

Subtext, Wishful Thinking, or Future Politics?
Reading Angela Davis's Early Black Feminism through a Queer Lens

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In February 1998, the cover story of *Out Magazine* was an “exclusive” interview wherein Angela Davis publicly came out as a lesbian. In the years since, she has continued to maintain her right to privacy about her romantic life, but she has been a vocal advocate for a coalitional and intersectional feminism inclusive of lesbian, bisexual, trans, and other queer women.

When one looks at her classic study *Women, Race, and Class* (1981), though, there is not much of a trace of Davis's embrace of either her own queerness or the role the LGBTQ+ subjects could have played in the long history she recounts. The main question for me is: Should there be traces of queerness in that study just because the author now identifies as lesbian? Certainly some aspects of *Women, Race, and Class* do read as “queer” to me, meaning that they trouble the fixed containers of social identity and thus disrupt heteronormative norms and other social conventions that consolidate power asymmetries along the lines of gender and sexuality. Just as one example, Davis' exposition in Chapter One of how the conditions forced upon enslaved African and African American women fostered disruptions of “the nineteenth-century ideology of womanhood” (p.11) is one such instance. “The economic arrangements of slavery contradicted the hierarchical sexual roles incorporated in the new ideology. Male-female relations within the slave community could not, therefore, conform to the dominant ideological pattern” (p.12). Such a moment could be invaluable for rethinking the common presupposition that queerness—often cast now as the transitive verb *queering*—is an agentic and performative mode of disruption and resistance. In the context of a slavery system, Davis's auxiliary verb phrase “could not,” in the passage quoted above, is crucial. In black historical experience, “queering” just as often might be a product of social and economic conditions as it is a willful resistance to ideologies, normative roles, and cultural or social practices. That is one lesson reading *Women, Race, and Class* through a queer lens could help remind us of.

Or, perhaps our question ought to be: Should we even be looking for queerness in Davis's text? Since *Women, Race, and Class* is a foundational text in the canon of coalitional and intersectional feminism, scholars like myself who work in queer studies and theory should be interested in exploring the possibilities of claiming—without appropriating and denaturing—the critical work Davis performs here. However, how much of reading the study queerly would depend on approaching it anachronistically and retrospectively, in light of Davis's later personal revelation about her sexuality? Wouldn't that be a form of violence, a violation of the integrity of the text and the activist and intellectual work it and its author performs? I am particularly sensitive to such issues, given my archival work on the activist-poet Muriel Rukeyser (1913-1980), who late in her life disidentified from both liberal feminism and, later, gay and lesbian liberation even though she lived—as a kind of open secret—as a bisexual (or pansexual) woman who challenged patriarchal systems. Ought we even claim such formative figures who actively disavowed, whether for a period or for the entirety of their lives and careers, any affiliation of either their intellectual and aesthetic work or their social justice activism with identity-based gender and sexuality movements?

In *Epistemologies of the Closet* (1990), a foundational text in queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick warns of how the paradigm of the closet reinforces heteronormative dynamics. To read a text to detect how the author may have closeted queerness, signaling it covertly, risks violating that text and its author. One would be acting like the very heteronormative, patriarchal, heterosexist, and homo- and transphobic social system one wishes to disrupt. In her later essay, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You” (1997; rev. and posthumously repub. 2003), Sedgwick implicitly recirculates those warnings by cautioning scholars and activists against adhering to “paranoid” attitudes, beliefs that one must always be postured to resist and fight because the world is out to do us harm. In contrast, a “reparative” mode—which Sedgwick leaves ill-defined—would mean keeping oneself open to happy surprises, which out of necessity also will be painful. *Anything* that breaks everyday habits and routines and preconceptions is disruptive and thus painful, even if it eventually leads to an amelioration of one’s conditions.

