

Parents and Black Liberation

By Roger Wilkins

The first "love letter" from Angela Davis to George Jackson introduced by the prosecution at Miss Davis' trial in California for murder offers an extraordinary glimpse into the mind of a young black woman as she struggles with one of the still live and anguishing legacies of slavery. During the late sixties, when young angry black rhetoricians lashed America because of three hundred years of oppression and recited the whole litany of slavery, the standard white response was, "What has this generation—white or black—to do with that period of our distant history?" But in writing to the man she loved, as a black woman caught up in the struggle for black liberation, Angela Davis had still to be deeply involved in the slow black psychic climb up out of the slime and ooze of slavery. In this letter, excerpts from which appear elsewhere on this page, her issue is whether the survival techniques and the perceptions of black needs developed prior to 1865 and persisting even now are suited to the needs and demands of black society.

The problem Miss Davis confronts runs in an unbroken line from the defense mechanisms blacks developed for survival during the brutal and violent days when they were chattel straight into the guts and spirits of today's black parents struggling with the excruciating problems of raising their children in a still racist America — an America that seems to think it has done enough about the racial problem and is both weary of the issue and hostile even toward such minor innovations as busing and scatter site housing. She knows the parents will be tempted to be "overly protective" by dissuading their children from accepting the "burden of fighting this war which has been declared on us," on the one hand while seeing the need to hand the sons of the race a "flaming sword" on the other.

During slavery, both black men and black women performed as beasts of burden from dawn to dusk, but in a very substantial measure, that was the man's sole function. In order to turn men into beasts, it was imperative for the so-

ciety to keep them docile. Male slaves could be murdered, punished brutally, sold down the river away from family and friends and have their faces pressed into the mud in hundreds of other more subtle ways until manhood was little more than a scream of anguish that died in the throat before it was heard.

Women seemed less threatening and were thus often given positions of trust at the mouths of white babies, and in the kitchens of the great houses or of sexual servitude, to master, masters' son, overseer or visiting fireman. The women did what they had to do for their own survival and to protect children, husbands and friends. They saw clearly the perils in store for the black man-child and, over generations and centuries, they devised ways to raise their boys to survive in the world they knew: "Keep your nose clean, hang back, work hard, succeed, escape, become 'non-nigger'."

After slavery, little changed in those patterns. The black male was still systemati-



ANGELA DAVIS

cally degraded. Women could get jobs because people needed domestics and the American fantasy grew enough to include a black woman teacher, nurse or social worker, but could not encompass a black male supervisor or executive. Meanwhile, up through the black revolution of the sixties, black mothers kept teaching the same old survival course to their children. They did so, partially because their own paths to progress were blocked and so they poured all of their hopes and all of their ambitions into their children, and partially because they wanted to save the children from both named and unknown perils.

Then came the revolution of blackness during the late 60s and the rise of black male consciousness. Cultists and others, rag-

ing at an abundance of injustices—many real, some imagined—began firing at any moving target. Black women loomed large in many sights; they were told “you have crushed our manhood and bled us of our blackness. We are men now and are prepared to take care of business while your role is to keep quiet, succor and love, while I fight and define my blackness.”

This is where Miss Davis parts company with much of the new black thought. She clearly understands the parental instinct to protect the cub, but she knows that the old survival patterns no longer work, for even when they do “work”, they often produce individualistic, white-like people, alienated from the black experience, people who stand alone, above and aside, identifying with little of the pain and soaring with none of the joy of engagement and occasional victory. The struggle, as she says, must now be collective. Renewed white resistance coupled with the still abysmal circumstances of the lives of at least half of black America requires a strategy of more ingenious and diversified black initiatives springing from both the talents and needs of a more unified black community than has ever previously existed.

Whether Miss Davis was speaking metaphorically when she talked about squeezing rather than jerking the trigger and rejoicing over the running blood of a policeman is something a jury in San Jose will soon begin to ponder. But no one who walks the streets of the poorest black communities in this country can doubt that desperate struggles, the contours of which are yet unknown, lie ahead. Eyes in black spirits see what white blindness and indifference fail to perceive: alleys where children play amidst rubble and wine-soaked bodies, tenements where families sleep eight to a room, grammar schools where heroin pushers peddle their wares to ten year olds and empty shells lurching along streets where men should walk. Nor is there any doubt about the rage such sights engender in the core of every black with a living spirit, whether or not that age is articulated as openly as Miss Davis does in her letter.

Nor can he believe that there is an asset anywhere more precious to the future of

black America than her children. Each mother will struggle with the knowledge of the pain that lies ahead for her child. Her instinctive desire to erect an iron protective mechanism around his spirit will do fierce battle with her knowledge that the black community needs him to live his life at full throttle and great risk while pouring his main force into the struggle for black liberation. If the parents choice is the latter, Miss Davis is right. That race of giants won't be developed by strong men and crippled mothers. Rather, it will arise from families headed by two whole human beings who set examples by being fully engaged in the most serious business of America, and who have the full courage to grow and to launch the child in the hope that none of them—whether parent or child—will flinch in the face of the awesome challenges that are sure to come.

