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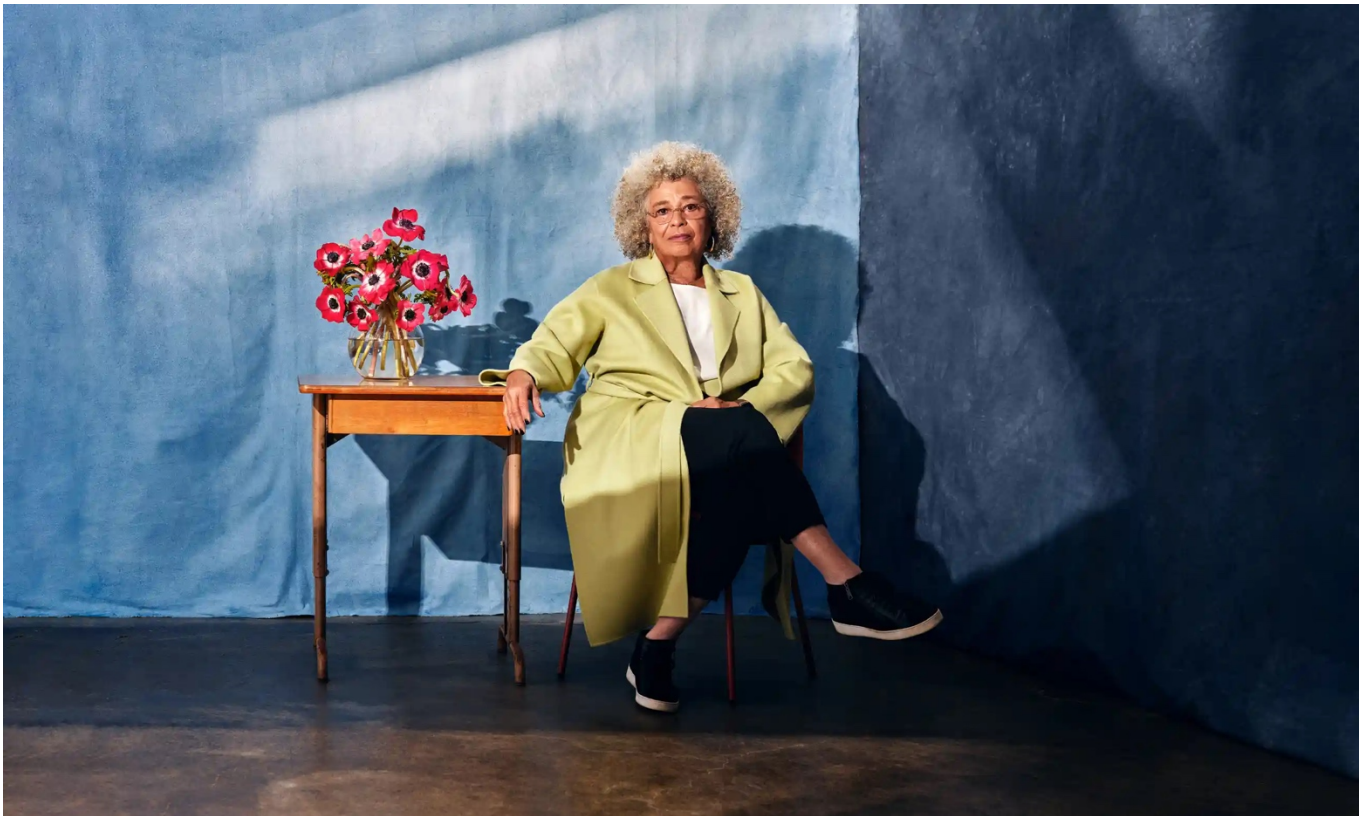
by Simon Hattenstone



Angela Davis on the power of protest: ‘We can’t do anything without optimism’

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Extracted from The Guardian

In 1972, the former Black Panther was facing the death penalty. Five decades after the campaign for her release went global, she still believes people are the ‘motors of history’

The last time Angela Davis was in Birmingham, Alabama, she caught up with childhood friends and her Sunday school teacher. While many of us would reminisce about favourite classes and first kisses, they discussed bombs.

