



The Black Scholar

Journal of Black Studies and Research

ISSN: 0006-4246 (Print) 2162-5387 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rtbs20

Confinement, Interiority, Black Feminist Study

A Forum on Davis's "Reflections" at 50

Sarah Haley, Shoniqua Roach, Emily Owens & Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor

To cite this article: Sarah Haley, Shoniqua Roach, Emily Owens & Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2021) Confinement, Interiority, Black Feminist Study, The Black Scholar, 51:1, 3-19, DOI: 10.1080/00064246.2020.1855091

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2020.1855091>



Published online: 15 Feb 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1618



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

Confinement, Interiority, Black Feminist Study

A Forum on Davis's "Reflections" at 50

SARAH HALEY, SHONIQUEA ROACH, EMILY OWENS, AND KEEANGA-YAMAHTTA TAYLOR

This Black feminist roundtable commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of Angela Davis's "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves." Contributors Sarah Haley, Shoniqua Roach, Emily A. Owens, and Keeanga-Yamahтта Taylor reflect on the continued impact of this essay within and beyond the fields of Black (Geography) Studies, Black Feminist Theory, Black Women's History, and theories of racial capitalism.

Black Study/Revolutionary Interior

Sarah Haley

You must know I've been in total isolation since I was extradited from New York to San Rafael. I miss the sisters in New York a great deal—the discussions, the clandestinely organized demonstrations, their warmth, their instinctive grasp of the concrete realities of oppression. I miss the pictures of you and other revolutionary heroes and heroines torn from contraband newspapers and pasted on cell walls with institutional lye soap.¹

Angela Davis's undated letter to Ericka Huggins provides a glimpse into the conditions of production of "Reflections on

the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves." A work of theoretical genius and audacity, the essay's conceptual framework and epistemological infrastructure is imbued with Davis's role in the community of women at the Women's House of Detention, her longing for those women after her extradition, and her pondering about the meaning of gendered community under captivity and its absence. Davis's humbly titled "Reflections" is a deep delineation of the entanglements of domesticity and dungeon, one that both anticipates and epistemologically grounds future Black feminist work on slavery. The essay's graceful elucidation of the simultaneity of white supremacist violence, ideologies, and extractive economies of racialized gendering, care, rebellion, domestic regimes of violation and fugitivity, and masculinist nationalisms remains a model. Her "portrait of the potentials and possibilities" is an explosive commentary on the domestic and the archive as loci of life and death. From the mortuary of the prison archive in which she then resided under *capital* conspiracy murder charges (what James Baldwin described as the corridor to the gas chamber), "Reflections" emerges as a work of kiting, a historiographic note smuggled through steel bars as well as layers of then-dominant popular discourse and scholarship that rendered Black women at once invisible and hyper-visible, passive and aggressive; and, most problematically, collusive with the slaveholding class. The *Black Scholar* introduces "Reflections" by positioning Davis within the genealogy of captive slave and revolutionary male leader, rhetorically invoking Malcolm

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

© 2021 The Robert Chrisman Foundation

The Black Scholar 2021

Vol. 51, No. 1, 3–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2020.1855091>

X in its description of the state terror she faced.

Sister Davis has been held in total isolation for 330 consecutive days. She has been confined in an 8 foot by 8-foot cell, which has no windows or fresh air ... This systematic assault on Sister Davis' physical well-being recalls the horrors of The Middle Passage, and indicates the full intention of the racist officials of California to destroy her life—by any means necessary.²

Perhaps Davis recognized that from her own position, facing execution or permanent captivity for conspiracy, she could uniquely disrupt the notion that the “black woman related to the slaveholding class as collaborator.”³ Yet “Reflections” accomplishes much more than this, refusing to align itself with a genealogy of charismatic male leadership by simply presenting it in feminine incarceration;⁴ instead, the essay provides a deep excavation of gender ideology and the revolutionary interior, which would influence generations of Black feminist work on slavery, labor, and resistance.

—

Kite

(n). Criminals' slang. A communication (esp. one that is illicit or surreptitious); spec. a letter or verbal message smuggled into, out of, or within a prison.

(v). To send a communication; spec. to smuggle a letter into, out of, or within a prison.

—Oxford English Dictionary

To kite is Black feminist practice. As contraband, as produced in captivity, it is a core

document in Black study, and in this case it ushered in a field of future work; as Marisa Fuentes notes, “Reflections” is part of a “substantial canon of black feminist scholarship on issues of representation and epistemology,” one that shaped her transformative 2016 history of enslaved women, violence, and the archive, *Dispossessed Lives*.⁵ According to Jennifer Morgan, “Angela Davis’s 1971 work on women in slave communities inaugurated a wide range of scholarship on African American women organized around the nexus of family, sexuality, and resistance.”⁶ “Reflections” is first among the chronology of works she includes in her own landmark text, *Laboring Women*, on women and slavery; beyond a mere historiographic turn, “Reflections,” and the subsequent works it “inaugurated,” asserted that gender was a legitimate category of analysis for studies of enslavement and rebellion; it exposed the masculine subject as the subject of historical knowledge on slavery; it reoriented the focus of study of slavery and revolutionary consciousness to the household. The hundreds of scholarly works that cite “Reflections” include substantive engagements by Black feminist thinkers including Patricia Hill Collins, Ann DuCille, Aisha Finch, Deborah Gray White, Cheryl Harris, Saidiya Hartman, Mae Henderson, Deborah King, Mireille Miller-Young, Hortense Spillers, and Dorothy Roberts.

