

# Intersectionality: An Analysis of Angela Davis's Contributions to Feminist Discourse in 'Women, Race and Class'

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**Intersectionality: An Analysis of Angela Davis's Contributions to  
Feminist Discourse in *'Women, Race and Class'***

Undergraduate thesis

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SVEUČILIŠTE U RIJECI  
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**Intersectionality: An Analysis of Angela Davis' Contributions to  
Feminist Discourse in *'Women, Race and Class'***

Završni rad

Preddiplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti/njemačkog jezika i  
književnosti

Mentorica: doc. dr. sc. Tatjana Vukelić

Rijeka, 24. kolovoza 2024.

Izjavljujem da sam ovaj završni rad napisala samostalno, svojim znanjem te uz pomoć navedene literature.

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Potpis

*Zahvala:*

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**Summary and key words:**

Born in 1944 in Birmingham, Alabama, Angela Davis was raised in a segregated environment which greatly influenced her fight against economic, gender, as well as racial injustices. During her early life she witnessed the evolution of The Civil Rights Movement and, due to experiencing and seeing oppression and racial injustice firsthand, later herself became a significant part of it. Davis was academically ambitious as she completed her studies abroad and at prestigious universities such as Brandeis University, eventually earning a doctorate in philosophy.

She is best known for her radical activism. Her early political participation includes joining the youth group Advance, and after that eventually the Communist Party as well as the Black Panther Party. While working with these parties she often fought for wrongly imprisoned or falsely accused black people which led to her imprisonment. She was also listed as one of the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Fugitives in 1970.

Davis often mentions *The Communist Manifesto* as a work which greatly influenced her political opinions and activism. She condemns inaction and urges people to fight for their rights and equality. During her life, she wrote many important works, one of which is *Women, Race and Class*, a book that explores intersectionality, especially concerning Black women. Due to her being an intersectional feminist, her ideas apply to everyone no matter of their gender, sexual orientation, social status, race, and physical abilities. Angela Davis became a symbol of resistance after her famous arrest and trial, winning the sympathy of many activists and intellectuals around the world. She continues to be a vocal advocate for prison abolition. According to her, the system is not serving its purpose and is doing harm to people.

**Key words:** intersectionality, Black feminism, racism, activism, social disparities

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## 1.Introduction

Oppression continues to be a pervasive, persistent and complicated struggle for numerous individuals even today. Meaning that systemic inequalities, discrimination, and social injustices still continue to marginalize many communities. The need for taking action against oppression is still very high even though some may consider it a part of the past.

What brings light to these issues is intersectionality. Intersectionality is a critical framework for understanding this multilayered and complicated nature of oppression. Angela Yvonne Davis is greatly responsible for shaping the concept of intersectionality throughout her contributions to literature and activism, but especially through her work *Women, Race, and Class*. In this book, she offers an analysis of how race, gender, and class all intersect and in this way shape the experiences of marginalized groups.

Davis is also known for fighting injustice through activism. Ever since she became politically active in the 1960s by joining the Black Panther Political Party and an all-black branch of the Communist Party, she was a very prominent person regarding black feminism and activism.

The aim of this thesis is to explore Davis's life, activism and the influential role which she played in advancing Black feminist discourse through this intersectional approach. By examining the historical context and some of the key arguments presented in *Women, Race, and Class*, this thesis will describe how Davis's insights have reshaped feminist theory.

Davis's early life, events and people who influenced her development will firstly be explored. After that, intersectionality will be defined and examined, and her work *Women, Race and Class* analyzed. Davis's activism and the influence that she had on the world will then be described. What is to be looked into lastly, is the contemporary applications of Davis's ideas.

## 2. Angela Davis's Early Life and Influences

Angela Davis is not only a scholar and an activist, but a revolutionary as well. Her work has significantly influenced social justice, civil rights and modern feminism. Her life is marked by relentless advocacy against racial, gender, and economic inequalities combined. This part of the thesis aims to explore different dimensions and parts of Davis's life, exploring her early life, family relationships, persons and events which influenced her. By examining the latter, hopefully a better sense of understanding of Davis's background; political, economic, familial, etc. will be provided.

Angela Davis was born in Birmingham, Alabama, on January 26, 1944. And, as Davis explains in her autobiography<sup>1</sup>, she grew up in a segregated society, which would forever alter and leave a strong mark on her understanding of the world.