“We talked about what it was like to grow up in a city where there were bombings all the time,” she says. Most notoriously, in September 1963, the Ku Klux Klan bombed the 16th Street Baptist church, killing four girls. It wasn’t a one-off, says the legendary radical feminist, communist and former Black Panther. “People’s homes were bombed, synagogues were bombed, other churches were bombed. People think of that as a single event, but it was more indicative of the pervasive terror at that time in Birmingham.”

When the girls were killed, Davis was 19, a brilliant young scholar travelling through Europe. She read about the attack in newspapers. “It was one of the most devastating experiences of my life. My sister was very close with one of the girls, Carole Robertson. I just recently spent time with Carole’s sister, Diane, who was one of my close friends growing up.” When Davis managed to phone her family from France, her mother told her she had driven Carole’s mother to the church after the bombing. “And, of course, she received the terrible, terrible news ...” She trails off.

“The back yard of one of the other girls almost abutted ours. We were neighbours and friends. And my mother taught yet another of the girls. So we had connections with three of the four girls who were killed on that day.” By 1965, the FBI had the names of the bombers, but there were no prosecutions until 1977.

Is this what turned her into a revolutionary? “I experienced it as a deeply personal assault, and it was a little while before I could stand back and think about the larger impact of it; the way it represented an effort to wipe out the resistance of youth. I think it was probably one of the moments that helped me find that path.”

Does she think Birmingham shaped her politics? “Absolutely. I do. I do,” she says in her low-pitched, mellifluous voice. So if she had grown up in New York she would have become a different Angela Davis? She grins. “Well, I went to high school in New York and it was at high school that I first read The Communist Manifesto!” So we would have had the same Angela Davis either way?
“Exactly. Exactly.”

Davis is interviewed in Marin county jail, 1972, for the documentary The Black Power Mixtape. Composite: Guardian/Kobal/Shutterstock

Back in the 1970s, Angela Yvonne Davis had one thing on her mind: revolution. She was public enemy number one to some, a beacon of hope to others. When she went on the run from the law charged with the murder of a judge and five counts of kidnapping, newspapers splashed her face across their front pages, naming her one of the FBI's 10 most-wanted criminals. A few months later, her face was on the T-shirts of young radicals across the world, fighting for her release.

Davis's became the public face of resistance, pinned to myriad badges, placards and posters. Her great natural afro became the hairstyle of revolution. In the past she has said it is "humbling and humiliating ... to be remembered as a hairdo". Anybody who was anybody in the world of culture supported her. When Nina Simone visited Davis in prison, she was overwhelmed by all the books in her cell and decided she needed to learn more about social justice. Aretha Franklin offered to pay her bail. James Baldwin wrote her a letter saying, "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." This provided the title for If They Come in the Morning …, an anthology of prison writings edited by Davis and published in 1971 when she was in jail.

At 78 and today talking to me on a video call from sunny Oakland, California, Davis has become an elder stateswoman of the civil rights fight, but her radical spirit shines as bright as ever. Her hair is now a grey corkscrew bob – in its own ways every bit as distinguished as the iconic afro of yesteryear. She has just reissued her classic memoir, with a new foreword. Angela Y Davis: An Autobiography was first published in 1974, edited by the great Toni Morrison, two years after Davis was acquitted of murder, kidnap and criminal conspiracy. When Morrison first talked to her about writing a book, she wasn't interested – she thought that at 26 she was too young to say anything significant, and didn't want to write something that "focused on personal

trajectory". In the new foreword, she says Morrison convinced her to do it by insisting "on the importance of a political biography" in which she not only told the story of her life but also the history of the movement she had become involved with.

She says revisiting her younger self for the new edition has both shocked and comforted her. "When I reread the autobiography, I was disturbed by my language and by what I did not know then, but I was also impressed by the continuity – the fact that we are still addressing issues that we were trying to address at that time. The dissonance I experienced, particularly in terms of the language, helped me to measure our progress, and how far we'd come."

