

AN OPEN LETTER TO MY SISTER, ANGELA Y. DAVIS

BY JAMES BALDWIN

WANTED BY THE FBI

INTERSTATE FLIGHT - MURDER, KIDNAPING ANGELA YVONNE DAVIS

Photograph taken 1969



FBI No. 867,615 G
Photograph taken 1970



Alias: "Tamu"

DESCRIPTION

Age:	26, born January 26, 1944, Birmingham, Alabama	Eyes:	Brown
Height:	5'8"	Complexion:	Light brown
Weight:	145 pounds	Race:	Negro
Build:	Slender	Nationality:	American
Hair:	Black		
Occupation:	Teacher		
Scars and Marks:	Small scars on both knees		

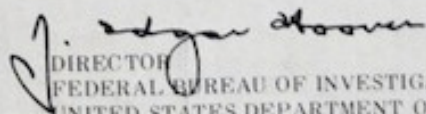
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CAUTION

ANGELA DAVIS IS WANTED ON KIDNAPING AND MURDER CHARGES GROWING OUT OF AN ABDUCTION AND SHOOTING IN MARIN COUNTY, CALIFORNIA, ON AUGUST 7, 1970. SHE ALLEGEDLY HAS PURCHASED SEVERAL GUNS IN THE PAST. CONSIDER POSSIBLY ARMED AND DANGEROUS.

A Federal warrant was issued on August 15, 1970, at San Francisco, California, charging Davis with unlawful interstate flight to avoid prosecution for murder and kidnaping (Title 18, U. S. Code, Section 1073).

IF YOU HAVE ANY INFORMATION CONCERNING THIS PERSON, PLEASE NOTIFY ME OR CONTACT YOUR LOCAL FBI OFFICE. TELEPHONE NUMBERS AND ADDRESSES OF ALL FBI OFFICES LISTED ON BACK.


DIRECTOR
FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20535
TELEPHONE, NATIONAL 8-7117

Entered NCIC
Wanted Flyer 457
August 18, 1970



Dear Sister:

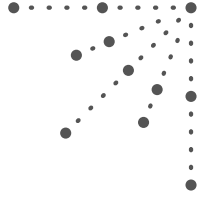

One might have hoped that, by this hour, the very sight of chains on Black flesh, or the very sight of chains, would be so intolerable a sight for the American people, and so unbearable a memory, that they would themselves spontaneously rise up and strike off the manacles. But, no, they appear to glory in their chains; now, more than ever, they appear to measure their safety in chains and corpses. And so, Newsweek, civilized defender of the indefensible, attempts to drown you in a sea of crocodile tears ("it remained to be seen what sort of personal liberation she had achieved") and puts you on its cover, chained.

You look exceedingly alone—as alone, say, as the Jewish housewife in the boxcar headed for Dachau, or as any one of our ancestors, chained together in the name of Jesus, headed for a Christian land.

Well. Since we live in an age which silence is not only criminal but suicidal, I have been making as much noise as I can, here in Europe, on radio and television—in fact, have just returned from a land, Germany, which was made notorious by a silent majority not so very long ago. I was asked to speak on the case of Miss Angela Davis, and did so. Very probably an exercise in futility, but one must let no opportunity slide.



"An Open Letter To Angela Y. Davis" (James
Baldwin), *New York Review Of Books*,
January 7, 1971

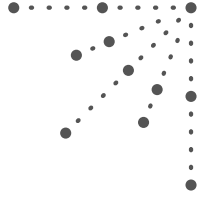



I am something like twenty years older than you, of that generation, therefore, of which George Jackson ventures that "there are no healthy brothers—none at all." I am in no way equipped to dispute this speculation (not, anyway, without descending into what, at the moment, would be irrelevant subtleties) for I know too well what he means. My own state of health is certainly precarious enough. In considering you, and Huey, and George and (especially) Jonathan Jackson, I began to apprehend what you may have had in mind when you spoke of the uses to which we could put the experience of the slave. What has happened, it seems to me, and to put it far too simply, is that a whole new generation of people have assessed and absorbed their history, and, in that tremendous action, have freed themselves of it and will never be victims again. This may seem an odd, indefensibly pertinent and insensitive thing to say to a sister in prison, battling for her life—for all our lives. Yet, I dare to say it, for I think you will perhaps not misunderstand me, and I do not say it, after all, from the position of spectator.