Roberts, for example, takes up one of the essay’s most notable assertions, that enslaved women’s household labor was “the *only* labor of the slave community” that slaveholders could not “directly and immediately clai[m].” While stressing that “masters ultimately profited” from enslaved women’s

care work, Roberts credits Davis with complicating radical feminist interpretations of the family as a site of subordination by explicating how “slave women’s devotion to their own households defied the expectation of total service to whites.” Indeed, alongside Davis’s 1981 essay “Toward the Approaching Obsolescence of Housework,” “Reflections” is a forceful rejoinder to feminist constructions of the housework/paid work oppression/emancipation divide. Hardly romantic, Davis is careful not to invert the dichotomy by casting the domestic sphere as a source of absolute reprieve; she notes the “infinite anguish” of ministering to the needs of men and children. She elucidates the distinction between the *complete and direct* labor extraction of plantation household and field labor and the *mediated* profit derived from enslaved women’s social reproductive labor for the family. Socially reproductive labor creates something *other and in excess of* a captive labor force, namely Black life; Davis is the foundational theorist of the domestic as a site for the production of Black life beyond racial capitalism; accordingly, her essay demands that the terrain of Black liberation be reoriented to the realm of care and intimacy, both historically and in the present. Davis contends that the slaveholding class meaningfully, but only partially, appropriated the labor conducted in the domestic sphere and also brilliantly exposes the gendering capacity of the plantation domestic sphere to capital accumulation, writing:

It is true that she was a victim of the myth that only the woman ... should do degrading household work. Yet, the alleged benefits of the ideology of femininity did not

accrue to her. She was not sheltered or protected; she would not remain oblivious to the desperate struggle for existence unfolding outside the “home.” She was also there in the fields alongside the man, toiling under the lash from sun-up to sun-down.⁷

In using the language of accrual, Davis suggests that normative femininity is constitutive of capital in whiteness, theorizing racialized gender as asset, tethering the gendering capacity of the domestic sphere (where feminists had long argued that gender was made and remade), to the history of capitalism as it were.

As Saidiya Hartman argues, “Reflections” clears a path for subsequent analyses of reproduction and gender as constitutive of political and economic relations under slavery.⁸ Moreover, Davis lays the foundation for Black feminist conceptions of slavery in terms of gendered double burdens and the duality of violation. Analyzing the double burden of intramural domestic labor and extramural household/field labor and the duality of violation, the article notes enslaved women’s subjection to rape and the lash. This analysis of the duality of gendered violation and extraction presents a framework for conceiving of the double burden that others, perhaps most influentially Hortense Spillers, would later employ in theorizations of flesh as produced by interiorized and externalized acts of torture and prostration. Indeed, in the now-canonical passage in which Spillers describes flesh in this way, she cites Davis’s subsequent work on gender and slavery in *Women, Race, and Class*, before concluding the section with one of the most authoritative statements in Black feminist letters: “This

materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh ‘ungendered’ offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method of reading both through their diverse mediations.”⁹

If the subject of “Reflections” is the production of life at the point of death or deadly privation, the article is also a flesh object, produced from conditions of interiorized and exteriorized violence, intellectual and physical privation, as a text for living and dying. It was crafted amidst the “hundred little things that have been done in the hope of breaking me,” and the condition of being “awakened each morning by a white woman screaming obscenities at Blacks,” which defined Davis’s time at the Women’s House of Detention and intensity of violence that would await at Marin County Jail.¹⁰ As Saidiya Hartman has famously asserted, “to read the archive is to enter a mortuary; it permits one final viewing and allows for a last glimpse of persons about to disappear into the slave hold,” Davis was kiting from the hold of the prison and the archive—deprived of most primary sources, that is to say deprived of even the scant, illusory, and fragmentary archives of gender and slavery that exist. Her resource, then, was the secondary literature on slavery, feminist theory, Black cultural theory, and memoir;¹¹ as evidence of the dominant erasure of Black women as central subjects in the historiography of slavery, the scholarly literature functions as both primary and secondary source. Kiting in this case is a form of “deep study,” mining these sources for every possible fact and insight, which is to say for gendered disappearances, though Davis might, despite her prominence,

have at any moment been disappeared, much like George Jackson to whom she dedicated the essay.

In “Black Study, Black Struggle” Robin D.G. Kelley gracefully delineates an array of spaces of fugitive Black study; he cautions (by way of scholar George Lipsitz) against the use of interiority-driven claims of pain as the basis of protest demands, which might “cultivate sympathy over social justice.”¹² Davis’s monumental contribution to Black study lies in part in her analysis of the domestic as an intimate arena of creativity, care, and drudgery in which the means of contesting economic, political, and social structures and relations of power resided; put another way, it is a formative analysis of the nexus of affective and material structures of life and power. The revolutionary interior, which often existed at once within, in distinction from, and in opposition to, the dungeon/cell/plantation, was a site of what Kelley calls *Love, Study, Struggle*.