Davis speaks in beautifully measured sentences, but sometimes you have to dig for the details. I ask if she is talking about her attitude to gay culture in prison, which seems surprisingly judgmental – not least because she has been in a relationship with a woman for the past 20 years. "Exactly!" she says, laughing. "I cringed."

In the memoir, she describes how women would replicate traditional family structures, "marrying" other women and referring to them as husbands. Davis didn't get it. Why ape the patriarchy? In jail she couldn't bring herself to refer to a woman as a husband or father. Now she says she was narrow-minded. "At the time, we weren't even using the word gay. We used homosexual. And reading that made me cringe, too, because now we have developed a really capacious vocabulary to talk about both intimate and political experiences." She's being tough on herself. The remarkable thing about her autobiography is how relevant it still feels.

Davis with Jane Fonda at a Vietnam war demonstration, 1970. Composite: Getty Images

In the 1960s and 70s, Davis says, everything was rigidly defined – not simply in terms of sexuality, but also revolutionary activity. “I didn’t regard those [prison marriage] practices as resistance practices. I had an intransigent notion as to what counts as resistance.” Everything was about belonging to a party and toeing that party line. “Now I see we are where we are today precisely because of large acts of resistance and small acts of resistance … I believe we need organised resistance and the forms of resistance that become practices in our daily lives.”

While many people become more insular as they get older, she has become ever more outward-looking. Perhaps it’s this that distinguishes the older Davis from the twentysomething Black Panther who found herself in prison facing a possible death sentence 50 years ago. Today, she has an extraordinary capacity to absorb and juggle ideas, many seemingly at odds with each other.

Davis is talking to me from a room lined with books in the home she shares with her civil partner, Gina Dent, a fellow professor at the

University of California, Santa Cruz. The two women have a lot in common. They have just written Abolition. Feminism. Now. together with two other authors (Erica R Meiners and Beth E Richie). At the heart of the book is the demand to defund the police, demilitarise the army and halt prison construction. The authors argue that all three perpetuate violence, inequality and structural racism. Davis's politics are expressed not merely in what she writes, but how she writes. Although there are four authors, the book is written in one voice. Its form reflects her belief in collective action.

When she wrote her memoir, the concept of intersectionality was not widely known, though many women of colour had been struggling with the ways they were discriminated against because of both their sex and their race, and how they impacted on each other. Although Davis was already a famous radical feminist, she says she often felt isolated, and questioned her place within the movement.

There was a backwardness in the early days of feminism. I was asked, 'Are you Black or are you a woman?'

"There was a backwardness in the early days of certain elements of feminism that refused to recognise the degree to which gender is historically and socially constructed. This is why I refused to consider myself a feminist for a while – the insistence that all of your loyalty has to be to women, and that tended to mean white women. I can remember being asked, 'Are you Black or are you a woman?'"

What?

She laughs. "Yes. I was asked that. Even when we had no precedents for intersectional notions I made it very clear, and I'm not the only one, that for many Black women the issues were intertwined. We could not separate one from the other."

Who asked this? "Oh, some of those white feminists I did not like." She smiles. No names. What did you say? "I said it's a ridiculous question. This is the power of racism, that they could not recognise, for

example, that in struggling against gender violence directed against women, one also had to take up the racist use of the rape charge, and they were part and parcel of the same battle. Of course, the intransigent white bourgeois feminists could not accept that."

Davis is no stranger to splits on the radical left or factional feminism. She has seen it all her life, and regretted it all her life. She doesn't understand why some feminists today see trans women as a threat. "There are some feminist formations that are very opposed to the trans presence, and that is so backwards. Those of us who are more flexible argue that if you want to get rid of violence directed against individuals in the world, whether it's racist violence or gender violence, you have to support Black trans women who are the target of more violence than any other group of people. And if we make advances in our struggle to defend Black trans women, those victories can be felt by all communities that suffer violence."

