



# THE ANGELA Y. DAVIS READER

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# Violence Against Women and the Ongoing Challenge to Racism

Even tonight and I need to take a walk and clear  
my head about this poem about why I can't  
go out without changing my clothes my shoes  
my body posture my gender identity my age  
my status as a woman alone in the evening/  
alone on the streets/alone not being the point/  
the point being that I can't do what I want  
to do with my own body because I am the wrong  
sex the wrong age the wrong skin and  
suppose it was not here in the city but down on the  
beach/  
or far into the woods and I wanted to go  
there by myself thinking about God/or thinking  
about children or thinking about the world/all of it  
disclosed by the stars and the silence:  
I could not go and I could not think and I could not  
stay there  
alone  
as I need to be  
alone because I can't do what I want to do with my own  
body and  
who in the hell set things up  
like this  
and in France they say if the guy penetrates  
but does not ejaculate then he did not rape me  
and if after stabbing him if after screams if  
after begging the bastard and if even after smashing  
a hammer to his head if even after that if he

This essay, which is based on a talk delivered at Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, October 16, 1985, was published the same year by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, as a pamphlet in the Freedom Organizing Series. Copyright © 1985 by Angela Y. Davis. The excerpt from June Jordan's "Poem About My Rights" is used by kind permission of the author.

and his buddies fuck me after that  
then I consented and there was  
no rape because finally you understand finally  
they fucked me over because I was wrong I was  
wrong again to be me being-me where I was/wrong  
to be who I am  
which is exactly like South Africa  
penetrating into Namibia penetrating into  
Angola and does that mean I mean how do you know if  
Pretoria ejaculates what will the evidence look like the  
proof of the monster jackboot ejaculation on Blackland  
and if  
after Namibia and if after Angola and if after Zimbabwe  
and if after all of my kinsmen and women resist even to  
self-immolation of the villages and if after that  
we lose nevertheless what will the big boys say will they  
claim my consent:  
Do You Follow Me: We are the wrong people of  
the wrong skin on the wrong continent and what  
in the hell is everybody being reasonable about . . .

June Jordan, "Poem About My Rights"<sup>1</sup>

June Jordan's poem draws some striking parallels between sexual violence against individual women and neo-colonial violence against peoples and nations. I share her words with you this evening in order to suggest that we cannot grasp the true nature of sexual assault unless we consider its larger social and political context. During this week of anti-rape activities and consciousness-raising, you will be specifically focusing on sexual violence as it affects women as individuals. At the same time, you must attempt to develop an awareness of its relationship to the violence suffered, for example, by the people of Nicaragua, the people of South Africa, and indeed Afro-American people and other racially oppressed people here in the United States.

Rape, sexual extortion, battering, spousal rape, child sexual abuse and incest are among the many forms of overt sexual violence suffered by millions of women in this country. We also experience violence aimed at our reproductive choices and sexuality when we are denied access to abortion rights because federal subsidies for abortion have been withdrawn and because abortion clinics are increasingly becoming targets of terrorist bombings. Here in Tallahassee, numerous bomb threats have been made against the Feminist Women's Health Clinic and when anti-abortion demonstrators attacked the niece of one of the clinic's coordinators, it was she and others associated with the clinic who were arrested.

Poor women, and specifically women of color, continue to be targets of sterilization abuse. Innumerable women injure their bodies with the Dalkon

shield and other potentially fatal methods of birth control, while differently abled women are assumed to be non-sexual and to therefore have no special birth control needs. Reproductive rights, however, involve more than access to abortions and safe birth control methods. They encompass, for example, the right of lesbians to reproduce outside of the confines of heterosexual relationships.

These particular manifestations of violence against women are situated on a larger continuum of systematic and equally violent assaults on women's economic and political rights, especially the rights of women of color and their white working-class sisters. The dreadful rape epidemic of our times, which has become so widespread that one out of every three women in this country can expect to be raped at some point during her life, directly reflects the deteriorating economic and social status of women today. Moreover, this rising violence against women is related to domestic racial violence as well as to global imperialist aggression. In fact, the conduct of the Reagan administration over the last four and a half years makes clear the fact that it is not only the most sexist government – the only one, for example, to actively oppose the Equal Rights Amendment at the same time that it supports the sexist and homophobic Family Life Amendment; it is not only the most racist government, persistently attempting to dismantle thirty years of gains by the civil rights movement; but it is also by far the most fiercely warmongering government of this century. Indeed for the first time in the history of humankind, we face the very real threat of global nuclear omnicide.