In 1948, Angela and her family moved out of the projects in Birmingham, Alabama, to a large wooden house on Center Street. They were the first black family in that area, and the white residents believed they were the beginning of a large influx of other black families. When Davis was just four years old, she had noticed that the people across the street were somehow different, though she couldn't yet understand that it was due to their light skin color. What she had noticed differentiated them from their former neighbors in the projects, was that these people were frowning, stood a hundred feet away glaring, and ignored their greetings. Soon after the family had moved in, the white residents established a boundary line along the street. As long as the family stayed on their side of the line, they would be left in peace. Davis's family felt the need to secretly keep weapons. Not long after they had moved to the hill, the white residents began leaving the neighborhood, and black families started to move in.<sup>2</sup>

In her autobiography<sup>3</sup>, Davis also describes how one evening in the spring of 1949, she was washing her shoelaces for Sunday School, when a loud explosion shook the entire house, even causing medicine bottles to fall and shatter. She then explains how crowds of enraged Black people climbed the hill, stood on "their" side, and stared together at the destroyed home of their neighbors,

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<sup>1</sup> Davis, A.Y. (2023) *Angela Y. Davis, An Autobiography*. Dublin: Penguin Books. (p.79)

<sup>2</sup> Davis, A.Y. (2023) *Angela Y. Davis, An Autobiography*. Dublin: Penguin Books. (p.79-81)

<sup>3</sup> Davis, A.Y. (2023) *Angela Y. Davis, An Autobiography*. Dublin: Penguin Books. (p. 80-81)



who were Black. Their home had been bombed. Because of how frequently these types of bombings occurred at the time, Davis's neighborhood quickly earned the nickname "Dynamite Hill."

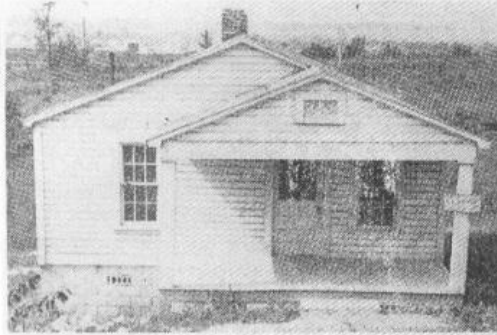
During this period bombings were recurring all over America, and houses of Black people were not the only target. Black schools and churches were being bombed frequently as well. However, the number of the attacks specifically in Birmingham was so significant that it was sometimes referred to as "Bombingham."<sup>4</sup> Detectives would time and time again close investigations related to the bombings of Black properties, reason being that their investigation "failed to reveal sufficient evidence to make an arrest", never providing justice for the victims.

Angela Davis's early life shows how the racism and violence shaped her drive to fight injustice. Growing up in a segregated and hostile environment surely helped to strengthen her will for resistance. She used her trauma as motivation for fighting against oppression. This is one of the reasons why she is considered one of the most resilient and influential figures in the struggle for civil rights.

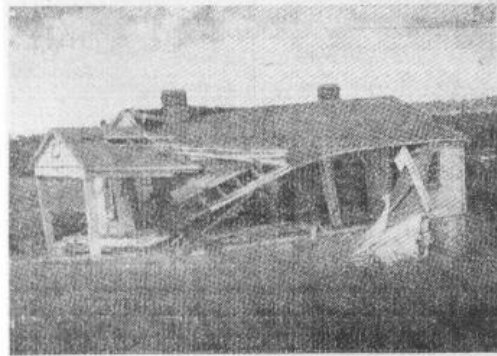
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<sup>4</sup> Eskew, G. T. (1997). "*Bombingham*": *Black Protest in Postwar Birmingham, Alabama*. *The Historian* (p.371, 377)

# SHATTERING BLAST SPLINTERS 11th COURT RESIDENCE MON.



(1.) The un-lived-in home of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Matthews, located at 120 Eleventh Court North before it was bombed into match wood Monday night, August 18, around 11 p.m.



(2.) The wrecked, six-room, framed dwelling valued at around \$5,000.00. Six sticks of dynamite did it. The house was blown to bits except for the foundation and the walls. KKK notes have threatened the Matthews, he house was built in a so-called "white only" community. However U. S. Judge Clarence Mullins on July 31 kicked that zoning law out. Police—city and county—say they can't find the dynamiters, as yet.

Mr. Matthews, a coal miner, lives at 632 First Court North.

Six sticks of dynamite left the six-room, newly built, unoccupied home of Samuel and Mrs. Eastie Mae Matthews, located at 120 11th Court, in ruins Monday night.

The blowing-up of the frame dwelling was put at around 11 p. m. Explosives, were placed under the living room, blasting it away. Jut from the explosion splintered other portions of the home.

Police Chief C. Floyd Eddins, assigned two of his topflight detectives E. B. Lewis and George Palmer of the dynamiting case. Detective L. Charles Pierce and Chief Eddins instructed the two ace detectives to "rundown every clue and leave nothing undone to bring about the arrest of the dynamiters.

Through Wednesday night the detectives had not been able to turn up an evidence that would throw any light on the crime.

"We cannot tolerate such a total disregard for law and order" Chief Eddins thundered.

The Alabama Code of 1940, Title 14, Section 124, upon conviction, of wilfully dynamiting a vacant house fixes punishment at not less than two and more than 10 years.

