



THE ANGELA Y. DAVIS READER

Edited by Joy James

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Excerpts from *Angela Davis:* *An Autobiography*

The entire jail was shrouded in darkness when I finally reached the cell in 4b. It was no more than four and a half feet wide. The only furnishings were an iron cot bolted to the floor and a seatless toilet at the foot of the bed. Some minutes after they had locked me in, the officer in charge of that unit – another young black woman – came to the iron door. She whispered through the grating that she was shoving a piece of candy under the door. She sounded sincere enough, but I couldn't take any chances. I didn't want to be paranoid, but it was better to be too distrustful than not cautious enough. I was familiar with jailhouse "suicides" in California. For all I knew, there might be poison in the candy.

The first night in jail, I had no desire to sleep. I thought about George and his brothers in San Quentin. I thought about Jonathan. I thought about my mother and father and hoped that they would make it through this ordeal. And then I thought about the demonstration outside, about all the people who had dropped everything to fight for my freedom.

I had just been captured; a trial awaited me in California on the charges of murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy. A conviction on any one of these charges could mean death in the gas chamber. One would have thought that this was an enormous defeat. Yet, at that moment, I was feeling better than I had felt in a long time. The struggle would be difficult, but there was already a hint of victory. In the heavy silence of the jail, I discovered that if I concentrated hard enough, I could hear echoes of slogans being chanted on the other side of the walls. "Free Angela Davis." "Free All Political Prisoners."

The key rattling in the cell-gate lock startled me. A guard was opening the gate for a plump young black woman wearing a faded blue prisoner's uniform and holding a big tray in her hands.

Smiling, she said in a very soft voice, "Here's your breakfast. Do you want some coffee?"

Her gentle manner was comforting and made me feel like I was among human beings again. I sat up on the cot, thanked her and told her that I would very much like a cup of coffee.

Looking around, I realized that there was no place to put the food – the bed and the toilet were the only furnishings in the tiny cell. But the sister, obviously having gone through this many times before, had already stooped down to a squatting position and was placing the food on the floor: a small box of cornflakes, a paper cup filled with watery milk, two pieces of plain white bread and a paper cup into which she began to pour the coffee.

“Is there any black coffee?” I asked her, partly because I didn’t drink coffee with milk and partly because I wanted an excuse to exchange a few more words with her.

“When they give it to us, it’s already like this,” she answered, “but I’ll see what I can do about getting you some black coffee tomorrow.”

The guard told me I had to get ready for my court appearance. Then she slammed the gate on the young woman’s exit. While she was unlocking the next cell, the sister whispered through the bars, “Don’t worry about a thing. We’re all on your side.” And she disappeared down the corridor.

I looked down at my breakfast, and saw that a roach had already discovered it. I left it all spread out on the bare floor untouched. After I had gone through the elaborate steps involved in getting dressed for court, a matron led me downstairs. A crowd of white men was milling around the receiving room. Seeing me, they swept toward me like vultures and clamped handcuffs around my wrists, which still ached from the previous day. Outside, shiny tin cars crowded into the cobblestone courtyard. It was still dark when the caravan reached the federal courthouse. A glimpse of the morning paper’s bold-lettered headlines, peeping out from under some man’s arm, stunned me: **ANGELA DAVIS CAPTURED IN NEW YORK**. It suddenly struck me that the huge crowd of press people summoned by the FBI the evening before had probably written similar headline stories throughout the country. Knowing that my name was now familiar to millions of people, I felt overwhelmed. Yet I knew that all this publicity was not really aimed at me as an individual. Using me as an example, they wanted to discredit the black liberation movement, the Left in general and obviously also the Communist Party. I was only the occasion for their manipulations.

The holding cell where I spent the next several hours was cleaner than the jail cell I had just left and looked like a giant, unfinished bathroom. It had sparkling white tile walls and a light-colored linoleum floor. A seatless toilet stood in one of the corners. Long metal benches lined the three walls.

One of the federal bureaucrats came into the cell.

“I have nothing to say,” I told him, “until I see my lawyer.”

“Your father’s lawyer is waiting outside,” he said.

My father's lawyer? Perhaps it was a friend posing as my "father's lawyer" in order to get permission to see me.