One argument for being open to a queer reading of *Women, Race, and Class*, then, would be to keep ourselves open to the surprises such readings might afford to help reshape our current ideas and practices of coalition and intersectionality. Such openness could lead to a reparative recasting of our activism, theorizations, art, and public intellectualism (including our teaching). We need to rethink these foundations, continually. That is especially true in a world where our voices are often silenced, or others attempt to bully us into silence. A recent, random email I received from a completely unknown person exemplifies this for me. “Is it possible to straighten a queer text?” this stranger wrote, in a message lacking salutation, signature, or context. Perhaps I’m just being paranoid, but I read this message as a microaggression—a homophobic invocation of conversion therapy, couched in a kind of trolling email and directed at a queer studies/queer theory scholar of some note and public visibility. Even if it were not intended that way, in the present political and cultural climate such a decontextualized message reads that way to someone like myself who personally has been subject to similar emails, institutional microaggressions, and actual hate crimes. So, I’m interested in the idea that Angela Davis may have something queer to tell me. I don’t want to “straighten” this text, and I definitely don’t want to “straighten”—i.e., push back into the silence and darkness of the closet—literature, artworks, and other cultural works (including histories like Davis’s) by out LGBTQ+ artists.

All the same, I think we must be cautious of overly queering *Women, Race, and Class*. To read as “queer” Davis’s exploration of how black feminism historically established coalitional ties across labor, gender, and racial divides could do violence to the study’s premise. Inadvertently, queering the text also might denature the activism Davis’s early intellectual work has helped inform. Such interpretive violence would gloss the fact that Davis had *opportunities* to expressly link her study to existing LGBTQ+ efforts and politics. Yet, she *chose* not to do so. On a certain level, if we are true to the text and its author’s intentions, we must respect her decision not to make that connection, at a particular moment—between Stonewall and before the advent of the HIV/AIDS crisis—when much LGBTQ+ activism was cultural and intellectual in nature, invested in a recovery of queer political, social, and cultural history that affirmed the day’s political efforts.

And it *was* a decision to treat nonconforming gender and sexuality identities not only implicitly (if that) in *Women, Race, and Class*, but also to keep those constructs out of the title altogether. It would be a different book if it were titled *Women, Race, Class, and Sexuality*. But it is not unimaginable that Davis *could* have written such a book, regardless of her own sexual experience, expression, or identification.

Famously, Huey Newton had published a letter in 1970 in the Oakland paper *Black Panther* to encourage other radical black nationalist activists to set aside their homophobia and to recognize the struggle of, and to form coalitions with, the gay and lesbian liberation movement, which was beginning to emerge in the wake of the previous year's Stonewall uprising. It is believed that French homosexual literary writer and anti-imperialist activist Jean Genet, during his brief visit to the United States to support the Black Panthers, is the one who persuaded Newton to make that communiqué. During that visit, Angela Davis met Genet. In 1991, seven years before her *Out* interview appeared and one decade after *Women, Race, and Class* was published, she remarked about Genet's significance for trying to forge a coalition between black and LGBTQ+ politics. Clearly this moment between Newton and Genet had made a lasting impact on her, but it does not seem to inform the coalitional imaginary of *Women, Race, and Class*. What do we do with this fact?

And what do we do with the fact that the gay and lesbian liberation movement did not begin as a form of identity politics, so that that could not have been Davis's rationale for dampening the visibility of sexuality in her recounting of coalitional resistance? Coalition actually was at the heart of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF)'s radicalism. Identity politics emerged in the mid-1970s, as the GLF lost its force, due to internal divisions and competing agendas, and began to be surpassed by the liberal identity politics of the Gay Activists Alliance. The GLF, though, had characterized its mission as a fight against *sexism* in all its forms, defining "sexism" as the systemically patriarchal and what we now would call heteronormative biases believed to be the basis not just for homophobia, heterosexism, and gender conformity, but also for white supremacy and imperialism. (In time, for some GLF activists, because of the higher incidences of incarceration of LGBTQ+ persons—since gender and sexual nonconformity were criminalized—a critique of sexism also would be linked to a critique of the military-industrial-prison complex, not unlike Davis's anti-carceral activism.) The GLF's anti-sexist program was rigorously theorized by particular cells within the movement's New York City branch, particularly the Marxist cell known as Red Butterfly and the cell headed by persons of color known as Third World Gay Revolution. As an African American openly working in a Marxist tradition, was Angela Davis aware of those local activist developments? Is *Women, Race, and Class* a way of responding to the idea that sexism, rather than white supremacy, is the foundational root of all social injustice in the United States? Or, does she not openly address LGBTQ+-related matters because she herself was subject to state surveillance and even incarceration for her radical ideology?