The FBI's special agent, George D. King, in charge of the Birmingham area, declined to say whether his office would look into the dynamiting. Sheriff Holt McDowell discounted the suggestion that it might be the work of the K. K. K. He countered with the observation that the Ku Klux Klans has only a skeleton organization of 15 or 20 members and is not strong and heret was. Meantime, he said that this possibility was being checked into.

The home, valued at around \$5,000, was built by the Matthews several months ago. He received a final building inspection on it July 15 but was prohibited by a Jimcrow zoning law from moving in it. Mr. Matthews said that he was unable to sell the house to white people because it was actually located in the rim of the East Thomas community, almost exclusively Negro. It was three blocks from the nearest white home and a half-block from any Negro home.

On July 31, U. S. Judge Clarence Mullins declared Birmingham's two color zoning laws unconstitutional. Former City Attorney John Foster,

Picture 1: Newspaper article describing one the bombings of the Black homes, from the *Birmingham World*, 22 August 1947.

When it comes to being politically involved, Davis was not the first in her family to do so, her parents were also both active in the Civil Rights movement, which means that she was brought up in a family that introduced her to the fight of the oppressed. Davis also grew up in an environment where education and intellectual accomplishments were highly encouraged and honored. Such an atmosphere eventually prompted her to take part in activism, take education seriously and excel at

it. Davis's upbringing significantly affected her political views and it instilled in her the notion that fighting against oppression and injustice is everyone's obligation and duty.<sup>5</sup>

In her book *Angela Y. Davis, An Autobiography*, Angela writes about how she looked up to her mother and how she felt responsible to help those in need<sup>6</sup>. With this she confirmed both how her mother was an inspiration for her activism and philanthropy and how she felt the strong need to do something about the worldly injustices.

Another important figure and influence in Davis's life was her grandmother, whom she described as a symbol of strength, age, wisdom and suffering. From her grandmother, who was born only a few years after the Emancipation Proclamation and whose parents were slaves themselves, she learned about what slavery was (it was not talked about) and never wanted her to forget that.<sup>7</sup>

Angela Davis was very dedicated to her education. Her mother taught her how to read when she was very young and later, when she got a little bit older, had a number of books that she should be reading per week. Her parents picked up her books, or Miss Bell, the Black librarian, would leave them by the house. Davis describes how reading was her favorite activity and how, when a Black library opened nearby, she would spend hours there reading everything she could. Everything from *Heidi* to Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*.<sup>8</sup>

Davis describes her early education that she received in Birmingham as completely affected by what she calls the Booker T. Washington syndrome. She further explains how this principle of working hard in order to be rewarded is based on the notion that life would be filled with more obstacles for Black people than it will be for those who are White. Davis's teachers warned her and other students to prepare for hard work and sacrifices if they wanted to succeed. Even at that age Angela found it confusing how her teachers spoke of these obstacles as something over which they have no control over and which could never change, as this simply being the natural order of things. Davis thought that the notion was false because if it were true, it did not make sense that all of those who did not "make it" were lacking the desire and motivation to better with their lives. It was more probable that the huge number of Black people who were not successful was a result

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<sup>5</sup> Davis, A., & Platt, T. (2013). Interview with Angela Davis. *Social Justice* (p.37-40)

<sup>6</sup> Davis, A.Y. (2023) *Angela Y. Davis, An Autobiography*. Dublin: Penguin Books (p.91)

<sup>7</sup> Davis, A.Y. (2023) *Angela Y. Davis, An Autobiography*. Dublin: Penguin Books (p.83)

<sup>8</sup> Davis, A.Y. (2023) *Angela Y. Davis, An Autobiography*. Dublin: Penguin Books (p.99-100)

of systemic racism rather than individual lack of will and effort.<sup>9</sup> Although Davis found flaws within this way of thinking, it did motivate her to prove to the world that she was equally capable and intelligent as any other White person.

Davis graduated from some of the most prestigious universities in the United States. This does not only reflect her academic capabilities, but her determination to overcome set systemic barriers as well. After graduating high-school, she continued her higher education at Brandeis University. She studied in Paris and Germany as well, eventually earning a PhD in philosophy. Education served as a method of resistance and empowerment, like it did for many others African Americans such as Booker T. Washington for example.

Emerged into the world during an era of intense racial division and social rebellion, Angela Davis's early life experience was significantly influenced by these problems. In the late 1960s and early 1970s America underwent a new reconstruction and it once again it had to deal with its African American population. During this time, black revolutionary movements arose, particularly following the murders of black leaders and civil rights activists Malcolm X.