In a large hall filled with rows of desks, John Abt was waiting to see me. Although I had never met him before I knew about the trials in which he had successfully defended members of our Party. With a great feeling of relief, I sat down to talk with him.

"I waited for hours last night at the jail, but they refused to let me in," John said. "I had to get your father to call them before they would let me see you this morning."

He went on to explain that I was about to be arraigned on the federal charge – interstate flight to avoid prosecution. Before he had gotten very far in his discussion of the legal proceedings before us, a group of people pressed through a door at the other end of the room. Without my glasses, which the FBI had not bothered to return, the people's faces were blurred. Noticing a young black woman involved in a heated exchange with the marshals, I squinted in order to see her more clearly.

"That's Margaret!" I shouted.

Margaret Burnham was a very old friend of mine. During my youngest years, her family and mine had lived in the same housing project in Birmingham. When the Burnhams moved to New York, we visited them every summer for four years, then we alternated the visits – sometimes they would come to Birmingham and sometimes we would go to New York. Our families had been so close that I had always considered Margaret, her sisters Claudia and Linda, and her brother Charles more family than friends. I had not seen her for several years. She had been in Mississippi, gotten married and given birth to a child. I knew that she had recently graduated from law school and I assumed she was now practicing in New York.

"Margaret," I called, as loudly as I could, "come on over." Apparently this was enough to settle the argument she was having with the marshal, for he did nothing to prevent her from walking over to the desk where John and I were. It felt so good to embrace her. "Margaret," I said to her, "I'm so glad you came. You don't know how glad I am to see you." As we started talking about personal things, I almost forgot that there was business to be taken care of.

"Can you work on the case?" I asked her finally, desperately hoping she would say yes.

"You know I will, Angela," she answered, "if that's what you think I should do."

It was as if half the battle had already been won.

John Abt went on to explain the legal situation.

Back in August, Marin County had charged me with murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy to commit murder and rescue prisoners. On the basis of an FBI agent's affidavit declaring that I had been seen by "reliable

sources” in Birmingham, a federal judge had issued a warrant charging me with “interstate flight to avoid prosecution.” It was possible, John said, that I might be “removed” to California, which meant that without further litigation I would simply be transferred from the New York Federal District to the California Federal District. But more than likely, he surmised, I would be “turned over” to the State of New York for extradition to California, and we would be able to challenge California in the New York courts.

As we were winding up this conference, David¹ walked into the room, encircled by guards. I hadn’t seen him since our arrest. He looked as if he hadn’t slept either.

In a cool, crisp tone, he called out to me, “Remember now, no matter what, we’re going to beat this thing.”

“No talking between the prisoners,” a voice announced. It could have come from any one of the marshals standing around.

“OK, David,” I said, ignoring the command. “You be sure to keep strong yourself.”

I had never seen a courtroom so small. With its marred walls of blond wood, it had the worn-out elegance of an old mansion. There was just enough room for the bench and a single row of chairs lining the back wall. The smallness of the courtroom exaggerated the height of the judge’s bench. The judge himself was little, like his courtroom. He was wearing old-fashioned plastic-rimmed glasses, and his white hair was spread sparsely over his head. I thought about Soledad guard O. G. Miller perched in his gun tower, aiming his carbine at the three brothers he killed in the yard in January.²

There were no spectators. The only non-official people were reporters – and there were not very many of them. As I entered, a sister sitting in the seat closest to the door held up a copy of the hardcover edition of George’s *Soledad Brother*. This was the first time I had seen the book, which I had read in manuscript.

The arraignment on the federal charges was short and to the point. All the prosecutor was required to do was to prove, for the record, that I was the Angela Davis named in the warrant. The bail figure was a farce. Who could even contemplate raising \$250,000 to get me out of jail?

It was still early – late morning or early afternoon – when I returned to the holding cell. The last time I had been in the cell, my thoughts had been monopolized by the problem of finding a lawyer. Now that I had two fine lawyers whom I trusted and loved, I could no longer ward off thoughts of my imprisonment. I was alone with the shiny tile walls and the gray steel bars. Walls and bars, nothing more. I wished I had a book or, if not something to read, at least a pencil and a sheet of paper.