By late February 1972, Davis had been released on bail and “Reflections” was reprinted in the Winter–Spring 1972 issue of *The Massachusetts Review* titled “Woman an Issue.” The issue contained an illustrious cohort of Black women writers including Audre Lorde, Sonia Sanchez, Lucille Clifton, and Amy Jacques Garvey. With Davis released, the *Review* omitted the introductory context for the article that the *Black Scholar* had printed but did include “Affirmation of Resistance: A Response to Angela Davis” by Johnnetta Cole (who also contributed a stunning bibliography to *The Black Scholar’s* Black

Woman special issue), which contextualizes Davis's role as a scholarly worker:

like Black women under slavery, her job and her work were not necessarily the same. Just as black women under slavery were assigned jobs in the fields and in the houses of slave owners, their work was to nurture resistance to slavery; so, in the case of Angela Davis, her job was as a teacher of philosophy, but her work was and is about the use of philosophy in the interest of correcting the human condition.¹³

Cole's insights about Davis's temporal, intellectual, and political proximity to "women under slavery" is perhaps most potent in Davis's letter to Huggins. This letter will instantly and intensely transport readers familiar with Black feminist historiographies of slavery to another California. According to historian Stephanie Camp, California was an enslaved woman, and she and other enslaved women displayed abolitionist material in their cabins much as Davis describes the "revolutionary heroines" so that children and others who visited might imagine and plot a future beyond slavery, revealing how cabins were "simultaneously public and private," "home to slaves' family and community lives and essential elements in the rival geography."¹⁴ Bondwomen, she reveals, "procured, preserved, and displayed abolitionist propaganda in their homes."¹⁵ At the nexus of remaking the Black interior under captivity (affixing newspaper vellum to lye to enclosure) and reflecting upon its making was "Reflections" and the transformation of knowledge it produced about

complex geographies of abolition, cartographies of racialized gendering, gendered absented presences, and gendered modes of racial capitalist accrual.

The Living Quarters

Shoniqua Roach

Angela Davis's 1971 publication "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves"¹⁶ is frequently cited as one of the first Black feminist critiques of the Black matriarchy thesis—that powerful and enduring archetype of castrating Black women who usurp Black patriarchal authority, transmit poor values to Black children, and leech on a federal budget that they are presumptively not entitled to. Davis is clear about her intention to smite this "mythical transposition" at its historical root. To do so, she focuses on the material conditions of Black life under transatlantic slavery, which was predicated on what Hortense Spillers conceptualizes as pornotropic objectification of Black female flesh—a racialized gendered process of symbolic cum material ungendering that violently attempted to preclude Black captive's claims and access to any notion of corporeal, which is to say spatial, integrity and specificity.¹⁷ The private sphere of the (white feminine) home and the public sphere of (white masculine) labor and political activity hinged on the specter of the fungible and boundaryless Black female captive whose exploitation was irreducible to any one (gendered) location. She labored in the field alongside "her men," and she performed affective, reproductive, and (coerced) sexual labor within the master's enclave, as well as in what Davis recuperates as the "living quarters."

One of the central Black feminist interventions of “Reflection” is its notion of “the living quarters” as a paradigmatic locus of Black resistance and erotic power.¹⁸ Davis wrote “Reflections” from an iron cot in a four-and-a-half-foot-wide maximum security jail cell, and, from that place, she theorized fresh possibilities for Black social life, possibilities imaginatively and materially linked to Black women’s affective and care labor in those spatial sites we might call “Black domesticity.” In this reflection, I take inspiration from a long genealogy of Black feminist social life writing—innovated by theorists such as Angela Davis, elucidated by Saidiya Hartman, and finessed by Terrian Williamson, among others—to exemplify the ways in which Black feminist foci on the home, domesticity, and the Black interior, offer powerful counternarratives to, or geographic stories about, the political utility of Black domesticity for various nominal Black freedom projects. Here I stage a creative dialogue between and among 1960s social policies mapping the Black female-headed household as a locus of pathology, Davis’s “Reflections” essay, and her autobiography. I argue that “Reflections” stages a respatialization of the pathologized Black household (“broken homes”) as a site of erotic potential (“the living quarters”), and her autobiography contextualizes this respatialization in Davis’s experience of state-sanctioned removal from Black domesticity under the material conditions of incarceration.¹⁹ Through Black social life writing, I illustrate the ways in which the state-sanctioned castigation of Black domesticity responds to (white) material and historical fears of Black domesticity’s potential to disrupt a social world

whose norms are governed by the pathologization and annihilation of other ways of living and being. Out of unbridled desire and sheer necessity, Black women have been compelled to innovate and embody these ways of living and being. In the process, I position Angela Davis as a Black feminist spatial theorist, and “Reflections” as an invitation to the reader to consider what it might mean to center the “living quarters” in Black studies as a crucial site from which to theorize Blackness, gender, subjection and erotic possibility.

As Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, Jennifer Morgan, and others have tracked, Black dwelling sites have long been an object of colonial observation and state scrutiny. Fifteenth-century European travel narratives suggested that “African” housing arrangements were not “homes” to justify Eurocentric conceptions of Black inferiority. The US “black household,” particularly the Black female-headed household, remains under discursive and material siege via sociological writings, social policy, state-sanctioned surveillance and invasion. We can trace this from the sociological cum state-sponsored research of E. Franklin Frazier to Daniel Patrick Moynihan to the unceremonious murders of Atatianna Jefferson and Breonna Taylor in their own twenty-first-century Black dwellings. Broken homes, indeed. Against this historical and ongoing anti-Black construction of, and engagement with, Black dwellings, Davis’s “Reflections” unpacks the matriarchal thesis as an indictment of both Black women and the spaces within which we dwell. To refute the matriarchy thesis, and to claim the erotic power of violently (un)domesticated Black women the

matriarchy thesis attempts to deny, Davis sets out to examine how an archetypal enslaved Black woman would interact with both “her people and oppressive environment.”²⁰

By focusing on Black women’s interactions with “[their] people” and “oppressive environment,” Davis reveals the (abolishment of the) matriarchy thesis as not just a representational cum material problem (to address policy and economic consequences such as the refusal of welfare benefits). It is also a structural cum spatial problem (because Black women’s “dangerous” social and affective labor inextricably shapes and is shaped by the spaces in which we dwell). Moynihan explicitly defined the nation-state’s “broken home” by the presence of single, nonheteronormative Black women and mothers. Challenging the matriarchy thesis thus hinges on the respatialization of both the Black woman and Black dwelling sites as potential loci of counterintuitive Black power rather than pathology.

Moynihan wrote:

In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.²¹

By way of response, Davis, incarcerated and strapped for sources, waded through her recollections of Black men’s sociological and historical letters, her own imagination, and lived experiences to retrieve the

Black female subject as someone who played a, if not *the*, salient role in the community of slaves. This community was sustained by fungibly gendered Black female flesh relegated to social and material care work in the living quarters. In the living quarters, and in the twentieth-century prison cell Davis inhabited, captive Black women stoked resistance and insurrection, revolt and minor revolutions, and not unlike enslaved Black women’s antebellum white captors “the department of corrections ... felt it was extremely important to establish methods of quarantining [Davis’s and other Black women’s] resistance and radicalism in order to prevent their large-scale diffusion.”²²

As Davis outlines, the flexible and fungible application of gender to captive Black women, who engaged in modes of production and reproduction, relegated them to the “living quarters”—the realm “furthestmost removed from the immediate arena and domination.” Davis recuperates the living quarters as the area “where the basic needs of physical life were met,”²³ as a crucial space through which to potentially feel like one was “*among human beings again*.”²⁴ Obviously, anyone could invade the living quarters, squarely situated on the slave plantation, at any time. Yet, for Davis, they constitute an imaginative and material space in which Black women, who were conveniently condemned to the project of reproducing an always already pathologized Black domestic life for white subjectivity and capital accumulation, cradled Black flesh and mended Black wounds, affirmed Black sentience and nurtured Black imagination. Where Moynihan observes “that the Negro American has

survived at all is extraordinary,”²⁵ Davis’s “Reflections” responds, yes. Yes, indeed.

If Moynihan claimed that “a stable home is a crucial factor in counteracting the effects of racism upon Negro personality,”²⁶ then Davis counterintuitively agreed, conjuring the living quarters when she herself was forcibly removed from her chosen dwelling space. While incarcerated, Davis agitated for access to a community of Black and brown women—prisoners and guards—who, despite differences in class status, geopolitical, spiritual, and sexual backgrounds and orientations, she marked as collective prisoners of white supremacist systems of captivity. In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, Black feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick observes that “locations of captivity initiate a different sense of place through which black women can manipulate the categories and sites that constrain them.”²⁷ From her jail cell, from her own twentieth-century living quarters in the afterlife of slavery, Davis reimagined Black domesticity as a space of radical Black assembly, as a location that “might possibly permit a retrieval of the man and woman in their fundamental humanity.”²⁸ In so doing, Davis respatialized the living quarters as a site in and through which to theorize Black radical possibility—for personhood, for gender, for intimacy, for desire, for kinship, for pleasure, for revolution. Before Wynter conjured the demonic grounds; before Gilroy chronotoped the slave ship; before Tinsley sounded the water; before Agard-Jones implored us to remember the sand; before Sharpe dwelled in the wake; before King illustrated the shoal, Davis gifted us the living quarters.