But let us focus more sharply on the issue of sexual assaults against women and our challenge to this misogynist violence. The contemporary anti-rape movement began to take shape during the early 1970s, shortly after the emergence of the women's liberation movement. Along with the campaign to decriminalize abortion, the anti-rape movement proved to be the most dramatic activist mass movement associated with the fight for women's freedom. In January of 1971, the New York Radical Feminists organized a Rape Speak-Out which, for the first time in history, provided large numbers for women with a forum in which to publicly relate their often terrifying individual experiences of rape.<sup>2</sup> Also in 1971, women in Berkeley responded to the painfully discriminatory treatment received by rape survivors in police departments, hospitals, and the courts by organizing a community-based 24-hour crisis line known as Bay Area Women Against Rape. This Crisis Center was the model for countless other similar institutions which arose throughout the country during the 1970s. It is still operating today, almost fifteen years later.

In 1971, Susan Griffin published an historic article in *Ramparts* magazine entitled "Rape: The All American Crime."<sup>3</sup> Her article opened with these words:

I have never been free of the fear of rape. From a very early age I, like most women, have thought of rape as part of my natural environment – something to be feared and prayed against like fire or lightning. I never asked why men raped; I simply thought it one of the many mysteries of human nature.

At the age of eight . . . my grandmother took me to the back of the house where the men wouldn't hear, and told me that strange men wanted to do harm to little girls. I learned not to walk on dark streets, not to talk to strangers or get into strange cars, to lock doors, and to be modest. She never explained why a man would want to harm a little girl, and I never asked.

If I thought for a while that my grandmother's fears were imaginary, the illusion was brief. That year, on the way home from school, a schoolmate a few years older than I tried to rape me. Later in an obscure aisle of the local library (while I was reading *Freddy the Pig*) I turned to discover a man exposing himself. Then, the friendly man around the corner was arrested for child molesting.

Virtually all of us have had one or another of these childhood experiences. I recall when I was an elementary school student – I must have been about ten years old – a girlfriend of mine who lived around the corner suddenly disappeared for a week or so. During her absence from school, there were embarrassed whispers that she had been raped. When she returned, she never mentioned the reason for her absence and no one dared attempt to break through her shroud of silence. I remember distinctly that all of the hushed conversations behind her back assumed that my friend had done something terribly wrong, and she walked around with a mysterious aura of immorality surrounding her for the rest of the time we spent in elementary school. More than any of the other girls, she was the target of the boys' sexual jeers. Assuming that she had transgressed against the moral standards of our community, no one ventured to argue that she was the tragic victim of a crime, which should never have gone uninvestigated and unpunished.

The anti-rape movement of the early seventies challenged many of the prevalent myths regarding rape. For example, women militantly refuted the myth that the rape victim is morally responsible for the crime committed against her – a myth which is based upon the notion that women have control over whether or not their bodies are violated during the act of rape. Defense attorneys sometimes attempted to demonstrate the supposed impossibility of rape by asking witnesses to insert a phallic object into a receptacle which was being rapidly moved from one point to another. Oleta Abrams, one of the co-founders of Bay Area Women Against Rape, has related an anecdote which clearly reveals the most probable power relations in an actual rape incident. When a policeman asked a woman to insert his billy club into a cup which he continually maneuvered around, the woman

simply took the club and struck him on the shoulder causing him to drop the cup, into which she easily inserted the billy club.<sup>4</sup>

Another widespread myth is that if a woman does not resist, she is implicitly inviting the violation of her body. Compare this assumption with those concerning the criminal violation of property. Is a businessman asked to resist the encroachment of a robber in order to guarantee that his property rights will be protected by the courts? Even today, the persisting mystification of rape causes it to be perceived as a victim-precipitated crime, as illustrated by the 1977 ruling of a Wisconsin judge who found a fifteen-year-old male's rape of a teenager, who was wearing a loose shirt, Levi's and tennis shoes, to be a "normal" reaction to the "provocative" dress of the young woman.

Although there is a pervasive fear among most women of being raped, at the same time, many women feel that it cannot really happen to them. Yet *one* out of *three* women will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime, and *one* out of *four* girls will be raped before the age of eighteen. Despite these startling statistics, there is only a 4-percent conviction rate of rapists – and these convictions only reflect the minute percentage of rapes that are actually reported.