That Malcom X had an influence on her, we can read in her autobiography, where she describes her experience of listening to a speech delivered by him during her early years in school. She explains how she was mesmerized by his words, specifically by his description of the way in which Black people had internalized racial inferiority that was thrust upon them by the white supremacist society which they were a part of.<sup>10</sup>

Angela Davis's early life as well as her later activist and academic achievements show how complicated the path to being a revolutionary is. From her early experiences in a segregated society to her contributions to feminist discourse and society overall, Davis's journey offers significant insights into what it takes to be an activist and to become truly influential. By delving into aspects of her early life, educational background, and influential relationships, we can gain a deeper

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<sup>9</sup> Davis, A.Y. (2023) *Angela Y. Davis, An Autobiography*. Dublin: Penguin Books (p. 94-95)

<sup>10</sup> Davis, A.Y. (2023) *Angela Y. Davis, An Autobiography*. Dublin: Penguin Books (p.128)

appreciation of how Davis's personal history relates with her efforts to challenge and overcome certain oppressive systems.

### 3. Intersectionality and Its Theoretical Framework

When studying Angela Davis's work and activism, one often comes across the term *Intersectionality*. In this section of the thesis, this term will be examined, with the goal of better understanding it.

“That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man, when I could get it, and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? “(Sojourner Truth, 1851)<sup>11</sup>

An abolitionist and former slave Sojourner Truth gave this famous speech "Ain't I a Woman" at the Women's Rights Convention in Ohio, in 1851. This powerful speech is remembered as an important beginning of viewing gender and racial inequality through the lens of intersectionality in America. Truth's speech is a great example of intersectionality, the idea of which was created by the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 20th century. The concept of intersectionality means that various social identities, for example those based on sexual orientation, gender, race, and class, are all interconnected.<sup>12</sup> Truth's speech, "Ain't I a Woman?" perfectly represent this idea. She challenges the popular narrative, which acknowledged womanhood only from the viewpoint of the middle-class and white male. Her speech questions the feminist movement of her era, and their erasure of Black women's experiences. This is consistent with Crenshaw's observation that oppressed populations, such as Black women, frequently find themselves at the center of several oppressive systems and endure a unique kind of marginalization that is often missed when looking at these systems as their own.<sup>13</sup> I Truth emphasizes the significance of viewing identity as complex

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<sup>11</sup> Sojourner Truth. Delivered at the 1851 Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio.

<sup>12</sup> Gopaldas, A. (2013). *Intersectionality 101*. Journal of Public Policy & Marketing (p.90)

<sup>13</sup> Rosenberg, E. (2023) *Analyzing 'Ain't I a woman' by Sojourner Truth through the philosophical lenses of...*, Medium

and urges us to notice the subtle forms of oppression that appear there where identities overlap and are connected.

Social constructionism is also important when analyzing the historical context of racial and gender inequality. According to social constructionism, reality is neither intrinsic nor natural; rather, it is shaped by social and cultural factors.<sup>14</sup> Truth's speech demonstrates this idea as well, as she challenges conventional ideas of what it truly means to be a woman. Through her speech, she challenges the socially imposed and taught gender norms that have placed women, especially Black women, in submissive roles. Her statements disprove biological determinism, which was used to defend the treatment of women as inferior because of alleged differences which are inborn and biological.

Truth saying that she carried out the physically demanding jobs that were only typically associated with men, questions the roles that are expected of her. In a similar way, by putting focus on her own physical power, she then challenges the idealized frailty and softness associated with White femininity. Through pointing out the ridiculousness of these unrealistic standards, Truth challenges the hierarchies of power that have brought these racial and gender inequalities. Her speech serves as a call to action for Black women, demanding their rights and justice. But it also serves as a wake-up call for everybody else who might not be aware of these problems. It emphasizes how complicated and layered the battle against inequality is.

The concept of intersectionality further developed throughout the twentieth century when Black feminists argued that Black women's interests were not adequately represented in Black movements which were always led by Black men, or in women's movements, which were always led by white women. Black women felt left out by both groups and began to view social identity structures not as separate but as interconnected.<sup>15</sup> They understood that overcoming racism, sexism, as well as classism was necessary to improve the conditions for all Black people and women. Although their struggles were unique, Black women recognized how much they have in

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<sup>14</sup> Rosenberg, E. (2023) *Analyzing 'Ain't I a woman' by Sojourner Truth through the philosophical lenses of...*, Medium

<sup>15</sup> Collins, Patricia H. (1990), *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge

common with other groups facing multiple disadvantages, such as Asian immigrants, the disabled, seniors, etc.

Today, the term "intersectionality" is used in different ways. At a greater scale, the concept of intersectionality refers to the interactivity of social identity structures such as race, class, and gender. According to the micro-level analysis of intersectionality, every individual in society is positioned at the intersection of many social identity systems and is, because of that, subject to multiple social advantages and disadvantages. Intersectionality as a field unites disciplines that were previously divided. (e.g., African American studies, disability studies, queer studies, men's and women's studies).<sup>16</sup>

Examining intersectionality motivates us to think about the problems others may face, which we might not see due to us being privileged in certain ways. It also motivates us to realize how complex oppression is. Through Truth's speech we gain knowledge about the specific interconnectedness between sexism and racism and are made aware of the ways in which women, Black women specifically, are treated unfairly.