'My mother always said: never forget that the world is not organised in the way it should be and that things will change, and that we will be a part of that change.' Photograph: Jessica Chou/The Guardian. Styling: Indya Brown

She says this fight reminds her of the days when she was asked to choose between being a woman and being Black. In her autobiography, she describes how many of the Black male revolutionaries regarded their activism as an assertion of their masculinity and believed women had no leadership role to play. Even so, she says, back then she didn't fully appreciate how she had been shaped as much by gender as by race. In the intervening half-century, she has realised how the two are umbilically linked in the fight for a better world.

Davis inherited her revolutionary spirit from her mother, Sallye, a schoolteacher and activist who was involved in the Southern Negro Youth Congress, organised by Black communists. Sallye was part of the successful campaign to release the Scottsboro Boys (nine Black teenagers falsely accused of raping two white women) – a case seen as

a milestone in the emergence of a national civil rights movement. Davis's father, Frank, was also a teacher and an Episcopalian lay minister. "He was not as outspoken as my mother, but he made his contributions in a quieter way." Both her parents grew up "dirt poor" and only managed to become teachers because they were financially supported – her mother by the principal of her high school, her father by the Episcopalian church. Her father gave up teaching and bought a service station and parking lot to enable him to better support Angela and her three siblings.

Davis grew up with a burning sense of justice – and injustice. She received a good education at her segregated school, where she was taught about Black history, and endowed with pride. "The teachers felt the need to cultivate a generation who would be capable of resisting the ideological racism surrounding us." Her mother told young Angela that the world they were living in was not the world of the future. "She always said: never forget that that world is not organised in the way it should be and that things will change, and that we will be a part of that change."

In her late teens, Davis worked part-time to earn enough money to travel to France and Switzerland, and to attend the eighth World Festival of Youth and Students in Helsinki. When she returned home in 1963, the FBI interviewed her about her attendance at the Soviet-sponsored festival. After a year studying literature in France, she enrolled on Herbert Marcuse's philosophy course at the University of Frankfurt. Davis later said: "Marcuse taught me that it was possible to be an academic, an activist, a scholar and a revolutionary."

In 1969, aged 25, she was hired as an assistant professor of philosophy at UCLA. A campaign spearheaded by California governor Ronald Reagan resulted in her sacking for being a member of the Communist party USA. By then she was also known as a radical feminist and affiliate of the LA chapter of the Black Panther party. When a court ruled she could not be fired solely because of her affiliation with the Communist party, she resumed her post, only to be fired again in June

1970 for “inflammatory language” used in four speeches, including repeatedly referring to the police as “pigs”.

By this time her mentor was the Black Panther George Jackson, who had been convicted of armed robbery in 1961. In January 1970, Jackson and two others were charged with murdering a prison officer in Soledad prison, California. The three men became known as the Soledad Brothers and Davis campaigned for their release. Davis came to love Jackson and befriended his younger brother, 17-year-old Jonathan, who accompanied her on public appearances as an informal bodyguard.

On 7 August 1970, Jonathan Jackson used guns registered in Davis’s name (she was regularly receiving death threats from white supremacists at this point) to hold up a courtroom at Marin county courthouse. He took superior court judge Harold Haley and four others hostage to secure the freedom of the Soledad Brothers. As he attempted to drive away, police opened fire, and Jonathan Jackson, Judge Haley and two prisoners were killed. The siege was headline news. As was the fact that the guns Jackson used were owned by Davis.

I felt terrified that I might end up in the gas chamber in San Quentin. Ronald Reagan wanted to see that, Richard Nixon wanted to see that

On 14 August, Davis was charged with “aggravated kidnapping and first-degree murder in the death of Judge Harold Haley”, and a warrant was issued for her arrest. By then, Davis had gone on the run. Four days later, FBI director J Edgar Hoover put Davis on the FBI’s 10 most-wanted fugitives list; she was only the third woman to be listed. On 13 October 1970, FBI agents found her in New York.

