell hooks and Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua. As a matter of fact for me 1981 is a pivotal year. Of course, *This Bridge Called My Back* was published, bell hooks' book was published. In that year I think my own book was published. Around the same time Michele Wallace's—

CTM: Also, yeah Michele Wallace's and Gloria Joseph's and Jill Lewis' Common Differences…

AYD: Yeah, exactly.

CTM: All in 1981.

AYD: And then there were these amazing conferences that took place**:** Common Differences, Parallels and Intersections. So it wasn't as if I had to make an effort. The scene was already set. The framework came together. And I was held by it so to speak. But yeah, I was teaching at San Francisco State at that time and so was Cherrie Moraga, Gloria and bell hooks and around that time new formations were happening, there were amazing confrontations at various conferences…the NWSA…I think I attended—I did not attend the one in 1981 which was in Storrs but I did attend the conference the following year.

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CTM: That was the one in Iowa right?

AYD: No, no I went to the one in Humboldt, in Arcadia, Humboldt state.

CTM: I don't know that.

AYD: Yeah, the thing was around racism but there were major issues there. So yeah, that I think was such a productive, generative period. And I was teaching in women's studies, as a matter of fact. I had not actually thought of myself as a person who fit into the new field of women's studies, as a matter of fact I think I felt a greater kinship with black studies. And I didn't want to teach. At that particular time I wasn't interested in a full time academic career because I was doing a great deal of activism, travelling and speaking and organizing, I wanted to continue that. So I got this offer from San Francisco State to teach in the relatively new women's studies department and at the same time, as I mentioned, bell hooks was teaching there. I don't think they realized, you know what was going on.

CTM: It is kind of incredible to think that Cherrie, you, Gloria and bell hooks were in the same space at that time. I never knew that actually.

LEC: That was a radical space then you know.

CTM: Exactly. Absolutely.

AYD: But it was a contested space as well because I can remember the difficulties I had teaching courses in the women's studies department. I would be told this is not appropriate for women's studies, this is more appropriate for black studies. I remember very specifically an encounter with a faculty member with whom I was co-teaching the introductory course. At that particular time I was thinking about the book that I would write later on the blues…*Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. And we had this huge fight in front of the students about the blues when this white woman faculty member was telling me that this was entirely inappropriate for a women's studies class because the blues were all about men beating up women and so forth and so on and it was— so for me that was a pivotal moment when I realized how much work would have to be done within that field to— and I guess the work is still happening.

CTM: And needs to happen still. *[Laughter]*

AYD: Exactly.

CTM: But I was curious about your socialist commitments and how that plays out in women of color feminism. Because I don't think there were too many people who identified as such in women's studies at that time.

AYD: Oh, but then that was the era of socialist feminism. You know you have people like Zillah, her amazing book.

CTM: Yeah, no. There is a genealogy.

AYD: So, it's interesting because I think I came to my work on gender though my socialist, Communist trajectory, right. I read *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* long before there had been any discussion of the field of women's studies.

LEC: I hear that thing what you're saying about the contestation because it was so— if you look at the literature back then you see the contestation, you see the point of contestation.

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Because the whole theory, the theoretical foundation of understanding social relations in capitalism was not happening in feminism, was not happening in women's studies. So those kinds of problems that you are pointing to become very apparent in one's

memory of this. Because that is where I would see you being like on the outside as the communist looking in from a socialist feminist frame at what's not happening in the field at that time.

CTM: So you're talking about the institutionalized. See, that's what the distinction is. So then when women's studies gets institutionalized there are almost no spaces that I can think of where there is a socialist feminist orientation to the field. There are socialist feminist theorists and activists in the world, producing those knowledges. I know this because I remember some of the same struggles, right, not just around race and US exceptionalism and whatever but also class. Yeah, very fundamentally the analysis of social relations that actually was anticapitalist. And that's from the point of view of somebody who has been in women's studies, right, so through the institutional lens.