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<sup>16</sup> Gopaldas, A. (2013). *Intersectionality 101*. Journal of Public Policy & Marketing (p.91)



## 4. Women, Race, and Class: Analysis

### 4.1 Intersectionality Explored in Angela Davis's "*Women, Race, and Class*"

The book '*Women, Race and Class*' by Angela Davis is a study of intersectionality, specifically, how racial and class problems interact within the women's movement.

She conducts her analysis by laying out in chronological order how black women are positioned within American culture. She examines their journey from slavery to freedom in light of several specific concerns brought up by the women's movement over the years, including female suffrage, resistance to rape, the right to an abortion and birth control, and finally housework. Her analysis paints a picture of black women's consistent exclusion from these concerns within the feminist movement. And she provides a sharp critique of American feminism, saying that it hasn't done enough to address the problems of racism and class.

According to Barnett (2003, p.19) Davis's book addresses the following questions:

1. What part have Black women played in the struggle for Black and female equality?
2. In what ways have working-class and Black women historically been left out of women's movements headed by mostly White European women?
3. What important historical and modern concerns do all women need to deal with?
4. How can working-class and poor women of all races, as well as women of color, including Black women, manage to resist and endure in the pursuit of social justice and human rights?

Throughout the thirteen chapters, *Women, Race and Class*' shed light on thirteen topics that had not been examined through a gender, racial, or class analysis: the consequences of enslavement and expectations on modern women; the beginnings of the women's movement and the anti-slavery struggle; class and race in the early women's rights movement; racism in the women's suffrage campaign; Black women's definition of emancipation; liberation and education from the viewpoint of Black women; women's voting rights at the start of the new century and the growing impact of racism; Black women and the club movement; working class women, Black women and the history of the suffrage campaign; Communist women; rape, racism, and the myth of the Black rapist;

racism, birth control, reproductive rights and the working class perspective on the impending obsolescence of housework.<sup>17</sup>

In my opinion, this work is groundbreaking because it does not only bring a fresh perspective to the discourse around feminism but it also challenges the reader to understand the complicated nature of oppression that we do not often think about. Davis's analysis of the intersection of race, class, and gender is significant because it emphasizes the unique struggles which Black women have faced and still do. Throughout history, they have been marginalized not only by broader society but also within movements that are said to promote equality and justice.

What stands out the most to me is how Davis critiques modern or more popular feminism for its failure to address the issues of racism and classism and recognize how they are all connected. By bringing to light the ways in which Black and working-class women have continually been excluded from the feminist agenda, Davis calls for a more inclusive approach that acknowledges and addresses the intersecting and more complex oppressions these women face.

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## **4.2 The Legacy of Slavery**

The work *Women, Race and Class* begins by delving into the era of slavery because this is when the practices of racism and sexism toward Black people were established. In White culture, there was a distinct division between "male" and "female" labor; however, this was not the case for slaves.

“Black women were equal to their men in the oppression they suffered; they were their men's social equals within the slave community; and they resisted slavery with a passion equal to their men's. This was one of the greatest ironies of the slave system for in subjecting women to the most ruthless exploitation conceivable, exploitation which knew no sex distinctions, the groundwork was created

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<sup>17</sup> Barnett, B. M. (2003). *Angela Davis and Women, Race, & Class: A Pioneer in Integrative RGC Studies. Race, Gender & Class* (p.19.)

not only for Black women to assert their equality through social relations, but also express it through their acts of resistance." (Davis, 2019, p.19)

Black women were not viewed as frail and soft human beings who should be shielded from dangerous or physically demanding, typically “male” jobs. They were treated just the same as the male slaves regarding work. Their unpaid work produced earnings that went toward the masters. Any children they had become mere property for the slave owner because the mother's status determined the status of their children. It became crucial for slave women to bear children, and in large numbers, after slave traffickers were forbidden from importing. This was a way to increase and replenish the slave population at a small cost, at least financially. Black women were therefore treated in the same way as animals, as they produced children who could be exchanged and sold for a profit.<sup>18</sup>



Picture 2: *Women with young children at work in the field*

This is a section that brings light the brutal and dehumanizing treatment of Black women during slavery, which shows the intersectionality of racism and sexism which they faced. It also brings attention to the exploitation that defined the whole institution of slavery. The fact that Black women were subjected to the same manual labor as men, while at the same time being forced to bear and raise children for the economic profit of their owners, shows the extent to which their humanity was stripped away from them. By asserting their equality in ways that were both subtle and direct. Their resistance, as Davis points out in her work, was not only a fight for their own dignity but also a broader resistance to the entire system of oppression.

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<sup>18</sup> Davis, A.Y. (2019) *Women, Race & Class*. Penguin Classics. (p.4)

### 4.3 Racism in the Woman Suffrage Movement

In this chapter, Davis delves into the complicated relationship between the fight for women's rights and racial equality in the United States. Davis critically examines how racism was a big part of the suffrage movement.