Davis has always said she had no prior knowledge of Jackson’s plans, and was shocked by the incident and the death of her young friend. How does she look back at her time in prison? It’s complex, she says. In one way, it was terrifying; in another, she got a better education than any university could provide. She saw for herself how much easier it

was to end up in prison if you were working class and a person of colour, and how much harder it was to get out. Many women she met were locked up for petty crimes but couldn't afford the $500 bail, so were stuck in the system. She discovered that, although slavery had been abolished in 1865, it was thriving in US jails thanks to the 13th amendment making a special allowance for penal labour. Davis realised she had to synthesise race, class and gender in her analysis. "It was a time of learning. Deep learning. That period defined the trajectory of the rest of my life."

Was there a time when she thought she would be executed? "Yes, there was. There was. There was." She repeats it gently, like a mantra. "I felt terrified that I might end up in the gas chamber in San Quentin prison. Ronald Reagan wanted to see that, Richard Nixon wanted to see that, J Edgar Hoover. So many people were convinced that despite my innocence of the actual charges I would be like Sacco and Vanzetti, the Rosenbergs, or any of the other political figures who have been put to death. And, yeah, it was terrifying. I had nightmares."

But on the outside, the fight for her release grew bigger and bigger. It is this, she says, that gave her hope. "You know, I received over a million letters from schoolchildren in East Germany alone." One million, I repeat, trying to picture that many letters. "Yes! A million postcards. Schoolchildren were supposed to send me a rose for my birthday, so they drew roses on postcards. It was called 1 Million Roses for Angela Davis. At first they started to come in big mailbags. They are at Stanford University now, in the archives."

There were campaigns worldwide. "Eventually the terror was displaced. I realised that even if I ended up being put to death I would not be alone; that they would all be walking with me. And that is what gave me courage. I learned about the value of mass movements and collective struggle; that lesson has remained with me."

It seems to me she has always been an optimist. "Well, you know, we need hope. We can't do anything without optimism. My

friend Mariame Kaba, who is part of the prison abolitionist movement, says hope is a discipline. Our job is to cultivate hope, and that is what I always try to do."

The campaign made her feel less isolated but she found the attention embarrassing; shaming, even. There were so many women in jail with nobody for support, and here she was with her million postcards. She was thankful, but she had never wanted to be a pin-up. "I feel best when I'm working in the background – teaching and organising is the work I love doing. I was very disturbed in jail because I saw so many women who got such a bad deal. It was not right for me to be the focus of so much attention when I already had a network of people."

Davis raises her fist after being cleared of charges of murder, kidnap and conspiracy, San Jose, California, June 1972. Composite: Polaris/San Francisco Chronicle/Polari/eyevine

Davis was released from prison after 16 months and acquitted four months later, in June 1972. Again, she was lucky. While she was jailed, the death sentence was abolished in California, allowing her to be bailed. At her trial, the prosecution argued that she was not a political prisoner; that she had provided the gun simply because of her love for George Jackson. It was an easy argument to refute. There was

so much evidence of a life of political struggle and that she had campaigned vigorously for all three Soledad Brothers.

By the time she was released, George Jackson was dead, killed while trying to escape prison. Does she think they would have married if he had lived? “That may have been a possibility, but I can’t say for sure because I do know that feelings are intensified under the pressure of incarceration, and people change.” As far as men go, was he the love of her life? For once, her speech becomes broken. “Erm, well, that may ... you may express it that way. Erm, yeah.” She quickly gathers herself. “At the same time, I want to emphasise how deep that political relationship was. I spent the majority of my time with George communicating with him about radical issues, and also with other partners that I’ve had, male and female.”

With Dent, who is in her late 50s, she says it’s been the same. “We got to know each other because I was making a contribution to a book she was editing, so we were working together intellectually long before we came together.” She takes a sip from her mug. I ask what she is drinking. “Green tea and ginger.” That’s another big change. She lives a healthier life now. Is it true you used to smoke four packets of cigarettes a day? “Yeah, I was a terrible smoker. I smoked Gauloises. Now I try to exercise and eat vegan.” As she talks, I’m looking at her perfectly painted black nails. “I painted them myself!” she says proudly. She looks youthful and stylish – dressed all in black, except for satin-blue streaks in her scarf.