I am trying to suggest that you—for example—do not appear to be your father's daughter in the same way that I am my father's son. At bottom, my father's expectations and mine were the same, the expectations of his generation and mine were the same; and neither the immense difference in our ages nor the move from the South to the North could alter these expectations or make our lives more viable. For, in fact, to use the brutal parlance of that hour, the interior language of despair, he was just a n****, a n**** laborer preacher, and so was I. I jumped the track but that's of no more importance here, in itself, than the fact that some poor Spaniards become

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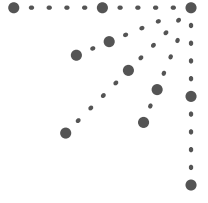
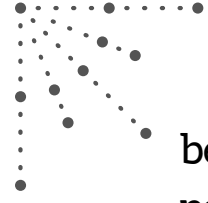
rich bullfighters, or that some poor Black boys become rich—boxers, for example. That's rarely, if ever, afforded the people more than a great emotional catharsis, though I don't mean to be condescending about that, either. But when Cassius Clay became Muhammad Ali and refused to put on that uniform (and sacrificed all that money!) a very different impact was made on the people and a very different kind of instruction had begun.

The American triumph—in which the American tragedy has always been implicit—was to make Black people despise themselves. When I was little I despised myself; I did not know any better. And this meant, albeit unconsciously, or against my will, or in great pain, that I also despised my father. And my mother. And my brothers. And my sisters. Black people were killing each other every Saturday night out on Lenox Avenue, when I was growing up; and no one explained to them, or to me, that it was intended that they should; that they were penned where they were, like animals, in order that they should consider themselves no better than animals. Everything supported this sense of reality, nothing denied it: and so one was ready, when it came time to go to work, to be treated as a slave. So one was ready, when human terrors came, to bow before a white God and beg Jesus for salvation—this same white God who was unable to raise a finger to do so little as to help you pay your rent, unable to be awakened in time to help you save your child!

There is always, of course, more to any picture than can speedily be perceived and in all of this—groaning and moaning, watching, calculating, clowning, surviving, and outwitting, some tremendous strength was nevertheless

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being forged, which is part of our legacy today. But that particular aspect of our journey now begins to be behind us.

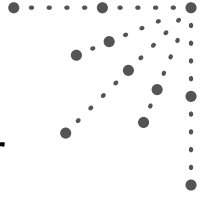
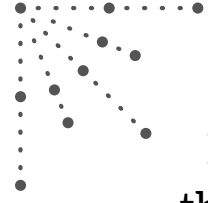
The secret is out: we are men!

But the blunt, open articulation of this secret has frightened the nation to death. I wish I could say, "to life," but that is much to demand of a disparate collection of displaced people still cowering in their wagon trains and singing "Onward Christian Soldiers." The nation, if America is a nation, is not in the least prepared for this day. It is a day which the Americans never expected to see, however piously they may declare their belief in progress and democracy. Those words, now, on American lips, have become a kind of universal obscenity: for this most unhappy people, strong believers in arithmetic, never expected to be confronted with the algebra of their history.

One way of gauging a nation's health, or of discerning what it really considers to be its interests—or to what extent it can be considered as a nation as distinguished from a coalition of special interests—is to examine those people it elects to represent or protect it. One glance at the American leaders (or figureheads) conveys that America is on the edge of absolute chaos, and also suggests the future to which American interests, if not the bulk of the American people, appear willing to consign the Blacks. (Indeed, one look at our past conveys that.) It is clear that for the bulk of our (nominal) countrymen, we are all expendable. And Messrs. Nixon, Agnew, Mitchell, and Hoover, to say nothing, of course, of the Kings' Row basket case, the winning Ronnie Reagan, will not hesitate for an instant to carry out what they insist is the will of the people.