Those questions become even more complicated if we consider the fact that the phrase "black feminism" signified in a specific way when Davis was researching and writing *Women, Race, and Class*. With the founding of the Combahee River Collective in 1974, an activist organization of self-identified lesbians of color, the basis for what we now call intersectionality had been established. The concept was eloquently and importantly theorized in that group's famous 1978

statement. Is such a model of queer feminist intersectionality, in which every person singularly embodies various social identities and thus experiences “interlocking systems of oppression” differently, at odds with the Marxist foundations of Davis’s thought? Black feminist poet Audre Lorde, who would be affiliated with the Combahee River Collective and would co-found their publishing organ *Kitchen Table*, seems to exemplify the possible truth of such a supposition. As Lorde famously theorized in “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” (1978), social transformation starts with the reformation of social bonds and intimacies through personal experiences of eroticism, which have the potential to refigure ideas of community and power asymmetries. But is such a model of intersectionality rooted in personal politics so different from the schema Davis envisions in Chapter 10 of *Women, Race, and Class*? In that anomalous section, she devotes her attention to *individual* women’s stories—each woman’s story told in a distinct, subtitled section of the chapter. This anomaly to a text that is otherwise largely a people’s history is even more significant because of the chapter’s title: “Communist Women”! Here communism, a political ideology privileging economic class (or even social class) narratives, is offset by an emphasis on narratives about exemplary individual activists. Nothing seems expressly or covertly erotic about these stories, though. Is this writing strategy also political one, a rethinking of, or maybe a response to, the intersectional and coalitional formations of (queer) personal politics that Lorde and her Combahee sisters were doing, outside the parameters of eroticism and sexuality?

Ultimately, for me, there is no final answer to the question of the presence of queer traces in Angela Davis’s study, or even if we should look for them there. Nonetheless, what remains important are the fact that that the text of *Women, Race, and Class*—as a written intellectual and activist engagement—should provoke such questions and pitch us back into the historical moment when Davis researched and wrote her book. Such questions can throw new light on our political history and thus implicitly can inform and reform our political present. From an activist vantage, one purpose of historical studies is to prompt new queries about the past and the resultant investigations should compel new, and sometimes painful and ultimately irresolvable, reflections on the present state of activist affairs. So, what does coalition and intersectionality look like now to us, once we resituate Davis’s project in relationship to what was going on as she developed and wrote it? Maybe *queering* this book is really just a matter of *querying* through it. That is, Davis helps us ask new questions about the nature of LGBTQ+ and coalitional and intersectional activism’s past, present, and future, and maybe those questions could prove fruitful for our efforts—as thinkers, scholars, teachers, artists, and activists—to dismantle a system that continues to dehumanize, disadvantage, disenfranchise, injure, and even murder its most vulnerable citizens, residents, and migrants.

Subtext, Wishful Thinking, or
Future Politics? Reading Angela
Davis's Early Black Feminism
through a Queer Lens

Art, Women, Race, and Class reading group

*Eric Keenaghan
27 March 2019*

HIV Eradication: The Impossible Dream?

America's Best-Selling
Gay & Lesbian Magazine

Out

February
1998
\$4.99
\$6.99 US

Exclusive

The '70s
Revolutionary Icon
Speaks Out

**Angela
Davis**

Murder, Italian Style
Signorile Reports From Rome

A Star Is Born
Midnight's
Lady Chablis
Rises
to Fame

February 1998 cover of *Out* Magazine, featuring Angela Davis.

She came out as lesbian in an exclusive interview published in this issue.

A Fall 2018 Angela Davis exhibit at the San Francisco GLBT Historical Society printed the following excerpts and extrapolations from the interview:

[In the 1970s], Davis rejected all “identity politics” that made categories like race, gender, or sexual orientation the basis for political organizing. Behind many of her objections was Davis’ distrust of the principle that “the personal is political.” Politics was political, she believed, and the personal was not an arena she wanted to explore.

