

Angela Davis:

Writing a Woman's Political Life

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Hist 212: Emergence of the Modern Woman

Professor Stevens

“I was not anxious to write this book,”¹ Angela Davis writes in the Preface of her Autobiography. She was convinced, however, to begin writing the book while in jail awaiting trial in 1971. In the work, Davis expounds upon her life, however she defines herself and places particular emphasis on her role as a black, politically-active female. Published in 1974, the book only covers the first thirty years of her life, but in that time she experienced and accomplished a great deal.

Davis’ autobiography offers a unique perspective on the Civil Rights movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s in that it is written by a woman. According to Carolyn Heilbrun, it is difficult, if not impossible, to represent a woman’s life in literature. “There is no ‘objective’ or universal tone in literature, for however long we have been told there is. There is only the white, middle-class, male tone.”² In light of this, the construction of Davis’ work allows for a better understanding of her female character.

While it seems that a lot of Heilbrun’s work does not apply to Davis—a modern, political figure “born into the current women’s movement and [who] escaped the usual rhythms of the once traditional female existence”³—certain conceptions about how a woman’s story is written definitely apply.⁴

In addition to this, it is important to also view Angela Davis’ autobiography as a political work. “When I decided to write the book after all, it was because I had come to envision it as a *political* autobiography that emphasized the people, the events and the forces in my life that propelled me to my present commitment,”⁵ Davis wrote. Margo Perkins examines Davis’ autobiography in this context in *Autobiography as Activism*:

¹ Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: International Publishers, 1988), xv.

² Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman’s Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 40.

³ Heilbrun, 124.

⁴ Carolyn Heilbrun’s book deals extensively with women born prior to well before the 1940s. Additionally, many of these women are white. Contexts such as marriage and children do not apply to Davis’ work as she is single; issues that are prevalent in her life such as the assumption of a leadership role are also not dealt with directly. Heilbrun’s work can, however, be qualified through such ideas as the development and use of her voice, her single status, the structure of her life, and her relationships with other women,

⁵ Davis, xvi.

Three Black Women of the Sixties, examining the influence of politics on Davis and two other women involved in the Civil Rights movement. This is the context to which Davis herself attributes her autobiography; it is important that in analyzing the work it not be overlooked.

Heilbrun contends that “the male construct...depends on women’s silence and absence, so that when women write they do not represent themselves as women.”⁶ This is true, to an extent, about Angela Davis. She is a woman and claims her femininity often very directly,⁷ although this is not her main construct; more often Davis refers to her race as her primary descriptor.

Angela Davis’ development of a public voice, however, is unique for a woman. She becomes a prominent spokeswoman for various causes, especially Civil Rights and the cases of those whom she considers to be political prisoners such as the Soledad Brothers. In doing so, she is forced to buy into male language in a sense, however Davis becomes a female public figurehead; when people see her speak at a rally or hear of her exploits on the news, they are referencing a visibly female figure.

Similarly, Heilbrun contends that “anonymity eases women’s pains, alleviates anxiety about the appropriateness of gender.”⁸ As a public figure, Davis did not have this anonymity. During the conflict over her teaching position at the University of California at Los Angeles, Davis received numerous threatening letters and calls daily.⁹ She was not anonymous by any means; indeed had she not so consistently drawn attention, Davis

⁶ Heilbrun, 41.

⁷ Davis describes herself as a “heroine,” “sister” and “woman” throughout the text of her Autobiography, as well as other feminine terms. Her experiences in Women’s jails also attest to her classification of herself as a woman. While Heilbrun’s contention is made under the pretext that a woman has to cast herself differently, despite how she refers to herself, the constant barrage of female terms rather firmly establishes Ms. Davis’ gender.

⁸ Davis, 40.

⁹ Davis, 219-220.

most likely would not have faced similar challenges. Instead by becoming such a public figure, Ms. Davis became a target of both support and threats.¹⁰

While this developed out of Davis' role as a political figure and not out of her role as a woman, she also faced challenges speaking and acting as a woman in the public sphere. Angela had been fundamental in turning the Black Panther Political Party (BPPP) into the west-coast branch of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1968,¹¹ however after only a few months the women of the organization came under attack by several of the male leaders. They believed the three women were trying to take over SNCC and, in doing so, actually worked against the black males as it cast them as weak and emasculated. "The brothers opposing us leaned heavily on the male supremacist trends which were winding their way through the movement,"¹² Davis wrote. As a woman she was cast aside; her voice was too strong for the men of the SNCC to handle. By not remaining silent and anonymous, Davis posed a threat to these men.