She begins by providing a historical context of the woman suffrage movement. Figures like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony initially worked alongside Black activists recognizing the interconnectedness of the struggles for racial and gender equality. However, this alliance weakened as the movement progressed more.

The discussion surrounding the 15th Amendment, which gave Black men the right to vote but restricted women from it, is one of the major turning points that Davis emphasizes. This led to a significant split in the suffrage movement, with some white suffragists taking a racist stand and saying that educated white women should have the right to vote before Black men.<sup>19</sup>

“With the black man, we have no new element in government, but with the education and elevation of women, we have a power that is to develop the Saxon race into a higher and nobler life and thus, by the law of attraction, to lift all races to a more even platform than can ever be reached in the political isolation of the sexes.” (Davis, 2019, p.63)

This quote by Staton is a good reflection of the racist and elitist attitudes that were highly present in parts of the women's suffrage movement. This, then popular, perspective, which implies that the education of white women would benefit society more than Black men's political participation, highlights attitudes of the white supremacist ideology. It exposes how some suffragists supported racism within the movement by placing more importance on racial as well as class hierarchies rather than on a truly inclusive movement.

The complicated racial dynamics within the suffrage movement are not just a part of history, they have lasting effects on how we understand race and gender today. The suffragists' exclusion of Black women and other minorities in the pursuit of gender equality reveals the often contradictory motivations behind social movements. It also forces us to confront the uncomfortable reality that the fight for women's rights was not always inclusive of every woman. The fact that prominent

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<sup>19</sup> Davis, A.Y. (2019) *Women, Race & Class*. Penguin Classics. (p.65-67)

figures like Stanton and Anthony prioritized their own good over the rights of Black people shows the importance of intersectionality in modern activism. It is important that we learn from these mistakes to ensure that modern movements for justice do not make the same ones.

#### **4.4 Rape, Racism and the Myth of the Black Rapist**

The chapter "Rape, Racism, and the Myth of the Black Rapist" in Angela Davis's book analyzes and looks into how racism and sexism have intersected with sexual violence in America. Davis explores the widely popular myth of the Black rapist, which has been used as a justification for acts of violence against Black communities for decades.

Davis firstly explains how rape has been, and still is a concerning, growing issue. She elaborated on how rape laws have been introduced only to protect the White, upper-class men and their wives and daughters. This resulted in rape charges being indiscriminately aimed at Black men. Between 1930 and 1967, out of 455 men convicted for rape, 405 of them were Black.<sup>20</sup>

As Davis explains in her book,<sup>21</sup> the myth of the Black rapist first surfaced in relation to the lynchings and crimes committed against Black people. It was a purposefully created tool rather than something that occurred by itself and out of nowhere. Frederick Douglass emphasized that Black males were not frequently accused of raping White women during slavery or even the Civil War. Taking into account the vulnerability of white women during their men's absence from home fighting in the Confederate Army, this calls into question the idea that Black males have an innate "rape instinct".

White men used these rape accusations against Black men as justification for a range of crimes against them. For if the White men were motivated by their duty to protect and defend their women, their crimes would be justified. Lynchings and mobs had an excuse thanks to the myth of the Black rapist, and no one defended Black men because who would defend a rapist?

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<sup>20</sup> Davis, A.Y. (2019) *Women, Race & Class*. Penguin Classics. (p.155)

<sup>21</sup> Davis, A.Y. (2019) *Women, Race & Class*. Penguin Classics. (p.166-169)

Those who endured rape the most were Black women and not only during slavery but even after the emancipation. Davis points out how rape was a crucial part of the relationship between the slave and the slave-master. The Ku Klux Klan and other types of terrorist organizations used group rape as a political weapon after the Civil War.<sup>22</sup>

What further enabled these actions and ways of thinking as well as the further development of the racist ideology was the portrayal of Black women as immoral and promiscuous. This kind of action was prominent within literary works where Black women characters would be described as such.<sup>23</sup>

In my opinion, Davis's exploration of the myth of the Black rapist mainly shows the ways in which racism and sexism have been used to justify and excuse violence. The myth served not only to rationalize immoral acts against Black men, but also to erase the pain of Black women, who suffered immensely under both slavery and racism. The conscious creation of this myth shows us how deeply racial prejudices can influence legal and social systems.

Understanding the historical context of these types of myths is necessary for addressing the ongoing impacts of racism and sexual violence. It serves as a reminder of the need for a critical and intersectional approach to justice and equality. By acknowledging these events from the past, we can better understand and challenge the stereotypes that still continue to affect certain communities today.