Recuperating Davis as a spatial theorist of the living quarters, of Black domesticity, exemplifies the ways in which Black domesticity quietly careens around the Black (feminist) imagination, inhabiting crevices, churning through theoretical impasses, hugging archival gaps, enabling Black feminists to cultivate counterintuitive possibilities for being and becoming otherwise, even under conditions of captivity. Although the state has foreclosed and surveilled it as pathological, women have abandoned it as oppressive, queers have disavowed it as sexually stifling, and many strands of Black studies have deemed it a structural impossibility, Black domesticity preoccupies the Black political imagination, anyway. Indeed, Davis’s living quarters reflect and shape who we are and have the potential to be. It is a space for loving and for living, a space for suffering and for dying, a space for assembling and for imagining how we might be Black *and* free.

“Ransom, a Subtle Intervention”

Emily A. Owens

From within the confines of incarceration, which at the very least restricted her ability to do research, Angela Davis’s “Reflections” recalls a historical moment in which writing about Black women in and beyond slavery, when it existed at all, was animated by what she calls “fictitious clichés.”²⁹ Even in 1970, as scholars established a New Social History and refocused their attention on histories “from below,” historical studies that centered Black women, the fields of women’s studies (and Black women’s studies), and the signal achievements of studies of gender and

sexuality in slavery were yet a decade away.³⁰ Yet Davis's title "reflections," which she suggests "does not pretend to be more than a collection of ideas which would constitute a starting point" protests too much: 50 years later, this essay is a cornerstone from which studies of gender, sexuality, and slavery still draw strength and direction.

"Reflections" endures not simply as an icon or a relic: Davis's conceptual framing of the particular circumstance through which enslaved women navigated their sexual lives is urgent, but remains under-utilized. Davis's use of "ransom" to name and frame enslaved women's erotic predicament opens up untapped space for understanding the relevance of transaction to slavery's sexual culture. "Ransom" attunes us to the ways that transactions were an important technology of sexual violence against enslaved women in the antebellum South.

While interrupting the "spurious ... and propagandistic" framework of the Black matriarch, Davis points to a subtle aspect of that fiction that continues to haunt public conversations about enslaved women, and signals fictions about sexual violence generally: the idea that Black women were veritable traitors to the race (because they were, as "matriarchs," traitors to "their" men). Davis notes that this fiction, codified by Moynihan's notorious report, inhered in Black nationalist discourse that imagined the ascendancy of heteronormative social formations as a signal of Black liberation, wherein an empowered woman was libeled as an "emasculating female," not an asset in shared struggle, but a liability. A starting point, indeed.

Even as the notion of the Black matriarchy thesis has lost all credibility since the time of

Davis's writing, the underlying suspicion of Black women's sexual lives in slavery, to which she points, haunts conversations about slavery. Indeed, Davis suggests that the insidious "indictment of our female forebears" that lurks beneath the matriarch stereotype suggests that women "assented to slavery," and even "related to the slaveholding class as collaborators."³¹ The basic hatred of women, and the specific hatred of Black women, has been, and continues to be, expressed through the notion of the (race) traitor, betraying an ongoing suspicion that women somehow participate in their own oppression. The specter of collaboration, of treason, tends to emerge in its most base form: sex. As Marisa Fuentes wrote much more recently: "in the historical literature, sexual intercourse becomes the means by which enslaved women are ascribed power."³²

Davis's critique of the Black matriarch and "tangled" Black family is essential for its refusal to engage in dichotomous thinking: she does not capitulate to an argument that would cure Black women's exclusion from femininity with an embrace of the same. Davis refuses heteronormativity's strivings, refuses her contemporaries' suggestion that the cure to "the deformed equality of equal oppression" was the increased oppression of women.³³ By the same token, then, she offers space for historians to encounter women whose lives and labors binary formations of rape or consent (read: treason) cannot easily capture, women whose creative responses to their condition cannot be described in, Jennifer Morgan writes, the "always already insufficient" poles of "resistance and accommodation."³⁴ Indeed, even

as Davis wrote for and from her own moment, and emphasized the drama of “open forms of counter-insurgency”³⁵ she also offered a vision of sex acts as, themselves, scenes “in the thick of battle.”³⁶

Davis’s discussion of *ransom* makes space for a more subtle, more context-driven encounter with the violence that enslaved women endured. Davis writes:

In confronting the black woman as adversary in a sexual contest, the master would be subjecting her to the most elemental form of terrorism distinctively suited for the female: rape. Given the already terroristic texture of plantation life, it would be as potential victim of rape that the slave woman would be most unguarded. Further, she might be most conveniently manipulable if the master contrived a ransom system of sorts, forcing her to pay with her body for food, diminished severity in treatment, the safety of her children, etc.³⁷

The elegance of “ransom” is that it insists on interpreting the acute violence that Black women survived *in the context* of structural factors: hunger, humiliation, bodily pain, “the safety of her children.”³⁸

The notion of ransom draws our attention, as well, to the impossible but persistent fiction of the traitorous Black woman. Davis’s revelation of ransom—that is, transaction—at the heart of Black women’s situatedness as concubines, prostitutes, and mistresses upends a simple assessment of resistance or accommodation, and also draws our attention back to her initial objection: the figuration of Black women as “collaborators,” Black women as traitors. She

helps us raise a new question: from whence does the presumption that Black women are culpable for their own violation emerge? Who does such a presumption serve?