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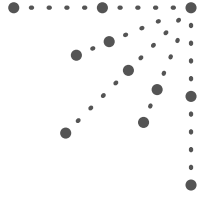

But what, in America, is the will of the people? And who, for the above-named, are the people? The people, whoever they may be, know as much about the forces which have placed the above-named gentlemen in power as they do about the forces responsible for the slaughter in Vietnam. The will of the people, in America, has always been at the mercy of an ignorance not merely phenomenal, but sacred, and sacredly cultivated: the better to be used by a carnivorous economy which democratically slaughters and victimizes whites and Blacks alike. But most white Americans do not dare admit this (though they suspect it) and this fact contains mortal danger for the Blacks and tragedy for the nation.

Or, to put it another way, as long as white Americans take refuge in their whiteness—for so long as they are unable to walk out of this most monstrous of traps—they will allow millions of people to be slaughtered in their name, and will be manipulated into and surrender themselves to what they will think of—and justify—as a racial war. They will never, so long as their whiteness puts so sinister a distance between themselves and their own experience and the experience of others, feel themselves sufficiently human, sufficiently worthwhile, to become responsible for themselves, their leaders, their country, their children, or their fate. They will perish (as we once put it in our black church) in their sins — that is, in their delusions. And this is happening, needless to say, already, all around us.

Only a handful of the millions of people in this vast place are aware that the fate intended for you, Sister Angela, and for George Jackson, and for the numberless prisoners in our concentration camps—for that is what they are—is a fate

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which is about to engulf them, too, White lives, for the forces which rule in this country, are no more sacred than Black ones, as many and many a student is discovering, as the white American corpses in Vietnam prove. If the American people are unable to contend with their elected leaders for the redemption of their own honor and the loves of their own children, we the Blacks, the most rejected of the Western children, can expect very little help at their hands; which, after all, is nothing new. What the Americans do not realize is that a war between brothers, in the same cities, on the same soil is not a racial war but a civil war. But the American delusion is not only that their brothers all are white but that the whites are all their brothers.

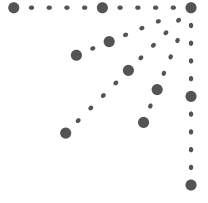

So be it.

We cannot awaken this sleeper, and *God knows we have tried*. We must do what we can do, and fortify and save each other—we are not drowning in an apathetic self-contempt, we do feel ourselves sufficiently worthwhile to contend even with the inexorable forces in order to change our fate and the fate of our children and the condition of the world! **We know that a man is not a thing and is not to be placed at the mercy of things. We know that air and water belong to all mankind and not merely to industrialists. We know that a baby does not come into the world merely to be the instrument of someone else's profit. We know that a democracy does not mean the coercion of all into a deadly—and, finally, wicked—mediocrity but the liberty for all to aspire to the best that is in him, or that has ever been.**

We know that we, the Blacks, and not only we, the blacks, have been, and are, the victims of a system whose only fuel is

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greed, whose only god is profit. We know that the fruits of this system have been ignorance, despair, and death, and we know that the system is doomed because the world can no longer afford it—if, indeed, it ever could have. And we know that, for the perpetuation of this system, we have all been mercilessly brutalized, and have been told nothing but lies, lies about ourselves and our kinsmen and our past, and about love, life, and death, so that both soul and body have been bound in hell.

The enormous revolution in black consciousness which has occurred in your generation, my dear sister, means the beginning or the end of America. Some of us, white and Black, know how great a price has already been paid to bring into existence a new consciousness, a new people, an unprecedented nation. If we know, and do nothing, we are worse than the murderers hired in our name.

If we know, then we must fight for your life as though it were our own—which it is—and render impassable with our bodies the corridor to the gas chamber.

For, if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night.

Therefore: peace.