Davis’ approach began to change in the ’80s, she says, as “new feminisms emerged, particularly from feminists of color, with new vocabularies to talk about gender and sexuality.” She says that her research on the blues, for example, helped her understand how “personal” life historically played a role in black women’s liberation. The blues women who sang about homosexual desire, abusive men, jealousy, lust, travel and love were creating, she says, “a working-class black feminism” and “a politics of resistance challenging race and gender identity.”

Davis credits younger activists for other insights: how issues like sexuality can “enter into consciousness and become the focus of struggle,” how “private” issues like domestic violence and AIDS can spark social movements.

Meanwhile, her sense of her own personal and political has shifted. Her lesbianism, she says, is “something I’m fine with as a political statement. But I still want a private space for carrying out my relationships.”

—Sara Miles, “Angela at Our Table,” *OUT Magazine* (February 1998)

<https://www.glbthistory.org/angela-davis?rq=angela%20davis>

Muriel
Rukeyser
(1913-1980)

Pansexual poet,
activist, and educator

Leftist, invested in
coalitional politics
since the 1930s (with

Yet resisted “coming
out” and refused
affiliation with second
wave liberal feminism
through the 1970s



Among our secrecies, not to despise our Jews
(that is, ourselves) or our darkness, our blacks,
or in our sexuality wherever it takes us
and we now know we are productive

too productive, too reproductive
for our present invention—never to despise
the homosexual who goes building another

with touch with touch (not to despise any touch)
each like himself, like herself each.

You are this. --- from “Despitals” (c.1972)

Epistemology of the closet
&
Paranoid reading vs. Reparative reading

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

1 question (in 2 parts)



William Stevenson <wstevenson811@gmail.com>

Fri 3/15, 6:49 AM

Keenaghan, Eric ↵



↩ Reply | ▾

Inbox

Flag for follow up. Start by Wednesday, March 20, 2019. Due by Wednesday, March 20, 2019.



Phish Alert



Is it possible to straighten a queer text? Is there an article posted someplace that addresses this topic in easy language?

A LETTER FROM HUEY TO THE
REVOLUTIONARY BROTHERS AND
SISTERS ABOUT THE WOMEN'S
LIBERATION AND GAY LIBERATION
MOVEMENTS

During the past few years, strong movements have developed among women and among homosexuals seeking their liberation. There has been some uncertainty about how to relate to these movements.

Whatever your personal opinions and your insecurities about homosexuality and the various liberation movements among homosexuals and women (and I speak of the homosexuals and women as oppressed groups), we should try to unite with them in a revolutionary fashion. I say "whatever your insecurities are" because, as we very well know sometimes our first instinct is to want to hit a homosexual in the mouth and want a woman to be quiet. We want to hit the homosexual in the mouth because we're afraid we might be homosexual; and we want to hit the woman or shut her up because we're afraid that she might castrate us, or take the nuts that we might not have to start with.

We must gain security in ourselves and therefore have respect and feelings for all oppressed people. We must not use the racist type attitude like the White racists use against people because they are Black and poor. Many times the poorest White person is the most racist, because he's afraid that he might lose something, or discover something that he doesn't have; you're some kind of threat to him. This kind of psychology is in operation when we view oppressed people and we're angry with them because of their particular kind of behavior, or their particular kind of deviation from the established norm.