This is why there are no good rape victims—in nineteenth-century jurisprudence, the only good rape victim is a dead one. The transactional conceit of rape law, and the cultural logic of rape that exceeds the law, is an artifact of patriarchy, because women are burdened with maintaining their honor in the form of withheld speech acts (consent). When those speech acts are central to investigations of violence, women’s credibility rests on proof that she sacrificed her physical body in order to preserve her sexual honor. This is indexed in the requirement, in nineteenth-century jurisprudence, but I would also argue in the present, of “evidence of a struggle” on the body as critical corroboration for a claim of sexual violence. Thus transaction is the critical hinge on which violence becomes illegible. If, in contemporary courtrooms, the simplest way to discredit a woman is to suggest that “she wanted it,” then the implication of that reliable defense is this: where there is transaction, there can be no violence. Women’s culpability ascends in importance, as the effects of violence disintegrate.

Fifty years ago, Angela Davis invited a turn in scholarship that has only recently gained its foothold: as scholars’ turn toward those women—the joyful,³⁹ the dispossessed,⁴⁰ the mischievous,⁴¹ the wayward⁴², the infamous.⁴³ These women, would never, by force, circumstance, or refusal, appeal to a Black studies imaginary that maintains any suspicion in women as “traitors.” Indeed, that quiet investment has left Black women

who lived outside of heteronormativity's strivings obscured for too long. And yet the seeds of a feminist imaginary that understands these same women as keepers of creative, resistant, and sustaining intellectual labor that calls the bluff on erotic transactions—including and perhaps epitomized by marriage—as nonviolent exists right here in Davis's opening salvo on slavery's history.

"Reflections" highlights both Black nationalist and mainstream American narratives of Black women's failure to conform to the constraints of normative femininity, and sets the stage for the now-abundant field of Black women's historians to continue—because we must—to write against a persistent flattening and obscuring of Black women's discernment of their own world. It is among these women that we are called to account for the false logic that transaction is evidence of anything other than violence, and called to find descriptive capacity that exceeds the binaries of rape or consent, resistance, or accommodation. The language of "ransom" that Davis's reflections offers has not been its most remarked-on contribution, and perhaps it need not become so. Nonetheless, this resistance to a binary description of Black women's experience of sexual violence, and this insistence on the complex terrain on which Black women negotiated their survival in and on behalf of community, is its quiet revolution.

Angela Davis's Dialectic of Freedom

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor

During her 18-month-long confinement in New York and California jails and while awaiting trial for three capital offenses

including murder, kidnapping, and the conspiracy to commit both, Black revolutionary Angela Davis embarked on a political journey to understand and explicate the history and experiences of enslaved Black women and their role within Black communities and Black families.

Davis would say that the research invested in this question would ultimately be of use in her legal defense given the sexism at the core of the case against her, but her inquiry began as part of a larger political dispute within the Black liberation movement. What was the role of Black women in the struggle for Black liberation? Radical Black feminist organizing in the late 1960s began partly in reaction to radical Black men's vision of Black women as subordinate to the leadership of Black men.

Davis's descent into this historical inquiry stemmed from her ongoing relationship with George Jackson, a Black revolutionary who had radicalized while in prison and with whom Davis politically collaborated before and during her imprisonment, and to whom the article is dedicated, and who was murdered in prison shortly before its publication. This dedication indicates that Jackson's political ideas concerning Black women were in a state of flux. Davis wrote in the generous spirit of conjuring solidarity through the serious political engagement of two comrades coming at a political question from two wholly different social positions. Instead of dismissing Jackson as irredeemably sexist, as separatist feminists were concluding of all men, Davis utilized her political skill and analytical prowess as a Marxist to locate a history mutuality and interdependence between Black men and women as opposed

to difference and intractable antagonism. In doing so, Davis uncovers a new understanding of the dialectic of Black women's enslavement and Black women's liberatory potential as co-conspirators in the struggle against slavery.

Davis cautioned Black men that the same forces of oppression located in the state and beyond that engaged in the racial demonization of Black men, were also the same institutional and social forces that conjured this imagined history of Black women as domineering or "castrating" Black women that, as the argument continued, were at the root of the instability within the Black family. In 1965 when Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan published a report on the condition of Black families titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, its ideological power was immediately evident. Even as the report called for public programs and interventions, it blamed the disproportionate conditions of inequality and poverty in Black communities squarely on the assumed domestic dysfunction within Black families. It was a powerfully descriptive argument that nourished a bevy of stereotypes that assuaged the guilt of Black men while implicating Black women as responsible for Black men's diminished role as financial providers. These were "common sense" or easy explanations put forward by the political establishment, attempting to take the place of much more complicated historical experiences. The power of these simplistic explanations, according to Davis, could be found "outside of the established ideological apparatus, and also among Black people, unfortunate references to the matriarchs can still be encountered."⁴⁴