I fought the tendency to individualize my predicament. Pacing from one

end of this cell to the other, from a bench along one wall to a bench along the other, I kept telling myself that I didn't have the right to get upset about a few hours of being alone in a holding cell. What about the brother – Charles Jordon was his name – who had spent, not hours, but days and weeks in a pitch-dark strip-cell in Soledad Prison, hardly large enough for him to stretch out on the cold cement, reeking of urine and human excrement because the only available toilet was a hole in the floor which could hardly be seen in the dark.

I thought about the scene George had described in the manuscript of his book – the brother who had painted a night sky on the ceiling of his cell, because it had been years since he had seen the moon and stars. (When it was discovered, the guards painted over it in gray.) And there was Ericka Huggins at Niantic State Farm for Women in Connecticut. Ericka, Bobby, the Soledad Brothers, the Soledad 7, the Tombs Rebels and all the countless others whose identities were hidden behind so much concrete and steel, so many locks and chains. How could I indulge even the faintest inclination toward self-pity? Yet I paced faster across the holding cell. I walked with the determination of someone who has someplace very important to go. At the same time, I was trying not to let the jailers see my agitation.

When someone finally opened the gate, it was late in the evening. Margaret and John were waiting to accompany me to a court appearance in the same courtroom we had appeared in that morning. Aside from us, there were no “civilians” in the courtroom, not even the reporters from the morning session. I wondered what kind of secret appearance this was going to be.

The elderly judge announced that he was rescinding the bail and releasing me on my own recognizance. I was sure I had misheard his words. But already, the Feds were approaching me to unlock the handcuffs. The judge said something else, which I hardly heard, and then suddenly several New York policemen moved in to replace the federal handcuffs with their own manacles.

With the New York handcuffs binding my wrists, there was a trip to a musty police precinct office, where I was officially booked as a prisoner of the State of New York. Forms, fingerprints, mug shots – the same routine. The New York police seemed to be as confused as their surroundings. Amid all the papers haphazardly strewn on desks and counters, they were running around like novices. Their incompetence calmed me. It must have been around ten in the evening when one of them announced that there would be yet another court appearance. (Did Margaret and John know about this third court session?)

The courtroom in the New York County Courthouse was larger than any I had ever seen. Its high ceilings and interminable rows of benches made it look like a church from another era. Most courtrooms are

windowless, but this one seemed especially isolated from the outside world. It was so dimly lit, with hardly anyone but policemen sitting randomly on the benches, that I had the impression that what was about to happen was supposed to be hidden from the people outside. Neither Margaret nor John was there. When they told me that I had to be arraigned before a New York judge, I said that I wasn't budging from my seat until they contacted my lawyers. I was prepared to wait the whole night.

When John finally arrived, he said that the police had directed him to the wrong courtroom. He had been running all over New York trying to find me. After hours of waiting, the court appearance lasted all of two minutes.

Back at the jail, I was so physically and emotionally exhausted that I only wanted to sleep. Even the hard cell cot in the "mental" ward felt comfortable. But as soon as I closed my eyes, I was jolted out of my exhaustion by piercing screams in a language which sounded Slavic. They came from a cell at the other end of the corridor: Footsteps approached the cell in the darkness. Voices tried to calm the woman in English but could not assuage her terror. I listened to her all night – until they took her away in the morning. [. . .]

While I was in solitary, I finally began to receive regular evening visits from several friends. An officer would stand just close enough to hear my side of the conversation. (I assumed that they summarized it in the log book.) I was not a stranger to visiting arrangements in jails, for I had visited friends and comrades in prison on many occasions. But this visiting room was by far the worst I had seen. It is not unusual to have to speak to a visitor through a glass pane, but the panes in the House of Detention were less than a square foot in size, and the rust-colored dirt that covered them made it impossible to get a clear look at the person who had come to see you. The prisoners had to stand up during these twenty-minute visits and shout into telephones which inevitably seemed to stop functioning just when the most important part of the conversation had gotten under way.