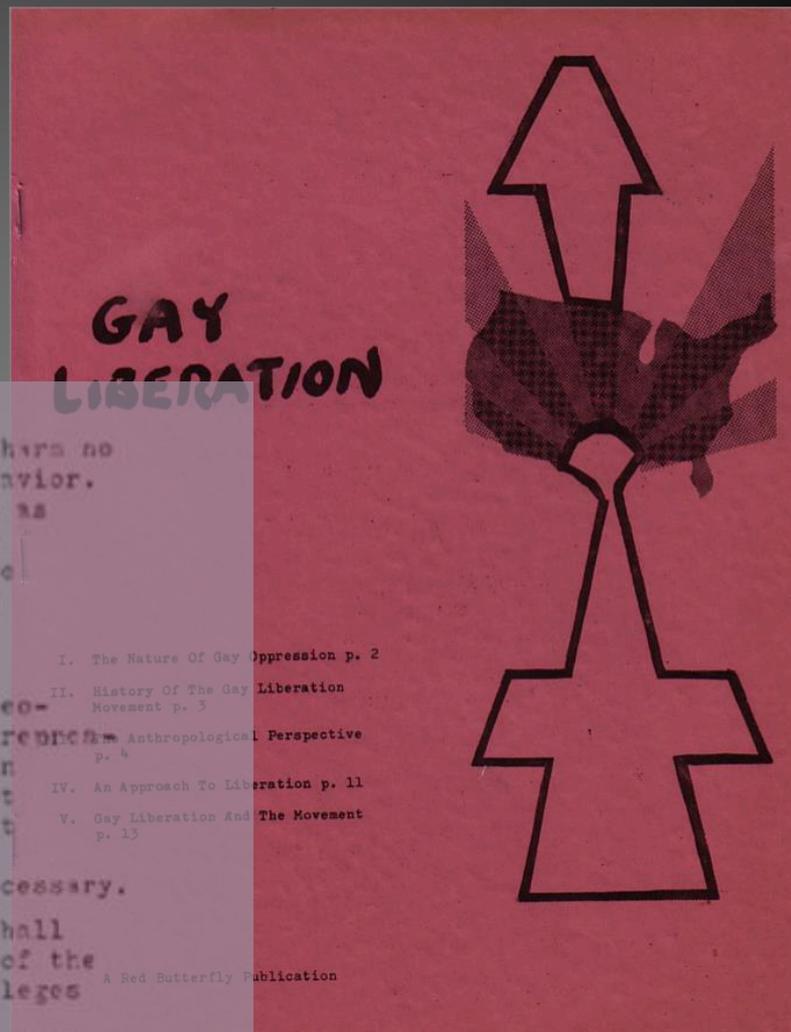
Huey Newton's 1970 missive in *The Black Panther* declaring solidarity with the Gay Liberation Front, one year after Stonewall.



In 1991 (before her *Out* interview), Davis noted the significance of this missive and how it had been prompted by Jean Genet's visit to the US to support the Black Panthers in 1970. Recalling Genet's shock tactics to stir up the homophobic Panthers (by dressing in a pink negligee), Davis remarked that Genet "had just wanted to bring about a discussion of the similarities between the struggle against racism and the struggle against homophobia." Davis met Genet during that trip.

--photo and quote from Davis' speech reproduced in *The Advocate*, 2016

The first pamphlet (1970) by Red Butterfly, a Marxist working group of the Gay Liberation Front



Basically we make two points to the movement:

1) Homosexual acts between freely consenting partners harm no one, and are a natural and completely human form of behavior. The revolution cannot be just or complete if our rights as full human beings are not recognized. We call upon our comrades to be progressive in sexual matters also, as we include ourselves in the Brotherhood of Man. An injury to one is an injury to all.

2) We feel that our oppression is due, not merely to ignorance and superstition, but to the interests and ideologies of an authoritarian capitalist society. Sexual repression is one means used to maintain the domination of man over man in an unfree society. Sexual liberation cannot succeed within the framework of reactionary society. At the same time, the struggle for sexual liberation is a necessary part of making the revolution by any means necessary.

Perhaps with the emergence of a classless society, we shall also enter into a labelless society -- one that will be free of the stereotypes that divide man from man and perpetuate the privileges of the few over the needs of the many.

We will not stop, nor will our straight friends, in the fight for the liberation of all, no matter what superstitions must be conquered. No one need give up anything for gay liberation except his own prejudice. We are not asking for our rights as human beings, but demanding them. We will not be satisfied with anything less than freedom.

ALL POWER TO THE OPPRESSED PEOPLES!
POWER TO ALL THE PEOPLE!

Third World Gay Revolution, 1971

16. We want a new society — a revolutionary socialist society. We want liberation of humanity, free food, free shelter, free clothing, free transportation, free health care, free utilities, free education, free art for all. We want a society where the needs of the people come first. We believe that all people should share the labor and products of society, according to each one's needs and abilities, regardless of race, sex, age, or sexual preferences. We believe the land, technology, and the means of production belong to the people, and must be shared by the people collectively for the liberation of all.