In challenging this widely held assumption about the destabilizing disposition of Black women, Davis grapples with two central issues. The first is the way that ideology, shaped and espoused by the dominant social class, is deployed in ways to distort social relations of those within a given society. Ideology helps to create order out of otherwise chaotic and irrational situations, and in doing so, it obscures and obfuscates the inherent contradictions born of inequality in class relations under slavery within US capitalism. The second, central issue that Davis elucidates is how the process of radicalization among enslaved Black women and within enslaved Black families and communal relations, more generally, subverted the stabilizing influences of ideology in their rendering through religion, family, and gender that allowed for the development of radical consciousness and action. Through the dialectical process where enslavement then unleashes the possibility of liberation, Davis rediscovers enslaved Black women at the epicenter of actions intended to disrupt and destroy the system of slavery. Rather than as passive or hidden figures in the history of African enslavement in the United States, Davis relocates enslaved Black women at the center of those processes.

Her methods that lead to this re-mapping of history are worth considering here. Her methods are not so important for the historically clarifying conclusions that she reaches, but they are means by which she arrives at her conclusions, which give critical insights into the possibilities of struggle, solidarity, and liberation in contemporary politics. The dynamic interplay of ideological trappings, the experiences of actual life, and the

radicalization that emerges in the clash between those two opens the possibility of uncovering the true nature of social relations. In its unvarnished form, when the exploitative and oppressive nature of capitalist society is exposed, the necessity for struggle reveals itself to broader layers. This is Davis's critical intervention.

The commodity-driven characteristic of slavery in the United States unraveled the possibility of an ordered, coherent African American family. The ideological trappings of Christianity, its insistence on the sanctity of family, and the supposed revered role of women within the household, collapsed in contradiction in the lived experiences of enslaved people. For the basest purposes of social reproduction, Black women were thrust into the role of home maker. But Black women's role in the larger sphere of labor as slaves who were expected to work as hard as men subverted the gendered division of labor as their role within the larger sphere of enslaved labor unraveled the ideological trappings of "women's work." In other words, the toiling responsibilities of enslavement exposed the hypocrisy and brutality of slavery by putting women in unwomanly situations. This, in turn, put slavery in contradistinction with Christianity, the supposed moral glue of slave society. Where ideology is intended to cloud, its collapse creates a brutal clarity where the productive and social relations are laid bare.

The productive capacity of Black women as slave labor also thrust them into what Davis describes as a "deformed equality" with men, fomenting the conditions for Black women to develop similar consciousness and conclusions about their experiences

as slaves. This "deformed equality" also extended to Black men, though in a different capacity. Indeed, it was Black men's inability to defend Black women from the violence and sexual abuse and assault within slavery that simultaneously plunged them into "deformed equality" with Black women. This symmetrical bond of subverted gender positionality, forged in mutual subjection, formed the basis of the solidarity that was necessary to engage in productive resistance or rebellion.

Thus, instead of viewing Black men and women from a socially antagonistic position, Davis repositions Black men and women in a socially collaborative stance rooted in shared experience and history. Davis brings this realization of the shared reality uniting Black families into the intimacy and interiority of the Black living space. The home space for Black families, relatively freed from the otherwise omnipotence of the slave master and his appendages, became a place where subversion could be explored and cultivated. Subversion ranged from the experience of actual family or other communal relations, building relationships, reading, thinking, scheming, resisting, rebelling, and essentially experiencing life as a human being.

Here, Davis unearths a new role for Black women in innovative and politically generative ways. Released from the shackles of an assumed passivity or recovered from historical invisibility, Davis shows the dynamic role of Black women's leadership and politics as essential partners and comrades in a wide variety of slave rebellions and uprisings that continue to lack our full historical knowledge and understanding. Davis's theorization,

however, is much more important than the “discovery” of Black women’s activism alone. Davis is making a broader intervention by grasping the dialectic between Black liberation and the broader project of human liberation.

If Black women are at the center of the struggle for Black liberation, and if the struggle of African Americans exposes the deeper contradictions within the United States by exposing and undermining the dominant ideologies of American exceptionalism and the supremacy of the United States and American capitalism, then that has the potential to unleash the same social forces of liberation struggles. This was the process that revolutionaries, Angela Davis among them, believed was unfolding in the 1960s and 1970s. Davis argued that the Black movement was a “harbinger of change throughout the society [that] is due in part to the greater *objective* equality between the black man and the black woman.” She quotes W.E.B. Du Bois toward the end of her own essay to draw even sharper attention to this point:

In the great rank and file of our five million women, we have the up-working of the new revolutionary ideas, which must in time have vast influence on the thought and action of this land ...⁴⁵

Martin Luther King, Jr. also observed about the role of Black struggle in US society in a posthumously published article in 1969, when he wrote,

In these trying circumstances, the black revolution is much more than a struggle for

the rights of Negroes. It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws—racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism. It is exposing the evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society. It reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws and suggests that radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced.⁴⁶

It was an observation poignantly made by the women of the Combahee River Collective in their 1977 groundbreaking statement also about the particularity of Black women’s experiences and politics. There they made the astounding statement: “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression.”⁴⁷ Here they imagine that the liberation of Black women is the genesis for all of human liberation. Far from placing the experiences of Black women above others, their point is the one Davis made: if the US is the epicenter of world capitalism and all of its attendant crises then when the empire is destabilized through the political activity of its most oppressed populations, the empire is weakened, thereby opening the space for liberation struggles to emerge and flourish. Angela Davis, writing from bondage, with the threat of execution acute and enclosing, rescued Black women from the margins of history, endowing them with agentic subjectivity and the possibility of a creating another world. This was not only about the significance of history, but its meaning in the contemporary world.