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<sup>22</sup> Davis, A.Y. (2019) *Women, Race & Class*. Penguin Classics. (p. 158-159)

<sup>23</sup> Davis, A.Y. (2019) *Women, Race & Class*. Penguin Classics. (p. 159)

## 5. Davis's Activism and Influence

“Nothing in the world made me angrier than inaction, than silence,” Davis (2023, p.96)

In the history of American activism, Angela Davis is a highly regarded figure whose name is often associated with determination, resilience, and a consistent commitment to social justice. Davis has continuously through her life questioned hierarchies of power and injustice, from her membership in the Black Panther Party to her work as a professor and researcher. This section explores the many sides of Angela Davis's activity, focusing on the main ideas and outcomes of her fight towards equality and liberation.

As already mentioned, Davis's mother alongside Birmingham's Black community shaped Davis's activist beginnings. Early on in her life she began noticing class and racial differences. In her autobiography, she explains how for a longtime, she thought about those who ate and those who watched. Her pursuit of justice started at a very young age. While she attended elementary school, she saw that some of her classmates were unable to buy lunch. This made her take money from her father and give it to those students.<sup>24</sup>

Shortly after that, during her teenage years, motivated by racial segregation in Birmingham, her sister Fiana and her decided to walk into a store that was for Whites only and pretend that they were foreigners. Davis then describes how they were treated with respect solely for the reason they were not “regular” Black people. After talking to a clerk for a while, they both burst out laughing and told him how all that Black people had to do was be from another country and they would be treated with dignity. This was one of her many mini-protests during her early life which she mentions in her autobiography.<sup>25</sup>

A turning point for Davis was definitely reading the *Communist Manifesto*, which she explains, hit her like a bolt of lightning. Shortly after that, she joined a youth organization called Advance, which was strongly associated with the Communist Party. Among the groups members included children of her mother's Black radical friends such as Margaret and Linda Burnham, Harriet and Kathy Jackson, and Marylouise Patterson. Davis participated in Advance's anti-war and civil rights

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<sup>24</sup> Davis, A.Y. (2023) *Angela Y. Davis, An Autobiography*. Dublin: Penguin Books (p.90)

<sup>25</sup> Davis, A.Y. (2023) *Angela Y. Davis, An Autobiography*. Dublin: Penguin Books (p.87-89)

demonstrations.<sup>26</sup> Being strongly influenced by the *Communist Manifesto*, Davis eventually did join the Communist Party later in her life.

In early 1968 Davis joined the Black Panther Political Party (BPPP) because they were flexible enough to approve of the Marxist ideas which she supported. This Party was a small collective of young Black people, mostly students, teachers and a few professors. It was also a member organization of the Los Angeles Black Congress which was a broad coalition of community groups.<sup>27</sup> She led the group's liberation school, organized a bail campaign for political prisoners, and elevated community support around the police killing of an unarmed Black man named Gregory Clark.<sup>28</sup>

According to Davis (20223, p. 191-193), in July 1968, she joined the Che-Lumumba Club, a distinct all-Black branch of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA). This marked a significant phase in her activism since this club recognized her dedication to intersectional battles against economic and racial oppression. The club, which is named after the revolutionary leaders Che Guevara and Patrice Lumumba, gave Black communists a distinctive forum to discuss the interconnected problems of race and class.

In 1970, Angela Davis, was placed on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Fugitives list. Her alleged involvement in an armed takeover of a California courthouse that left four people dead was the cause of this. That event was a part of the plan to liberate the Soledad Brothers, three Black prisoners who had been charged with the murder of a prison guard. After Davis was charged with the possession of the weapons used in the assault, a national manhunt was launched.<sup>29</sup>

Davis was a woman of color, a Communist, and a vocal opponent of the American legal system. She posed a direct threat to the status quo. In addition to being a legal action, her inclusion on the FBI's Most Wanted list was also a measure meant to undermine her activity and the larger movements she supported. Many of Davis's supporters perceived her trial as an obvious attempt

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<sup>26</sup> Davis, A.Y. (2023) *Angela Y. Davis, An Autobiography*. Dublin: Penguin Books (p.114)

<sup>27</sup> Davis, A.Y. (2023) *Angela Y. Davis, An Autobiography*. Dublin: Penguin Books (p.165-166)

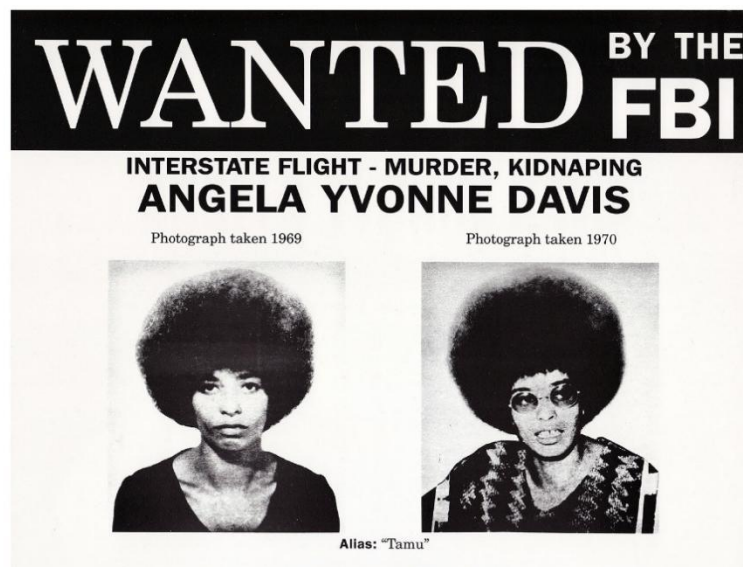
<sup>28</sup> Davis, A.Y. (2023) *Angela Y. Davis, An Autobiography*. Dublin: Penguin Books (p.175)