When Davis went to trial for conspiracy, kidnapping and murder, the prosecutor attempted to position his case so as to convince the jury that she had committed a crime of passion; that her love for George Jackson had led her to work with his younger brother Jonathan in an attempt to free George, a Soledad brother.¹³ Davis, however, led the life of a single woman. Her relationship with George, however, is clearly misconstrued. Though

¹⁰ When I began reading *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*, which opens with the first leg of her time spent in jail, I was amazed by the protests that were organized. From the street outside of her cell, Davis could hear chants of "Free Angela Davis" and "Free All Political Prisoners," I was amazed. Who was this woman to garner such attention? What made her different and distinctive from the rest of the inmates? How did the other women feel that she gained such attention? As I read on, I realized that this is all a direct relation to her role as a prominent leader in the black community. She received such attention because she was a public figure, unlike the other women who were primarily private figures.

¹¹ The BPPP had clashed with the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP) which is known today for its often violent tactics. James Forman of the SNCC encouraged the BPPP to form the west-coast chapter of the SNCC, thereby diffusing what had developed into a threatening controversy over the name "Black Panther Party." See *Autobiography*, 164-181 for more information.

¹² Davis, 182.

¹³ Davis, 359.

Davis rather freely offers the expression “I love you,” she does so as a comrade in the fight against social injustice.¹⁴ She is not tied down to the old-fashioned idea of being an object of a man’s affection.¹⁵

Throughout Davis’ autobiography she writes of her close relationships with various women from her own sister Fania to Margaret Burnham, a member of her legal team and old friend, to Kendra Alexander, a fellow member of the Che-Lumumba club. Her expression of her relationship with Margaret is typical of those she forms with the others: “Margaret and I already had established that deep trust, for we loved each other as sisters.”¹⁶ This closeness is particularly evident in how Angela interacts with the women. She is forced to depend on them while being threatened and later imprisoned; at the same time, however, Davis is extremely emotionally available to help out in the case of an emergency, such as when Fania’s husband was shot by police.¹⁷

“In the old style ‘autobiography,’ women never told of their love for other women,”¹⁸ Heilbrun wrote. Davis openly expresses that affection for her close female friends; her autobiography is written in a newer style; it is not surprising that she has this affection toward her female friends. Heilbrun also contributes that this love joins women together, drawing them to think of a collective “we.” Davis’ experiences transitioning from solitary confinement to the general population of several jails exemplifies this. Even

¹⁴ Davis, 375. Indeed, the nature of Davis’ autobiography as a political work also keeps characters at a distant. It certainly more than presumable that Davis did not have a romantic interest in George Jackson, however she also kept some details of her personal life out of the work. According to Margo Perkins, “[w]ithin the genre of political autobiography, there is little room for activists’ exposure of their interior lives, since focus on aspects of the struggle always take precedence” (13). This gives autobiographers such as Davis the freedom to retail personal details; romantic relationships that Davis may have indeed had are most likely to not appear in the text, for fear that they may romanticize or draw attention away from the struggle for which Davis fought so hard.

¹⁵ Heilbrun, 84.

¹⁶ Davis, 288.

¹⁷ Davis, 224.

¹⁸ Heilbrun, 72.

when she couldn't make the transition, the women of the general population sent her long "kites" or hidden notes, showing their support for her.¹⁹

The structure of Ms. Davis' life is unique; it is inspired by numerous experiences from her upbringing on "Dynamite Hill" to her experiences studying philosophy. Though her autobiography is only complete through age 30, it does not follow the traditional life pattern that Heilbrun discusses in her book of a marriage or otherwise erotic plot.²⁰

Instead she seeks to follow the traditional male quest plot, ultimately seeking social justice through the abolition of racial discrimination and political repression. Heilbrun suggests that there is some event transforms the life of a woman who seeks this plot; subconsciously she is changed and as a result pursues a different storyline to her life.²¹ For Davis, this life-changing event could be any of a number of factors that seem to combine to create her political character. She pursues communism as a means to an end, coming to communism through her love of Marx. This outgrowth of political activism ultimately seemed to define Davis' life. Inherently, this is quite a drastic departure from the traditional marriage plotline often forced upon women; Davis is not a traditional woman in this regard.