AYD: But I think there were some, certain figures around whom…

CTM: Socialist feminists…

AYD: Yeah, yeah, I mean I'm thinking about UC Santa Cruz and the department I came to teach in for many years—the History of Consciousness. And when that program was founded it was around socialist feminism so, you know I think that at a certain point there was a far too simplistic assumption of what it meant to do work around gender or around women's issues. And actually some of this came from the Communist framework as well. The woman question, right? Which is how I came to it and I had to figure out how to sort of extricate myself from the framework without leaving behind what was productive and what was important. But I think as women's studies came to be institutionalized it gave rise to a whole strain of literature that moved away from engagement with issues of class and imperialism. I actually like to think about what was happening on the ground in communities outside of the academy and if I think about the work that women of color were doing, I'm thinking specifically about a genealogy that goes back to people like Fran Beal, back in 1970 published that amazing piece *Double Jeopardy to be Black and Female* and then the Third World Women's Alliance that developed this framework which was…the name of their newspaper was a *Triple Jeopardy.* Today when people refer to intersectionality as if that category had always been around…it's been so completely naturalized now…that they don't take into consideration that much of the impetus for developing a framework that was capable of addressing these issues together came directly from people, women especially, working on the ground, doing activism against war, activism within the labor movement, activism against, for example, sterilization abuse. And so "Triple Jeopardy", which was the name of the newspaper, referred to racism, sexism and imperialism. Those were the three categories, and of course imperialism embraced capitalism. So, I mean it's interesting because I felt drawn to that analysis all along but did not necessarily see it as feminist.

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It was the alternative framework to what was then considered to be feminism and it was that framework that didn't make it into the academy and would take another ten years before it became available and then perhaps not until…well, it hasn't really made it into some departments, it still hasn't in 2016.

CTM: It still hasn't. *[Laughter]* Yeah.

AYD: But yeah, I think it's really important to look at all of the ways in which the work outside of the academy had a direct impact on what would eventually be taken up within.

LEC: Within, on some levels.

AYD: On some levels, yeah.

CTM: Right.

LEC: So in reflecting on your work, say over the last four decades, *that* feminist work and *that* feminist activist work, how would you say, how would you imagine that that work has impacted the lives of women, how do you see it moving through the lives of women in real ways and creating change? And this is of course in the imaginary, right because some of it you will know for sure and some you would hope that it does.

AYD: Well, I think that whenever one engages in work that is designed to contribute to social transformation one only hopes to have an impact. And for me, I have never imagined that impact has been confined to the work that I do as an individual, right? I always see it as a collective process. And even things that I've done, like the book that I wrote in 1981, *Women, Race and Class*, a lot of those ideas came from my activism and came from my community. So when people tell me that they were profoundly transformed by that I can't take the credit for it myself. I suppose I would say that I always hope to be connected to communities that have some impact on the world, that make a difference in the world, that make it perhaps somewhat easier to move forward. And of course change is never given, it's always—you know what can be a very positive transformation at one point can turn into its opposite so easily. So I don't think it's a good thing to rest on one's laurels because we can see that some victories within the academy, departments, fields which seems so revolutionary at the time—

CTM: Are completely co-opted.

AYD: Exactly. So I think it's always important to look back and understand the histories and the genealogies but at the same time it's important to look forward and not say, "Oh! This is what I've done and I feel proud of what I've done".

LEC: Well that's the reason I asked the question the way I did because it's not about the self and knowing you we would never be like wow this is what Angela did, contributed to. But the way that your work is often taken up—and we can understand that why and how it's taken up as individual—you, of course, don't look at it that way. So I'm saying in that imaginary how do you see that in part of the collective way you think about it, as making those fundamental differences that haven't happened out of other spaces?

CTM: So for instance if you were to specify, like what were the issues, concerns, contradictions that you feel really engaged you, within which you had worked over this long period of time? What would be those spaces?

LEC: And the question came out of the prior question and response, right? The contestation thing.

CTM: Right, true.

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AYD: Well, I think I've always been interested in complicating, you know, whatever is given. Not in a way that is not comprehensible to people who may not have had the same kind of preparation but… I can even remember when I was young and wanting to, when I felt drawn to communism, I joined a communist youth organization when I was in my teens and that was a decision I made even though my parents had many friends who were communists but I can remember even then wanting to figure out how racism and class exploitation— I mean I instinctively felt that they were…

CTM: Missing things?