It was only when she came out of prison she discovered what her family had done for her and what it had taken out of them. “My mother would tell me about people who she thought were her friends who severed connection with her because they did not want to be associated with somebody who had a communist daughter.”

I bet there were times she wished you weren’t a communist and hadn’t got yourself in so much trouble, I say. “Oh yeah! I’m sure. I’m sure!” She laughs. “I thought about that myself sometimes. But both my

mother and father were really proud of the work that I did and the support that came from my siblings. My sister Fania travelled all over the world when I was in jail. My brother Ben, who was a football player in the NFL, suffered as a result – they put him on the bench. Nevertheless, his wife organised the largest political rally in Cleveland around the demand for my freedom." Why did they bench him? "Because he called out the journalists and asked them: why are you not asking me about my sister, who is in jail? We see the NFL at the centre of many waves of resistance now, but there was a nascent politicisation at that time and my brother was a part of it."

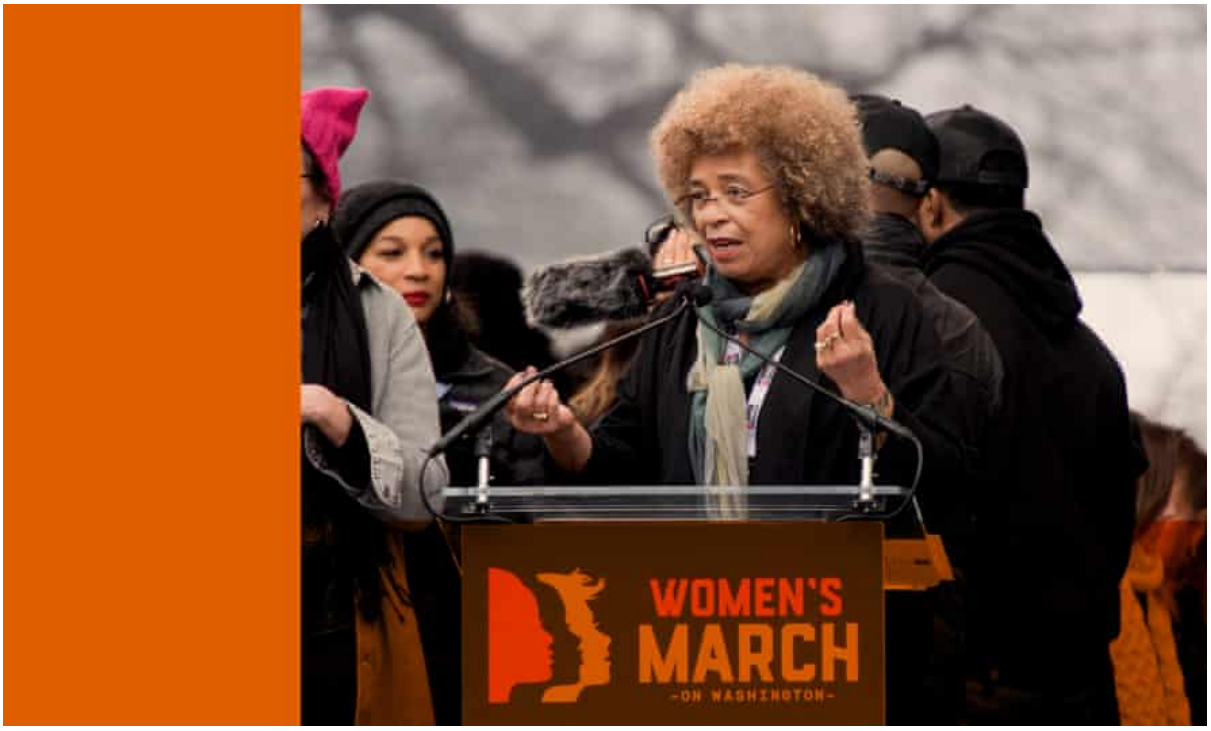
I don't think Black Lives Matter would have emerged except within the context that was created by the election of Obama

She talks about an image she loves that symbolises the way her family fought for her. "There is footage of my mother speaking at a rally where she's holding my sister's baby girl in one arm, with the other arm outstretched in a fist and calling for my freedom. I said: 'Wow! I am my mother's daughter.'"