One evening while I was still in solitary, I received a visit from Kendra Alexander, who had been subpoenaed to New York along with her husband Franklin to testify before the Grand Jury in the case against David Poindexter.³ She informed me that the demonstration protesting my solitary confinement was about to begin. They knew more or less where my room was located – I had carefully detailed the areas of Greenwich Avenue I could see from my window. The demonstrators were to gather on the corner of Greenwich and West Tenth.

I ran back upstairs. The officer guarding me was one of the friendlier ones, and turned her head and closed her ears while I spread the news. On five or six floors, the women who lived in the corridors with windows

looking out on Greenwich Avenue would be able to see and hear the demonstration.

It was an enthusiastic crowd. Their shouts "Free Angela! Free all our sisters!" rang through the night. Looking down from my cell window, I became altogether engrossed in the speeches, sometimes losing the sensation of captivity, feeling myself down there on the street with them. My mind flashed back to past demonstrations – "Free the Soledad Brothers," "Free Bobby and Ericka," "Free Huey," "End the war in Vietnam," "Stop police killings in our community now . . ."

Jose Stevens, a communist leader from Harlem, had wound up his speech. Franklin was addressing his words, full of passion, to all the prisoners locked up in the Women's House of Detention. Then my sister, Fania, took the megaphone. The sound of her voice shocked me back into the reality of my situation, for I momentarily had forgotten that this demonstration was centered around me. I had been so absorbed in the rally that I had actually felt as if I were down there in the streets with them. Reflecting upon the impenetrability of this fortress, on all the things that kept me separated from my comrades barely a few hundred yards away, and reflecting on my solitary confinement – this prison within a prison that kept me separated from my sisters in captivity – I felt the weight of imprisonment perhaps more at that moment than at any time before.

My frustration was immense. But before my thoughts led me further in the direction of self-pity, I brought them to a halt, reminding myself that this was precisely what solitary confinement was supposed to evoke. In such a state the keepers could control their victim. I would not let them conquer me. I transformed my frustration into raging energy for the fight.

Against the background of the chants ringing up from the demonstration below, I took myself to task for having indulged in self-pity. What about George, John and Fleeta, and my co-defendant, Ruchell Magee, who had endured far worse than I could ever expect to grapple with? What about Charles Jordan and his bout with that medieval strip-cell in Soledad Prison? What about those who had given their lives – Jonathan, McClain, and Christmas?

The experience of the demonstration had worked up so much tension in me that I felt none of the debilitating effects of the fast. I did an extra heavy set of exercises to sufficiently lower my energy level so I could lie in bed in relative calm. There was no question of getting a full night's sleep. On this evening, I had to be especially vigilant. All was quiet in the jail, but I was convinced that the demonstration had aroused the jailers, and I had to hold myself in readiness in case they decided to strike sometime during the night. On the tenth day of my hunger strike, at a time when I had persuaded myself that I could continue indefinitely without eating, the Federal Court handed down a ruling enjoining the jail administration from holding me any

longer in isolation and under maximum security conditions. They had decided – under pressure, of course – that this unwarranted punishment was meted out to me because of my political beliefs and affiliation. The court was all but saying that Commissioner of Corrections George McGrath and Jessie Behagan, the superintendent of the Women’s House of D., were so fearful of letting the women in the jail discover what communism was that they preferred to violate my most basic constitutional rights.

This ruling came as a surprise. I hadn’t expected it to be so swift and to the point. It was an important victory, for we had firmly established that those in the Department of Corrections in New York would not have a clear course before them when they attempted to persecute the next political prisoner delivered into their hands. At the same time, however, I did not put it past the jail administration to concoct another situation which might not be solitary confinement, but which would give me an equally bad time. This thought subdued my delight at the news of the injunction.

Next destination: seventh floor, C corridor. When I arrived, there was a big shake-up going on. Women were being moved out, others were coming in. For a moment the thought struck me that they were preparing a special corridor for informers, jailer’s confidantes – and me. But as it turned out, the lawsuit had forced the administration to get on its toes – so-called “first offenders” were supposed to be jailed separately from those who had already spent time in the House of Detention. Apparently the necessary shifts were being made.