AYD: That they had to be thought together. That we have to figure out how to bring them together, so that it wasn't only a class analysis that overshadowed everything else. So I think it was about breaking down hierarchies. Even hierarchies of the understanding of the way oppression works in the world. And so, later when I was a member of the Communist Party and I was active in the Black Panther Party, I was actually a member of the Black Panther Party and those of us who were in other parties, were told that we had to choose whether we wanted to remain in the Black Panther Party or—and that wasn't a difficult decision for me. As passionate as I felt about the work in black communities and the work I was doing with the Black Panther Party, but I needed a larger framework and so my experiences within the Communist Party gave me this global framework, this way of identifying not only

with struggles, labor struggles and struggles that were being conducted by people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds and you know, white workers and so forth, but also the world. And to me that has—I guess I'm still talking about that today, because even as we are witnessing a new flourishing of activism today there could be a more pronounced internationalism, and that's what in the United States of America we are always encouraged to look inward and not outward.
LEC: Problem of insularity.

CTM: Yeah. So I think actually you've addressed some of the challenges but if you were to think concretely about, maybe even just think about what we face now. What are some of the most urgent challenges according to you that we face in doing sort of radical—yesterday you used the word serious you as said a lot in your talk, right *[Laughter]*—so a serious, radical feminist, antiracist, anti-imperialist kind of praxis, right. What kinds of challenges are we facing?

AYD: Well, you know I think that in some ways we really missed the boat on a whole number of issues. And I say this not to be overly critical, but because it's important to take promises that were unfulfilled in the past and use them to help us to build agendas for the present. So I can remember back in, must've been in the '70s when we were talking about, when we first began to talk about violence against women.

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You know I wrote a piece for I think it was Kitchen Table Press on violence against women and I can't remember what year it was. It was called "Violence Against Women and the Ongoing Challenge to Racism".

LEC: That was in the '80s.

CTM: Sometime in the '80s, but I'm trying to think—

AYD: Was it in the '80s? But no, I can't remember— okay I'm all kind of mixed up. But you know I'm trying to…unfortunately, before this conversation I didn't sit down and try to map things out clearly in my mind but I do remember in the 70s taking this issue, taking up this issue in relation to the Joan Little case. So that I know was '75 or '76.

LEC: Maybe that piece was like '79-'80.

AYD: Which one? The Joan Little piece?

LEC: No, the one after.

AYD: That one may have been later but it came out of the experiences that we had working around the Joan Little case. Joan Little of course, was a young black woman who was raped by a guard in a prison in North Carolina. And I wrote a piece for "Ms. Magazine". And I remember that we were talking at that time about the importance of men getting involved in the campaign against violence against women. And that there was, as a matter of fact, an organization—and this I think was in…it may have been in the early '80s in Washington DC—Black Men Against Rape, and a number of small formations of men who had taken up the issue of combating gender, what we called then violence against women. And I remember thinking back then that this is what needs to be done. This is how we're actually going to eradicate gender violence. But it didn't catch on. And there were a few men's groups here and there who were doing that work but it wasn't embraced and that means that here we are in the 21st century in the sixteenth year of the 21st century and that's still on the agenda. So I think that is one of the main challenges and I'm very happy to see young men, young black men especially, taking up feminist frameworks. I have encountered groups of young students here and there, men doing work in rape crisis centers, women's centers. And in this new student activism, I think it's very much shaped by feminism. And that has to do with Black Lives Matter and the activist feminist framework that has become a part of activism today. I don't think it's possible for young people to consider themselves serious activists, if they don't embrace feminism to a certain extent or another. So it's both a challenge, but I see some real hopeful developments.

LEC: Thinking back on that, you just pointed to what's been missing and the kinds of mistakes, that you know we've all made and contributed to, how do you see…what do you think needs to happen in terms of feminists across race, ethnic class divides to build solidarity? Across national borders as well. To build solidarity, you know to really have an understanding of how to contribute to necessary change in this age of neoliberalism?

AYD: Well, I think that the feminisms with which we identify—antiracist, anti-imperialist—

LEC: Anti-capitalist.

AYD: Anti-capitalist feminisms—are constantly changing.

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This is something that is sometimes difficult for academics and activists to grasp. That they can't assume that the framework is going to always remain the same. And so even those of us who might think that we have attached ourselves to the most generative, the most productive framework have to be careful about allowing that

framework to stagnate. And so, therefore, older generations really have to listen carefully to younger generations. I think that the value of listening is something that we don't place enough emphasis on. Within the circles that I operate, in abolitionist circles, I've seen so much change over a relatively short period of time. For instance, we were talking about the role that work around transgender issues plays. It would have been impossible to imagine twenty years ago even—
CTM: Their conversation.