17. Only Lesbians can be liberated women. Only gay males can escape the sexist role of "man."

Written & adopted by the Third World Gay Revolution (NYC), adopted with the addition of Point 17 by GLF-NYC

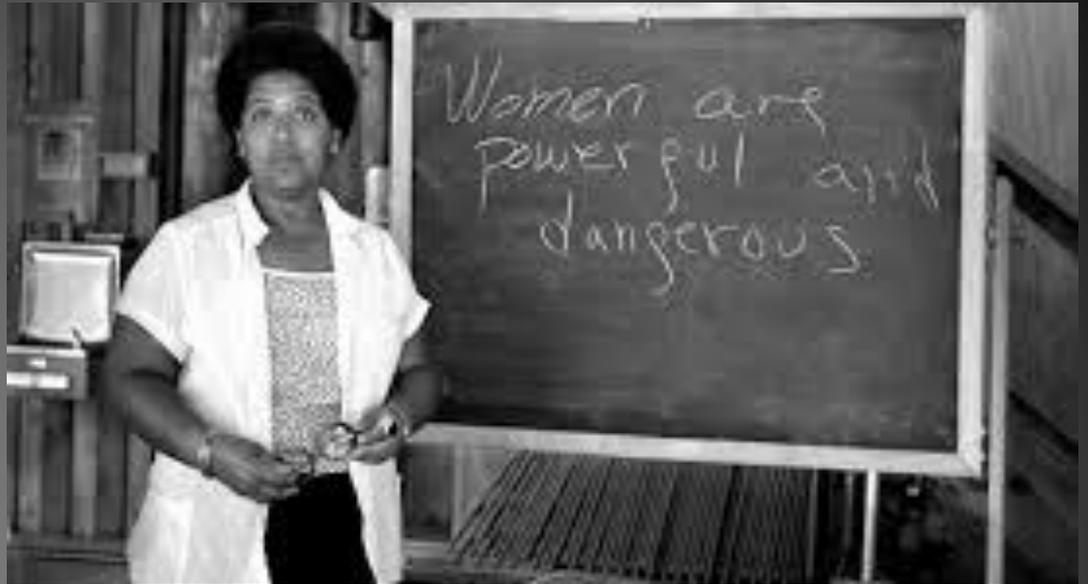
Combahee River Collective

Statement (1978)

“We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women’s lives as are the politics of class and race. We also find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. [...] Although we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand.”

Audre Lorde “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” (1978)

“There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women this has meant the suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives.”



“The erotic cannot be felt secondhand. As a Black lesbian feminist, I have a particular feeling, knowledge, and understanding for those sisters with whom I have danced hard, played, or even fought. This deep participation has often been the forerunner for joint concerted actions not possible before.”

In a 2014 interview with *The Nation*, Davis signaled black feminism's primacy for her politics, but also gestured toward an intersectional feminism including nationhood and sexuality.

ACTIVISM EDITORIAL SEPTEMBER 15, 2014 ISSUE

A Q&A With Angela Davis on Black Power, Feminism and the Prison-Industrial Complex

"Like Nelson Mandela, we must be willing to embrace the long walk toward freedom."

By Frank Barat

AUGUST 27, 2014



(Image: Archie Pinedman)

Frank Barat: How would you define black feminism and its role today?

Angela Davis: Black feminism emerged as a theoretical and practical effort demonstrating that race, gender and class are inseparable in the social worlds we inhabit. At the time of its emergence, black women were frequently asked to choose whether the black movement or the women's movement was most important. This was the wrong question. The more appropriate question was how to understand the intersections and interconnections between the two movements. We are still faced with the challenge of understanding the complex ways that race, class, gender, sexuality, nation and ability are intertwined—but also how we move beyond these categories to understand the interrelationships of ideas and processes that seem to be separate and unrelated.

Davis was a featured speaker at the
2017 Women's March in Washington, D.C.

Her speech marks her current political alignment with an
invocation of contemporary queer feminist intersectional politics.