There was little time to learn my way about before all the cell gates were locked, but some of my neighbors gave me a guided tour of my 8’ × 5’ cell. Because mine was the corner cell – the one which could be easily spied on from the officer’s desk in the main hallway – it was also the smallest one on the corridor; the double bunk made it appear even smaller. The fixtures – the bed, the tiny sink, the toilet – were all arranged in a straight line, leaving no more than a width of two feet of floor at any point in the cell.

The sisters helped me improvise a curtain in front of the toilet and sink so they could not be seen from the corridor. They showed me how to use newspaper wrapped in scrap cloth to make a seat cover so the toilet could be turned into a chair to be used at the iron table that folded down from the wall in front of it. I laughed out loud at the thought of doing all my writing while sitting on the toilet stool.

Lock-in time was approaching; a sister remembered that she had forgotten to warn me about one of the dangers of night-life in the House of D. “‘Mickey’ will be trying to get into your cell tonight,” she said, and I would have to take precautionary steps to “keep him out.”

“Mickey?” Was there some maniac the jailers let loose at night to pester the women?

The sister laughingly told me she was referring to the mice which scampered about in the darkness of the corridors looking for cell doors not securely stuffed with newspapers.

It became a nightly ritual: placing meticulously folded newspapers in the little space between the gate and the floor and halfway up the gate along the wall. Despite the preventive measures we took, Mickey could always chew through the barricade in at least one cell, and we were often awakened by the shouts of a woman calling the officer to get the mouse out. One night Mickey joined me in the top bunk. When I felt him crawling around my neck, I brushed him away thinking that it was roaches. When I finally realized what it was, I called for the broom – our only weapon against him. Apparently mousetraps were too expensive, and they were not going to exterminate.

There was one good thing about Mickey. His presence reassured us that there were no rats in the vicinity. The two never share the same turf.

In a sense our daily struggles with Mickey – with all the various makeshift means devised to get the better of him – were symbolic of a larger struggle with the system. Indulging in a flight of fancy, I would sometimes imagine that all the preparations that were made at night to ward off those creatures were the barricades being erected against that larger enemy. That hundreds of women, all over the jail, politically conscious, politically committed, were acting in revolutionary unison.

That first evening, shortly after the sister had helped me stuff the gate with newspapers, an officer called out, “Lock-in time, girls. Into your cells.” As the women slid their heavy iron gates closed, loud metallic crashing noises thundered from all four corridors of the seventh floor. I could hear the same sounds at a distance echoing from throughout the jail. (In 4b, I had never been able to figure out what all this commotion was about. The first time I heard it, I thought a rebellion had been unleashed.)

The officer came around to count each prisoner, and at 9 p.m. all lights in the corridor and cells were turned off by a master switch. In the darkness, a goodnight ritual was acted out. One sister shouted goodnight to another, calling her by name. The latter, catching the identity of the voice, would shout goodnight, also calling the first sister by name. Early on, someone from my corridor called out warmly, “Good night, Angela!” But having learned hardly anyone’s name, much less to recognize their voices, I was an outsider to this ritual and could only respond with a lonesome, unsupported, though no less vigorous) “goodnight.” My call sparked off goodnight shouts to me, which came not only from my own corridor but from the others as well. I am sure that there had never been such a prolonged “saying of goodnights.” The officers did not interrupt, though silence should have prevailed long before.

NOTES

- 1 Editor's note: David Poindexter traveled with Davis during the two months she was underground. He was acquitted of federal charges of harboring a fugitive.
- 2 Editor's note: O. G. Miller was the Soledad prison guard who killed three black prisoners (W. L. Nolen, Cleveland Edwards, and Alvin Miller) on January 13, 1970. When the grand jury ruled his action was "justifiable homicide," the prisoners' riot resulted in the killing of a guard who was on duty at the time. The Soledad Brothers were charged with the murder of this guard.
- 3 Editor's note: Angela Davis first met Kendra and Franklin Alexander through her work with the Black Student Alliance. Franklin Alexander and Davis were active together in the organization, Black Panther Political Party, and it was as a result of Davis's growing political relationship with the Alexanders that she decided to join their organization, the Che-Lumumba Club of the Communist Party, USA. Kendra Alexander died in 1993, Franklin in 1994.