AYD: Yes, yes, exactly. People like CeCe McDonald who spent several years in prison and was, you know brutalized and falsely charged with murder when she was defending herself against someone who attacked her. She's a really amazing activist—I had the opportunity to spend some time around her at a conference—not only around trans* issues but around issues of the prison-industrial-complex in general. And that conversation has allowed us to—and I think this is the value of feminism to me, that the flexibility of the frameworks—has allowed us to rethink the way in which we had imagined the analysis and the struggle against what we call the prison-industrial-complex. To begin to talk about the ways in which the institution itself of the prison is an apparatus that engages and processes of gendering. That makes it have so much of a broader reach and it's not only connected to punishment and to prisoners and prisoner's rights and so forth. But part of the process of working towards the abolition of the prison-industrial complex has to do with the abolition of an ideological apparatus, not only a state repressive apparatus but it's also about an apparatus that has helped to create and continues to reproduce the whole process of gendering. It's a gendering apparatus and that would never have become apparent if we had not been willing to embrace the issue of trans* prisoner's rights. And so as I was saying yesterday, I think that feminism allows us to break free of the framework that assumes that what is numerically larger is going to define the issue. So we recognize that even the smallest, most minute issue contains insights that can allow us to move forward in amazing ways. I see feminism as also about methodology, not just about objects of what one is studying or objects of one's organizing but as a method, a methodology, a framework.

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LEC: Of how to be in the world.

AYD: Exactly, exactly.

CTM: Which is why then one can envision futures that are emancipatory or liberatory in largest possible ways, right?

AYD: Exactly, exactly.

CTM: Because it's not about just the concreteness of we want to live a life that you know, gives us food and shelter and this and that and the other—which of course we all want— but that it allows one to imagine an expansive vision of what it would mean to live in a just world. So, what would that mean for you? How would you characterize that?

AYD: Well, you know I always think that these imaginaries are temporary because once we have moved to the place we once imagined we recognize it is so much more complicated and is so much more…but that's precisely the value of the imagination. What's interesting is that we're often encouraged to think in terms of bodies and of course racism does that, because race is presumed to be attached to bodies although it isn't. We know that. As a matter of fact that's why I found your notion years ago when I first read your *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, your notion of third world women as a political project. I found that so liberating. And so I guess I would want to live in a world where the processes of commodification are clearly on their way out of history. I mean what sometimes often appear to be very basic wishes are so far out of reach and the very ability to get an education, a free education, that seems so bizarre today. I would want education to be free from kindergarten or childcare all the way up to postgraduate and beyond. That would mean that the very process of education would have to be transformed, too. It's not just being able to have free access to what exists now. But that would mean that curriculum would change, structures would change, administration would change, relations would change. And having spent the majority of my life on college and university campuses what really continues to bother me is the fact that the workers in these spaces are so invisible even today. Even students who consider themselves to be most radical or faculty they don't take into consideration that we have not created a community on these campuses that involves the people that actually enable the work to be done. I always go back to Marx because to me before Marx decided that the question of leisure time would be solved by reducing the number of hours one works in the day right—which somehow or another has got stuck at eight hours, by now we should definitely be at four or three.

[Laughter]

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And if one looks at the struggles for shorter work days over the years and centuries we should definitely be at about three hours a day now. But I imagine people having the opportunity to really follow their passion. Everyone should be able to make art. It doesn't have to be good art but everyone should be able to express themselves, because I took that really seriously from Marxist analysis, about the fact that we externalize ourselves in the objects that we make and that workers are totally alienated from the products of their labor because of the whole capitalist system. So I

would want a world in which that was possible. I could go on and talk about any of the basic things and also philosophically about what might it mean to transform human relations and to transform our sense of ourselves.

LEC: Especially in an era when commodification is so intense. Everything that can be commodified is commodified.

AYD: Which is everything, which is literally everything; even thoughts, right?

CTM: Yeah, right.