In addition to all of this, however, it is important to view Angela Davis' autobiography through a political lens. Carolyn Heilbrun does not offer this framework; indeed, few of the women that she analyzes take on political work, often turning to writing as their way of addressing the public sphere. Davis is, as has already been mentioned, not a typical example of most women throughout history.

¹⁹ Davis, 303.

²⁰ Heilbrun, 48.

²¹ Ibid.

Margo Perkins does, however, offer this model of a political work with which to view Davis' autobiography. She compares the work of Davis to that of Assata Shakur and Elaine Brown who are the only other women from the movement to also wrote full-length autobiographies. Necessarily there is a political nature to all three works. Davis clearly offers herself as an example; in the Preface she directly states that she only chose to write the work when she came to the realization that others might learn from her commitments, i.e. she might turn others to the communist or black movement's cause. These are certainly radical historical texts; however Davis does define the work (hers, in particular) as *political*.²² “[It] becomes a particularly useful way of naming the distinction between activists’ texts like her and the larger body of twentieth-century African-American autobiography.”²³

The texts offer a new, counter history, attempting to tell what truly happened, especially to them. The political autobiography, especially when released when the atmosphere is charged from, can help to win over public support to the movement behind each woman. “[P]olitical autobiography is in major part concerned with redefining criminality,”²⁴ according to Perkins. Davis, like Shakur, utilizes her autobiography as a defense tool, explaining and justifying her actions. A context is formed around the event; the author shares her side of the story which is not the common societal version.

“Like other writers of resistance narratives, Davis, Shakur, and Brown fashion autobiographies that are extensions of their political work.”²⁵ This connection to similar political work throughout black history offers them validation as part of the collective

²² Davis, xvi.

²³ Margo V. Perkins. *Activism as Autobiography: Three Black Women in the Sixties*. (Jackson, MI: University of Mississippi, 2000), 23.

²⁴ Perkins, 18.

²⁵ Perkins, 70.

black struggle over time. Davis rewrites the history that surrounds her immediately, just as Frederick Douglass and others have done for more than a century; she disrupts the status quo that surrounds her by producing a radical work.²⁶

It is clearly evident that Davis has hopes for her autobiography beyond the retelling of her life, however. She hopes to speak for those who do not have voices by telling her story.²⁷ This motive perpetuates itself even in Davis' actions in her autobiography. She helps to organize a bail coalition in the Women's House of Detention, offering a voice for those who ordinarily might not have one.²⁸ Instead, she empowers them by bringing awareness to the issue; as Davis accomplished this with the House of Detention bail fund, so to does she hope to bring attention to the voiceless through the movement and her autobiography.

Angela Davis brings a distinctive perspective to light with her autobiography. It is unique as an example from such a contemporary woman, furthermore as a non-hegemonic counter history of the Civil Rights movement. To best understand the work, it must be placed into this context and then broken apart. Its function ought to be seen as a product of its construction; through this construction the essential nuances and perspectives can be discovered.

Carolyn Heilbrun's lens set forth in *Writing a Woman's Life* does a fairly adequate job of laying some framework from which one may start to break down the construction of Davis' autobiography. It must be understood as written by a woman; in order to do so certain factors such as the development of her voice and her relationship with other women are to be examined.

²⁶ Perkins, 22.

²⁷ Perkins, 7.

²⁸ Davis, 64.

Beyond this, however, Heilbrun's model falls short. In specifically analyzing Angela Davis' autobiography, it is important to view it as a political work. This conception brings together both the historical circumstances of her authorship, as well as one of her primary motivations in life. While the Heilbrun model deals with the author as a woman, this Perkins model offers a lens through which to view how Davis' saw her life and societal impact. Her own intentions are clearest through this model; it qualifies for the very reason that this is perhaps as close as one can come to best understanding what Davis defines as her very clear motivations for authoring the work. She wants people to learn from her book and benefit the movement;²⁹ Perkins allows for the handling of such motives through her model.

²⁹ Davis, xvi.