After her release, Davis continued where she had left off – with her career and her activism. She became a professor of ethnic studies, and is now professor emerita of history of consciousness and feminist studies at UC Santa Cruz. She ran twice as vice-president for the Communist party USA, and dedicated much of her life to fighting for fellow activists who remained in jail and for the abolition of the prison system. Her ideas on abolitionism have evolved over decades, and are now championed by sections of the Black Lives Matter movement and feature prominently in Ava DuVernay's documentary on the subject, 13th.

It's funny, she says – so many people tell her it must be depressing fighting for the same things she was fighting for 60 years ago. But she's not having any of it. So much has changed; she cites the fact that America elected Barack Obama twice. How does she think he did? "He could have done a lot more, and I'm angry that Guantánamo is still

there, because he was going to shut Guantánamo, right? But at the same time, it was a world historical moment, and I treasure that moment and that it was enabled by young people who refused to believe it was impossible to elect a Black person."



Speaking at the Women's March on Washington, January 2017. Composite: Noam Galai/WireImage

She says you can't simply blame Obama for any disappointments. "Again, we can't project all of our power as a collective of human beings on to a single individual. So my critique is also a self-critique; there should have been mass demonstrations forcing him to move in a more radical direction. At the same time, I don't think Black Lives Matter would have emerged except within the context that was created by the election of Obama." The fact that there is now a mass mainstream anti-racist movement, involving white people as well as people of colour, is true progress, she says.

As for President Biden, Davis believes his conservatism is a historical inevitability post-Trump. "When there are moments of upheaval, the recovery period always tends to emphasise the conservative." But she says she has never focused on the dominant parties. "I think it's important to think more capaciously about the meaning of politics. The

millions of people who poured on to the streets in the aftermath of George Floyd's lynching constituted a force that was so much more powerful than any political party. And if there is a new moment of trying to recognise structural racism that occurred as a result of those demonstrations, then I would say those people are the motors of history. It's not about who the president was or is." She had witnessed deaths in police custody throughout her life. The difference now was that mass protest (and digital technology) ensured officers could no longer go unpunished. Last June, Floyd's killer Derek Chauvin was sentenced to 22 years and six months for second-degree murder.

Good comes out of bad, Davis says. The pandemic highlighted structural racism in both the US and the UK. In May 2020, research from the non-partisan APM Research Lab revealed Black Americans were three times more likely than white Americans to die of Covid. In the same month, the Office for National Statistics revealed that Black people were four times more likely to die of Covid than white people in England and Wales. Not only is the research being done to prove the existence of structural racism, Davis says, but people now are shouting about it. "There are young activists and scholars who are so much better at explaining what we tried so hard to figure out. Now they just take it for granted, and I love that."

With Nelson Mandela, in South Africa, 1991. Composite: Getty Images

You seem so content, I say. “Well, at this particular moment I really am happy to be alive and healthy and to be able to link what is happening at this moment to past histories.” Again, she says how lucky she is. “I treasure this time, because it means I get to see that the work that was done 50 and 60 years ago really mattered, even though there were moments when all of us felt it was in vain.” So many of the people in her life didn’t live to see the progress that has been made – her parents; George and Jonathan Jackson; the four girls murdered at the Birmingham church. “I feel that I’m a witness for those who did not make it this far.”

Angela Davis will be streaming in to Southbank Centre’s Royal Festival Hall for an in conversation with Lola Olufemi this Sunday 13 March as part of Women of the World Festival. Tickets available here: https://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/whats-on/literature-poetry/angela-davis-lifetime-resistance