LEC: Commodified and appropriated and the state is a master of this now. It takes so much of it. Even relations, some elements of human relations are commodified and becomes the state's language. The state makes it part of its language. From relating to people, telling them how to relate to each other. I mean if you look at the current election campaign you see it. Some of these ideas are not these peoples'. They come out of elements of struggle that they have appropriated and commodified.

CTM: So what do you see is the kind of future of feminist praxis?

LEC: Or praxes.

CTM: Yeah

AYD: Yeah and I think that this might be the time to try to broaden the reach of feminism and to…I've never been someone who has relied on labels, because even early on my position was, well, it doesn't really matter whether you call yourself a feminist, what matters most is the work that you do—the activist work, the scholarly work, whatever. But I do think that this might be the moment to encourage a more accessible feminism. I gave a talk at Vassar to mark the 30th anniversary of their Women's and Gender Department, I think it was on 30th November and it was called "Our Feminisms". How can we make feminisms accessible to young women and men and those who don't necessarily directly identify along those binary lines as something that is relevant to their lives because it's inevitable that younger generations are going to see feminism—we're seeing this played out in the elections—as belonging to their mothers or their grandmothers or their great grandmothers, right, and not as something that they can take and transform and work with and work on. So I think this is precisely the period when feminisms can become and are becoming more accessible. I like the idea that…I'd like to see these, as I was saying, young black men activists, student activists talking about the importance of challenging gender violence.

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I like the fact that the Black Lives Matter movement has been represented as a movement that is expansive and that addresses queer issues, addresses issues of ableism. For me feminism is about producing these broad frameworks. It began with a focus on gender but I think that we know now that the real value of feminism is the ability to create a framework of understanding and analysis that allows us to do what is otherwise impossible, particularly when we rely on these frameworks that assume that there are discrete issues and categories and they don't interact with each other or at the same time there might be things that need to be pulled apart that we can't. So that is what we need today. And I think it appeals to the younger generation in ways that it never appealed to our different generations because it was not familiar and it has become more familiar to those who are coming up. And so it should be more familiar because they take it for granted and they can move forward with it and create other things that we never could have imagined ourselves.

CTM: So, so much is about the imagination, right?

LEC: Exactly, but that too has been commodified, right? Their notion of feminism, because when you hear is this person is feminist, or that person is saying that they are feminist you start thinking through what some of this means.

AYD: But see I think that's okay, Linda. It's okay and I think it's good because I think it may…"Is Beyoncé a feminist?" is a good question because it allows us to engage in conversation.

LEC: We have them let me tell you. We're having them in classes we are.

AYD: Well yeah. And also there are so many different versions of feminism, so she's you know…there's no way to say yes or no definitively to any question because there are so many different questions. But I think it's great that these issues are coming up in popular culture and Beyoncé…is Beyoncé a feminist? Well there's also the other question, which I won't…*[Laughter]*

CTM: No, we don't need both.

AYD: But I think it was great that she did that.

LEC: And others. You know the question has been asked of Adele and that popular singer—what's her name?

AYD: Janelle Monae?

LEC: Who?

KP: Nicki Minaj.

LEC: Nicki Minaj! And Taylor Swift. I mean she has made some comments about women.

AYD: About women, exactly, that was her Grammy speech.

LEC: Yeah, really progressive—

AYD: But you know, the thing is that what is progressive at one moment in history is not necessarily progressive fifty years later, or twenty years later. The value of feminism or the value of antiracist, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist feminisms that are kind of Marxist inflected feminism is that it allows us to think about the framework of our analysis or of our organizing at the same time as we use that framework to think about whatever it is we're examining. And I think that's a habit that most people haven't been able to embrace because it's a habit that contravenes disciplinary thinking—in disciplinary thinking the framework is what enables everything else so once you begin challenging the framework everything falls apart. And feminism allows us to trouble the framework, allow things to fall apart and at the same time put them back together.

CTM: Imagine something…

AYD: Exactly, imagine something entirely different.

CTM: Yeah, yeah. Okay, wonderful. That's a wonderful place to end.

AYD: Ok now, good.

CTM: Thank you, Angela.

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Feminist Freedom Warriors (FFW) is a first of its kind digital video archive and documentary project. Born out of an engagement in anti-capitalist, anti-racist struggles as women of color from the Global South, this project is about cross-generational histories of feminist activism addressing economic, anti-racist, social justice and anti-capitalist issues across national borders.