Rape happens anytime, anywhere, to females of all ages – from infants of four months to women over ninety years old, although the single largest group of rape survivors is composed of adolescent girls between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. Rape happens to women of all races and all classes, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Although most of us tend to visualize rape episodes as sudden, unanticipated attacks by total strangers, most victims actually know their rapists and, in fact, more than half of all rapes occur in the home of either the survivor or the offender. Furthermore, it is often assumed that rape is an act of lust and that, consequently, rapists are men who cannot control their sexual desire. The truth, though, is that most rapists do not impulsively rape in order to satisfy an uncontrollable sexual passion. Instead, men's motives for rape often arise from their socially imposed need to exercise power and control over women through the use of violence. Most rapists indeed are not psychopaths, as we are led to believe by typical media portrayals of men who commit crimes of sexual violence. To the contrary, the overwhelming majority of rapists would be considered "normal" according to prevailing social standards of male normality.

Certainly, the most insidious myth about rape is that it is most likely to be committed by a black man. As a direct consequence of rampant racism, white women are socialized to harbor far more fear that they will be raped by a black man than by a white man. In actuality, however, as a direct result of the fact that white men compose a larger proportion of the population, many more rapes are committed by white men than by black men. But as

a consequence of this country's history of ubiquitous racism in law enforcement, there is a disproportionately large number of black men in prison on the basis of rape convictions. The myth of the black rapist renders people oblivious to the realities of rape and to the fact, for example, that over 90 percent of all rapes are intra-racial rather than inter-racial. Moreover, as pointed out in studies on sexual assault – and as was indeed the case during the era of slavery – proportionately more white men rape black women than black men rape white women. Nonetheless, the average white woman in this country maintains a far greater suspicion of black men than of white men as potential rapists. These distorted social attitudes, which are shaped by prevailing racist ideas, constitute an enormous obstacle to the development of a movement which can win victories in the struggle against rape.

If we examine some of the reasons why it has been such an arduous process to lay the foundation for an effective multiracial anti-rape movement, the influence of the myth of the black rapist plays a pivotal role. During the early seventies, when the anti-rape campaign was in its infancy, the presence of Afro-American women in that movement was a rarity. This no doubt was in part attributable to the relatively low level of awareness regarding the interconnectedness of racism and sexism in general among the white women who initiated the women's liberation movement. At the same time, anti-rape activists failed to develop an understanding of the degree to which rape and the racist use of the fraudulent rape charge are historically inseparable. If, throughout our history in this country, the rape of black women by white men has constituted a political weapon of terror, then the flip side of the coin has been the frame-up rape charge directed at black men. Thousands of terroristic lynchings have been justified by conjuring up the myth of the black rapist.

Since much of the early activism against rape was focused on delivering rapists into the hands of the judicial system, Afro-American women were understandably reluctant to become involved with a movement which might well lead to further repressive assaults on their families and their communities. Yet, at the same time, black women were and continue to be sorely in need of an anti-rape movement, since we comprise a disproportionately large number of rape survivors. It is all the more ironic that black women were absent from the contemporary anti-rape movement during its early days, since anti-rape activism actually has a long history in the black community. Probably the first movement to launch a frontal challenge to sexual violence was the Black Women's Club Movement, which originated in the late 1890s as an outgrowth of the anti-lynching activities of women like Ida B. Wells.<sup>5</sup> Today, organizations such as the National Black Women's Health Project in Atlanta are conducting organizing and educational campaigns around such issues as rape and sterilization abuse.

Numerous women of color have been active in organizing against domestic violence on both the local and national level and have provided essential movement leadership, especially in the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence and its member coalitions. Increasingly, women of color are involved in working on sexual assault, often in projects based in Third World communities.

Certainly any woman can understand the intense emotional anger which characterized the first phase of the anti-rape campaign. Throughout all of history, the judicial system and society in general had not even acknowledged women as legitimate victims of a crime if the crime committed against them was rape. Much of women's cumulative rage about rape was understandably aimed at men. When a feminist theoretical foundation for the campaign began to develop, however, the theories tended to simply bolster and legitimize anti-male anger by defining rape as an inevitable product of masculine nature. Masculinity was understood not so much as it has come to be, as socially defined, especially under conditions of capitalism, but rather as an immutable, biologically and psychologically determined product of men's inherent nature.