<sup>29</sup> Mejías-Rentas, A. (2023) *How Angela Davis ended up on the FBI most wanted list*, History.com.



to scare people who dared to challenge injustice. In 1970 she was arrested in a hotel she was staying at while hiding from the police.

During the months that Davis was running from the police, she gained a significant amount of popularity as a symbol of resistance and was covered by the media. Her image appeared on wanted posters around the USA. But instead of reducing her impact and making her a villain, her time as a runaway only raised her visibility and earned her a lot of support.<sup>30</sup> A number of activists, intellectuals, and common people came together to support the fight to “free Angela Davis” because they believed that her situation represented and stood for larger struggles against political and racial tyranny, especially towards Black people.



Picture 3: *Davis wanted by the FBI on a federal warrant issued August 15, 1970, for kidnapping and murder.*

Many saw her trial as a test of the American legal system and its ability to fairly handle cases involving radical political personalities, and it became an important part of the global civil rights movement. In June 1972, following a publicized trial, Angela Davis was found not guilty of any charges. Her acquittal was regarded as a significant win for the social justice and civil rights

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<sup>30</sup> Mejías-Rentas, A. (2023) *How Angela Davis ended up on the FBI most wanted list*, History.com.

movements, enhancing her reputation as a symbol of persistence and the struggle against injustice.<sup>31</sup>

Angela Davis continues to be an important global figure today, giving talks at prestigious colleges. She has been an educator for almost thirty years, having taught at the University of California, Santa Cruz and other academic institutions as well. She still attends rallies and is politically active and expressing her anti-capitalist opinion that as long as capitalism is our religion, racism will continue to persist.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Davis, A.Y. (2023) *Angela Y. Davis, An Autobiography*. Dublin: Penguin Books. (p.403-404)

<sup>32</sup> George, N. (2020) *Angela Davis still believes America can change*, *The New York Times*.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, by examining Angela Davis's work, specifically *Women, Race, & Class*, through the lens of intersectionality, it becomes evident that her contributions have greatly influenced and reshaped feminist discourse. Through observing her early life experiences, intellectual as well as familial figures which influenced her, we can gain a better understanding of what motivated her to become a revolutionary. Lastly, by analyzing her work as an activist, we are able to notice how great of an impact she had on the world.

From the beginning of her life, Davis witnessed what it means to be oppressed and therefore felt a strong inclination to do something about it. She always believed change is not only possible, but necessary. After finishing high-school, Davis pursued further education at Brandeis University in Massachusetts. There she developed an interest in philosophy and became officially politically active. Later she joined the Communist Party and became a Civil Rights activist as well. Her involvement in the Soledad Brothers case was the main reason why she was arrested in October 1970. They then charged her with murder, kidnapping, as well as conspiracy. After spending 16 months in prison and then being released on bail, Davis was acquitted of all charges on June 4, 1972.

Her work on intersectionality, when analyzed and looked into, provides a useful tool for understanding the complex layers of oppression that many groups are still faced with. The analysis of *Women, Race, & Class* reveals Davis's ability to articulate the nuanced struggles of Black women while challenging more popular feminist beliefs and movements that often overlook these issues. Davis's activism still continues to motivates generations that came after her to embrace a more inclusive perspective on social justice. What makes Davis so impactful is her ability to combine and use both theory and practice.

The importance of her work is still visible today as Davis is still politically active and involved in the newer movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement. Through her example, we can be motivated to take more action, try to recognize how there are still injustices to be fought against, even if they are not directly affecting us, and lastly not to lose hope because change is possible.

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## Pictures:

Picutre 1: *Newspaper article describing one the bombings of the Black homes, from the Birmingham World, 22 August 1947*. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24449974> (Accessed: 30.. April 2024)

Picture 2: *Women with young children at work in the field* Available at: <https://pixels.com/featured/during-work-slave-mothers-had-to-leave-everett.html?product=metal-print>. (Accessed: 30 April 2024)

Picture 3: *Davis wanted by the FBI on a federal warrant issued August 15, 1970, for kidnapping and murder.* Available at: <https://www.history.com/news/angela-davis-fbi-most-wanted-list> (Accessed: 9 May 2024).