Notes

1. Letter to Ericka Huggins, undated: Angela Y. Davis and the Angela Davis Defense Committee, eds., *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance* (New York: Third Press, 1971), 109.
2. "Free Angela Davis," *The Black Scholar* 3, no. 1 (1970–1971): 1.
3. Angela Y. Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Black Scholar* 3, no. 4 (December 1971): 4.
4. On race manhood and charismatic leadership see Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men: The W.E.B. Du Bois Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998) and Erica R. Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).
5. Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 156.
6. Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 4.
7. Davis, "Reflections," 7.
8. Saidiya Hartman, "Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," *Souls* 18 no. 1 (January–March 2017): 167.
9. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" *Diacritics* 17 (1987): 68.
10. Davis and the Angela Davis Defense Committee, *If They Come in the Morning*, 188; 202.
11. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *small axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 4.
12. Robin D.G. Kelley, "Black Study, Black Struggle," *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 40, no. 2 (2018): 162.
13. Johnnetta Cole, "Affirmation of Resistance: A Response to Angela Davis," *The Massachusetts Review* 13½ (Winter–Spring 1972): 102.
14. Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 93; reference to California is also from Camp, 96.
15. *Ibid.*, 95.
16. Davis, "Reflections."
17. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67.
18. On erotic power, see Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984).
19. Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1974).
20. Davis, "Reflections," 3.
21. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. No. 31–33 (US Government Printing Office, 1965).
22. Davis, "Reflections," 42.
23. *Ibid.*, 6.
24. *Ibid.*, 24.
25. Moynihan, *The Negro Family*, 29.
26. *Ibid.*, 39.
27. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xvi.
28. Davis, "Reflections," 6.
29. Davis titled her piece "Reflections" because, she writes in the introduction, "the conditions of my incarceration [meant that] opportunities for researching the issue I wanted to explore were extremely limited" (81).
30. For more on the emergence of women's studies, see Joan Wallach Scott, *Women's Studies on the Edge* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Clare Hemings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), and Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and its Pedagogies of Difference*

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012). For more on the politics of Blackness in women's studies, see Beverly Guy-Sheftall and Evelyn M. Hammonds, "Whither Black Women's Studies: Interview," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 9, no. 3 (1997): 31–45 and Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). For examples of this earliest wave of historical studies that centered enslaved women, see Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985, 1999 [2nd edn]), Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912–20, and Nell Painter, "Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting," in *US History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, ed. Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995). The explosion of Black women's histories in the late 1980s was the result of graduate study and archival work done by Black women historians in the 1970s, a time which also saw the founding of the Association of Black Women Historians in 1977.

31. Davis, "Reflections," 4.
32. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 577.
33. Davis, "Reflections," 7.
34. Morgan *Laboring Women*, 166
35. Davis, "Reflections," 12.

36. *Ibid.*, 14.

37. *Ibid.*, 13.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

40. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*.

41. See Sarah Haley's description of "malicious mischief" in *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

42. Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019).

43. Samantha Pinto, *Infamous Bodies: Early Black Women's Celebrity and the Afterlives of Rights* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020)

44. Davis, "Reflections," 4.

45. *Ibid.*, 15.

46. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Playboy Interview: Martin Luther King, Jr., January 1965," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. J. M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1986), 340–77.

47. Miriam Schneir, *Feminism in Our Time: The Essential Writings, World War II to the Present* (New York: Vintage Press, 1994).

Sarah Haley is Associate Professor of Gender Studies and African American Studies at UCLA, and has research and teaching investments in Black feminism, gender history, carceral studies, labor, and Black radicalism. Her book, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, was published by University of North Carolina Press in 2016.

Shoniqua Roach is assistant professor of African and African American Studies & Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Brandeis University. Her peer-reviewed work appears in *Feminist Theory*, *Signs*, *differences*, and *Feminist Studies*, among others. She is currently at work on her manuscript, *Black Dwelling: Home-Making and Erotic Freedom*, an intellectual and cultural history of the ways in which Black homes have been tragic sites of state invasion, as well as paradigmatic entry-points for Black women artists, activists, and intellectuals to imagine, rehearse, and enact Black freedom.

Emily Owens is the David and Michelle Ebersman Assistant Professor of History at Brown University. She researches and teaches about race, gender and sexuality in United States contexts, with particular emphasis on the legal history of sexual violence and the intellectual history of Black women.

Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor is an assistant professor of African American Studies at Princeton University and the author of several books, including *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2019), which was a 2020 finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for history. Taylor is a contributing writer at *The New Yorker*.