These theories most often did not take into account the class and racial components of many rapes suffered by working-class women and women of color. In fact, the failure of the anti-rape movement of the early seventies to develop an analysis of rape which acknowledged the social conditions that foster sexual violence as well as the centrality of racism in determining those social conditions, resulted in the initial reluctance of black, Latina, Native American, and Asian-American women to associate themselves with that movement. Throughout Afro-American women's economic history in this country, for example, sexual abuse has been perceived as an occupational hazard. In slavery, black women's bodies were considered to be accessible at all times to the slave-master as well as to his surrogates. In "freedom," the job most frequently open to black women was domestic work, and it was the case until the late 1950s that the majority of black women working outside the home were domestic workers. It has been amply documented that as maids and washerwomen, black women were repeatedly the victims of sexual assault committed by the white men in the families for which they worked.

Sexual harassment and sexual extortion are still occupational hazards for working women of *all* racial backgrounds. In a survey conducted by *Redbook* in 1976, 90 percent of the 9,000 respondents reported that they had encountered sexual harassment on the job.<sup>6</sup> According to Julia and Herman Schwendinger's book *Rape and Inequality*, one congresswoman discovered that a certain congressman was asking prospective women employees whether they engaged in oral sex, as if this were a requirement for the job.<sup>7</sup>

If we assume that rape is simply a by-product of maleness, a result of men's anatomical construction or of an immutable male psychological constitution, then how do we explain that the countries which are now experiencing an epidemic of rape are precisely those advanced capitalist countries which face severe economic and social crises and are saturated with violence on all levels? Do men rape because they are men, or are they socialized by their own economic, social, and political oppression – as well as by the overall level of social violence in the country in question – to inflict sexual violence on women?

Sexual violence often flows directly from official policy. In Vietnam, as Arlene Eisen has pointed out in her book *Women in Vietnam*, US soldiers often received instructions for their search and destroy missions which involved “searching” Vietnamese women's vaginas with their penises.<sup>8</sup> The following observation has been made about sexual violence under the conditions of fascist dictatorship in Chile:

The tortures of women included the agony of scorching their nipples and genitals, the blind terror of applying shock treatments to all parts of their bodies, and, of course gang rape. An unknown number of women have been raped; some of them pregnant after rape have been refused abortions. Women have had insects forced up their vaginas; pregnant women have been beaten with rifle butts until they have aborted.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, rape is frequently a component of torture inflicted on women political prisoners by fascist governments and counter-revolutionary forces. In the history of our own country, the Ku Klux Klan and other racist groups have used rape as a weapon of political terror.

I want to suggest to you that rape bears a direct relationship to all of the existing power structures in a given society. This relationship is not a simple mechanical one, but rather involves complex structures reflecting the complex interconnectedness of race, gender, and class oppression which characterize that society. If we do not attempt to understand the nature of sexual violence as it relates to racial, class, and governmental violence and power, we cannot even begin to develop strategies which will allow us to eventually purge our society of the oppressiveness of rape.

In our attempt to understand rape, it would be a grievous mistake for us to stop at the level of analyzing individual cases or even at the level of male psychology. The only logical strategies for the elimination of rape which could follow from this type of analysis would involve the reliance on repression to punish rapists. But as the use of the repressive paraphernalia of the state has generally demonstrated, crimes are seldom deterred as a result of the punishment received by those who are caught committing them. Thus for each punished rapist, how many more would be lurking in

our neighborhoods, indeed in our workplaces and even in our homes? This is not to argue that those men who commit rape should go unpunished, but rather that punishment alone will not stem the tide of the omnipresent sexual violence in our country.

As I mentioned earlier, the experience of the seventies demonstrates that anti-rape strategies that depend primarily on law enforcement agencies will continue to alienate many women of color. Indeed the experience of black women has been that the very same white policeman who would supposedly protect them from rape, will sometimes go so far as to rape black women in their custody. Ann Braden, a veteran civil rights organizer, has referred to such conduct by southern white policemen who arrested black women activists during the civil rights struggle and subsequently raped them. I recall an experience I had as a graduate student in San Diego when a friend and I found a young black woman, beaten and bloody, on the shoulder of the freeway. The story she told us was horrifying. She had been raped by several white men and dropped by the side of the road. When the police found her, they too raped her and left her on the freeway barely conscious. Because such experiences are by no means exceptional, black women have found it difficult to accept policemen as the enforcers of anti-rape measures.