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Letter to George Jackson

**Angela Davis:
Struggle, Survival**

It is already impossible to begin at the beginning. If I start by dropping the mask and say in all naturalness: I have come to love you very deeply, I count on you to believe me, George. I have used these words very seldom in my 26 years—because I could not have meant them very often. Believe me, it happened so abruptly, so spontaneously. I was not seeking to love when I walked into a Salinas courtroom on Friday, May 8, 1970. And so it is difficult to articulate it further. But one thing remains to be said—my feelings dictate neither illusionary hopes nor intolerable despair. My love—your love, reinforces my fighting instincts, it tells me to go to war . . .

Concerning black women: I am convinced that the solution is not to persuade the black woman to relax her reins on the black male, (but to translate) the "be a good boy" syndrome into a "take the sword in hand" attitude . . . to take our first step towards freedom, we, too, must pick up the sword. Only a fighting woman can guide her son in the warrior direction. Only when our lives—our total lives—become inseparable from struggle can we, black women, do what we have to do for our sons and daughters . . .

My mother was overly protective of her sons and daughters. I could never forgive her for forcing my brothers (us, too) to take dancing lessons. George, we must dig into all the muck and get at the roots of our problems . . . When we are overly protective, we attempt to dissuade our loved ones from accepting the burden of fighting this war which has been declared on us, we cannot be dismissed as counter revolutionary. You'd be surprised how many brothers would say this. Nor can it be said that we ought to blot our natural instincts for survival. Why, why, is our condition so wrought with contradictions? We, who have been coerced into performing the most degrading kinds of labor—a sex machine for the white slave master. Rather than helplessly watch her children die a slow death of starvation, my grandmother submitted to the white master, my father's accursed father . . .

To choose between various paths of survival means the objective availability of alternatives. I hope you don't take this as an apologetic stance. I'm only trying to understand the forces that have led us, black women, to where we are now. Why did your mother offer you reprimands instead of the flaming sword? Which is equivalent to posing the same question about every other black woman—and not only with respect to the sons, but the daughters too (this is really crucial. In Cuba last summer, I saw some very beautiful Vietnamese warriors . . . all female . . . I saw women patrolling the streets with rifles on their backs—defending the revolution. But also, young companeras

educating their husbands, and lovers—de-mythologizing machismo. After all, if women can fight, manage factories, then men ought to be able to help with the house, children.

But returning to the question—we have learned from our revolutionary ancestors that no individual act or response can seize the scepter of the enemy. The slave lashes out against his immediate master, subdues him, escapes, but he has done nothing more than take the first step in the long spiral upwards towards liberation. And often that individual escape is an evasion of the real problem. It is only when all the slaves are aroused from their slumber, articulate their goals, choose their leaders, make an unwavering commitment to destroy every single obstacle which might prevent them from transcribing their visions of a new world, a new man onto the soil of the earth, into the flesh and blood of men.

Even dreams are often prohibited or are allowed to surface only in the most disguised and sublimated form—the desire to be white, the monstrous perverted aspirations of a so-called black bourgeoisie, created to pacify the masses. And then there is the unnatural system-oriented desires of a black woman who is relating to the survival of her children . . .

The point is—given the vacuum created by the absence of collective struggle, the objective survival alternatives are sparse: ambitions of bourgeois gluttony or—like you said—unconscious crime. One path goes in thru the front door, the other sneaks in thru the back and is far more dangerous and seemingly far less likely to reach its destination . . .

A mother cannot help but cry out for the survival of her own flesh and blood. We have been forbidden to reach out for the truth about survival—that is a collective enterprise and must be offensive, rather than defensive . . .

Frustrations, aggressions cannot be repressed indefinitely . . . For the black female, the solution is not to become less aggressive, not to lay down the gun, but to learn how to set the sights correctly, aim accurately, squeeze rather than jerk, and not be overcome by the damage. We have to learn how to rejoice when pig's blood is spilled. But all this presupposes that the black male will have purged himself of the myth that his mother, his woman, must be subdued before—he—can wage war on the enemy. Liberation is a dialectical movement—the black woman can liberate herself from all the muck—and it works the other way around and this is—only—the beginning . . . Women's liberation in the revolution is inseparable from the liberation of he male . . .

Jon and I have made a truce. As long as I try to combat my tendencies to remind him of his youth, he will try to combat his male chauvinism. Don't come down on me before you understand—I never said Jon was too young for anything, I just mentioned how incredible it is that in spite of a Catholic school, Georgia, etc., he refused to allow society to entrap him in adolescence. But still, he doesn't dig any mention of age.

The night after I saw you in court, for the first (time) in months, I dreamt (or at least the dream was significant enough to work its way into my consciousness). We were together, fighting pigs, winning. We were learning to know each other.

I love you . . .