

## “MY POLITICAL LIFE HAS BEEN INFORMED BY THE STRUGGLE IN SOUTH AFRICA” – ANGELA DAVIS

—JWTC 2014 Interview

### Ainehi Edoro

Duke University

*American political thinker and activist, Angela Davis, travelled through South Africa with the JWTC mobile conference. During our stop at Ginsberg, I had a chance to chat with her at the Steve Biko Center. She reflects on how the South African anti-racist struggle informs her political work and comments on the place of women in political struggle.*



Angela Davis addressing JWTC participants on the Bus. (c) Tana Nolethu Forrest

**Ainehi Edoro:** 60 intellectuals. One bus. 47 hours of road time. And the theme: “The Archives of the Non-Racial.” What is your sense of what this intellectual project is about?

**Angela Davis:** The project is informed by place and space. This was the attraction for me---our movement from Johannesburg to Swaziland to the Eastern Cape to the Western Cape. I have visited South Africa on three other occasions, but this is the first that I’ve been able to acquire a real sense of space. Of course, it also has to do with the kinds of conversations that have been happening around the question of race and political struggle. I was primarily interested in this project because most of my political life, which is most of my life, has been informed by the struggle in South Africa.

**Ainehi Edoro:** Can you tell us a bit about your life---growing up in the south and entering into a life of political activism.

**Angela Davis:** I grew up in a racially segregated city-- Birmingham, Alabama--- a city that was known as the Johannesburg of the south. So my entire life, in many respects, has been informed by an anti-racist political project. I’m interested in how people, intellectuals--organic intellectuals--cultural workers, imagine the possibilities of moving beyond racism.

I often tell a story about my mother trying to me help understand why it was that we lived in a place where black people were treated as inferior and systematically excluded from education, amusement parks, libraries. As a child, I constantly asked my mother why. And I’m very fortunate that, as an activist herself, she had her vision. She always insisted that we inhabited a world that was not supposed to be structured that way. She helped me live in that reality without feeling as though I was fundamentally of that reality.

I eventually became involved in the campaign to free Nelson Mandela. I was very young. I could probably tell the story of my political life by pointing to

various moments in the history of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. For many years, South Africa was the center of the world in the sense that it was here that we invested all of our aspirations. But as with most investments that are as absolute and total as this one was, it didn’t turn out in the way we had all imagined.

**Ainehi Edoro:** How had you imagined it?

**Angela Davis:** As someone who was involved in communist politics and had close relations to the South African communist party, I could never separate economic liberation from racial liberation. I imagine racial liberation as taking place within the context of a redistribution of wealth. I imagined the end of privatization. And that is not what was achieved.

But I’m interested in the achievements of the South African struggle because things are different. We cannot discount the struggles and those who gave their lives. It has to mean something, and it does mean something.



Angela Davis reflecting on Nelson Mandela’s Legacy at Qunu—Mandela’s hometown (c) Naadira Patel

**Ainehi Edoro:** You have taken part in many political movements. How has the South African anti-apartheid/anti-racist movement informed your own theories and practices around the questions of political struggle?

**Angela Davis:** My involvement in the campaign for international solidarity against apartheid dates back to the 1960s. I was arrested in 1970 by the US Government and charged with 3 capital crimes. I faced the death penalty 3 times. It was thanks to an international solidarity movement that I was released.

I'm saying this to point out that many South Africans joined that campaign. I received numerous expressions of solidarity from South Africans in exile, from the ANC, the South African communist party. In the year after my release—I was in jail for about two years—I visited London and participated in the anti-apartheid rally there. Not long after that, on August 9<sup>th</sup>—the South African Women's Day— I went back to London and spoke at a huge rally.

I can't imagine my own trajectory without that constant South African theme. In 1980 when I was arrested on the campus of UC Berkeley, I was participating in an anti-apartheid rally. I was also involved in the International Longshore and Workers Warehouse Union. They were the first to engage in actions that served as a catalyst for the student anti-apartheid efforts by refusing to unload South African Ships.

What I didn't have a chance to say during the session at Qunu—where we shared our experiences about Nelson Mandela—was that I spoke to Winnie Mandela during the time of her banning. We arranged a conversation on the telephone. She went to a paid telephone. I was doing a radio show at that time, so I was able to organize the show around Winnie Mandela. I later

met her and spent some time with her when she and Mandela were still living together.

**Ainehi Edoro:** Political movements tend to constellate around male figures. Think Mandela, Martin Luther King, Nkruma and so on. Names of women tend not to take on as much force. What do you think is the place or status of the feminine or the woman in these kinds political struggles?

**Angela Davis:** In the black struggle— in black radical struggle—women have played an absolutely pivotal role. The struggle is inconceivable without the participation and the leadership of women. It's unfortunate that the figure of the heroic individual—the masculinist figure of the heroic individual—almost inevitably erases the people who are most responsible for the emergence and the development of these struggles. This applies to South Africa as well. We don't hear about the women who played absolutely essential roles. There's Albertina Sisulu. There's Ruth First, a white woman whose name is not evoked nearly enough.

But what about those whose name we will never know? I'm primarily concerned about how we pay tribute to those whose names we can never know. How do we acknowledge that, in the US civil rights movement, it was Black women domestic workers who played the central role? Most people who are thankful for the civil rights movement never think about poor black women maids as being the ones who refused to ride the bus and therefore who were responsible for the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Women's role in South Africa is very much the same. Hilda Bernstein's book, *For Their Triumph and their Tears*, comes to mind. It's a nice book that records the names of a number of these women.

We have to figure out how to read the silences of the archives. And certainly women are almost consistently absent—masses of women who participated in these struggles.



Angela Davis and Achille Mbembe during lunch in Johannesburg (c) Naadira Patel

**Ainehi Edoro:** This year's workshop is built around the concept of the "non-racial." What is your take on the term? Do you see it has a helpful way of naming an ideal to which anti-racist struggle, philosophy, practice, or theory should aspire?

**Angela Davis:** I'm trying to be open [Laughs]. I've expressed some of my ambivalences, some of my suspicions, and my historical reluctance to embrace the non-racial except within a particular context of South Africa. What is important about this workshop is that we have stayed open to the exploration of all sides of the concept. The non-racial is not a unitary concept. And because it has played such an essential role in the history of South Africa and in the theorization of a free

South Africa, we have to come to grips with it. We have to engage it. But then whether it travels in the way the idea of South African freedom has travelled across the planet, I do not know. But as I said, I'm trying to be as open as possible.