Brother James
November 19, 1970



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DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Historical context:

In 1970, Angela Yvonne Davis - a black militant, professor of philosophy at the University of California, self-proclaimed communist and outspoken supporter of the Black Panthers - was captured and arrested after two months of absconding. She was on the run with the accusation of aggravated kidnapping and first-degree murder, generated by the events that unfolded during the incident of the Marin County Civic Center in San Rafael, California: on August 7, some guns legally purchased by Davis were smuggled and used in a violent hold-up that took place in the courtroom, when 17-year-old Jonathan P. Jackson freed and armed three convicts to forcefully negotiate the liberation of three other African-American prisoners, known as the Soledad Brothers. They managed to get out of the Civic Center by taking five hostages, but during the escape a shootout between the young men and the guards occurred, terminating with the death of three of the abductors and of Superior Court Judge Harold Haley.

Davis had already been the centre of national attention in 1969, when she was fired from her teaching job at the University of California after publicly admitting her membership in the Communist party. Immediately after the courtroom incident, even though it was clear that Davis was only responsible for the purchase of the incriminated firearms, a warrant was issued for her arrest, making her the third woman to show up in the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Fugitive List. This was mostly due to her well-known closeness to the Soledad Brothers and Jackson himself. Fearing to become a political scapegoat due to her activism and outspoken ideas, Davis tried to avoid capture by running away. She was nonetheless spotted, arrested and processed. Eventually, on June 4, 1972, an all-white jury cleared the 28-year-old woman of all the accusations listed during the two years long trial, which could have led her to the death penalty.

In the meantime of the process, however, a "Free Angela and all political prisoners" movement had begun to wreak havoc all around the world.

Thousands of posters portraying Davis were held up high during marches against the modern types of segregation, against the Vietnam war and, especially, against the unfair treatment that the long time activist was enduring as a result of her life-long fight to put an end to racial, sexual, and class distinctions.

Baldwin's take:

James Baldwin, an African-American author residing in Europe, was deeply touched by a photograph depicting Davis cuffed and plainly disoriented, which was the front image of the October 26, 1970 issue of *Newsweek*. The novelist begins this open letter to Angela Davis by pointing out the distressing nature of the sight of "chained" Davis, a symbol of past oppression that was nonetheless shamelessly glorified by the newspaper in their account of the goings-on of the trial. According to Baldwin, this fact alone shows how certain issues regarding black people were still handled with little or no respect.

He proceeds to address his own opinion on the Davis case, the particular significance of which he admits to have attempted to divulgate as much as he could in Europe, considering the sole act of silence on such a matter not only "criminal" but very much "suicidal". He indeed explains to Angela how he views this whole issue as nothing more than another attempt to shame and bully valid black individuals into silence, of course with the predictable aid of political and societal framing. But, he remarks, the Blacks of Davis' generation are not the same of his own, or his father's: "*We are not drowning in an apathetic self-contempt, we do feel ourselves sufficiently worthwhile to contend even with the inexorable forces in order to change our fate and the fate of our children and the condition of the world!*". Something is changing, then, and it is precisely thanks to people like Angela, who bravely stood up and fronted the challenges that come with being born as an African-American in a fundamentally fragmented and exploited nation, "if America is a nation".

It is, basically, thanks to the new generations of Blacks that refuse to hide any longer the fact that they are men, as if it were a secret all along. It is here clear that Baldwin is speaking from the verge of exasperation: what he wants to remind everyone, and certainly not Davis in particular, is that it is time to awaken the spirit of a country that still thinks in colors and ostracises its own

least desirable citizens. "What the Americans do not realize is that a war between brothers, in the same cities, on the same soil is not a racial war but a civil war. But the American delusion is not only that their brothers all are white but that the whites are all their brothers." The times are mature enough to do what Angela Davis has then already been doing all along: speaking up before the course of events unfolds in the least likeable - but, at that time, the most likely - of scenarios, that is, a civil war in the name of racial differences that were supposed to be extinct from a very long time but that, to this day, still haunt America.

In conclusion, Baldwin asserts that the changes that had already been, and were about to be brought by these courageous black youths can only mean the end of that tremendously retrograde America in favour of the birth of a new country in which those who know how dangerous it can be to wait and try to raise one's voice only in the aftermath of plain abuse will never be quiet again when a case like that of Davis occurs in the present.