Moreover, police forces often utilize tactics ostensibly designed to capture rapists which will simultaneously augment their arsenal of racist repression. During the 1970s, a rapist was terrorizing the Berkeley community. He initially attacked black women – scores and scores of them. Hundreds of rapes in the area were attributed to “Stinky,” as he was called. However, it was not until he began to rape white women, and specifically when he raped a well-known black woman television newscaster, that the police began to turn their attention to the case. They released a description of him so general that it fit at least a third of the black men in the area, and countless black men who obviously had nothing to do with the Stinky rapes were arrested simply because they were black. Moreover, Berkeley police proposed to the city council a strategy to capture Stinky which involved hiring more police, acquiring helicopters and other aircraft, and using tracking and attack dogs. The police department had been attempting to get approval for the use of dogs since the student movement of the sixties, but had failed because of community opposition. They seized a situation which had caused so many women to be terror stricken, in order to implement their repressive, racist agenda. Unfortunately, the anti-rape movement, which at that time was almost exclusively white, did not perceive the hidden agenda of the police force and agreed to cooperate with the proposed strategy. Thus, they unwittingly became collaborators in a plan which would inevitably bring increased racist assaults on Berkeley’s black community.

The anti-rape movement today must not ignore these looming pitfalls. Nor can it focus exclusively on strategies such as rape crisis centers which, as important as they might be, treat only the effects and leave the cause of the crime untouched. The very same social conditions which spawn racist violence – the same social conditions which encourage attacks on workers, and the political posture which justifies US intervention in Central America and aid to the apartheid government in South Africa – are the same forces which encourage sexual violence. Thus, sexual violence can never be completely eradicated until we have succeeded in effecting a whole range of radical social transformations in our country.

In conclusion, I want to direct your attention to the connections we must establish between our efforts to ensure the safety of women and our concern for the safety of this planet. It is no coincidence that the explosion of sexual violence in this country takes place at a time when the United States government has developed the means with which to annihilate human life itself. It is no accident that a government which will be spending one billion dollars a day on weapons next year, forty-one million dollars a minute on the most devastating instruments of violence human history has ever known, also encourages the proliferation of violence on all levels of society, including sexual attacks on women. Moreover, consider that \$200 million, just five hours of military spending, could provide annual support for 1,600 rape crisis centers and battered women's shelters.

Let us now move forward in our battle to eliminate the horrendous violence done to women in our society by realizing that we will never get past the first step if we do not recognize the issue of rape within its context, as one element in a complex web of women's oppression. And the systematic oppression of women in our society cannot be accurately evaluated except as it is connected to racism and class exploitation at home and imperialist aggression and the potential nuclear holocaust which menace the entire globe.

The anti-rape movement should attempt to establish closer ties not only to the campaigns for women's economic and political rights, but also to labor struggles wherever they unfold. At this moment, Chicana and Mexicana women and men are out on strike against the canneries in Watsonville, California. Anti-rape and other feminist activists should hasten to join them on the picket line.

If we are militant activists challenging violence against women, we must also see ourselves as fearless fighters against police violence, and in passionate solidarity with the racially and nationally oppressed people who are its main targets. We must defend, for example, the memory of Eleanor Bumpurs, the sixty-seven-year-old black woman from the Bronx who was murdered in 1984 by New York Housing Authority policemen because she dared resist an attempted eviction.

The banners and voices we raise against rape must also be raised against racist and anti-Semitic Ku Klux Klan violence. And they must be raised in defense of political prisoners like Leonard Peltier, the American Indian leader, and Johnny Imani Harris, the black prison activist who presently faces the death penalty in Alabama.

If we aspire to eventually eradicate sexual violence, we must also call for the immediate freedom of all political prisoners. Our sisters and brothers in Nicaragua and El Salvador need our solidarity, as do our Palestinian friends who are fighting for their land and dignity. And certainly, we cannot forget our Iranian sisters who are attempting to complete the democratic revolution which has been violently stifled by Khomeini's Islamic Republic.

To recognize the larger socio-political context of the contemporary epidemic of sexist violence does not, however, require that we ignore the specific and concrete necessity for the ongoing campaign against rape. Those of you whose political activism is primarily channeled into this movement are involved in a cause which has urgent implications for all women. This battle must be waged quite concretely on all of its myriad fronts. As you further shape the theoretical foundation of this movement and as you implement practical tasks, remind yourselves as often as possible that even as individual victories are claimed, the ultimate elimination of sexist violence will depend on our ability to build a new and revolutionary global order, in which every form of oppression and violence against humankind is obliterated.

## NOTES

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- 5 Cf. Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter* (New York: Morrow, 1984), chapter 6.
- 6 Schwendinger and Schwendinger, *Rape and Inequality*, 50.
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- 8 Arlene Eisen, *Women in Vietnam* (San Francisco: People's Press, 1975), 62.
- 9 Schwendinger and Schwendinger, *Rape and Inequality*, 203.