Interview with **Angela Y. Davis**
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Interviewers Terry Kay Rockefeller
Camera Rolls: 3107-3112
Sound Rolls: 348-350
Team: C

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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #3107]
[sound roll #348]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Hit it.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark one.

[slate]

00:00:15:00

Interviewer:

In 1967, what made you make the decision to come back home, and how would you characterize the mood of, of, of the Black liberation movement, and, and how you began to get involved with it in those years?

00:00:29:00

Angela Y. Davis:

I decided to study in Europe in 1965, which was the year of the Watts uprisings, and the following year the Black Panther Party was founded. So, I found myself in Europe at a time when the Black liberation movement was undergoing a very important transformation. I felt very drawn to that movement and felt very frustrated during the entire period I spent in Europe because I was forced to watch things from afar. In 1967, I decided to discontinue my academic work in Europe and return to this country specifically in order to become involved in the Black movement. I chose to go to San Diego because Herbert Marcuse, with whom I had studied at Brandeis, was teaching there. But I also knew that in California, there was a great deal of organizing occurring in the community as a result of the emergence of the Black Panther Party and other organizations. So, as soon as I arrived in San Diego, I began to investigate what was happening in the community, what organizations existed. A number of organizations were active. The Black Congress, and there was an organization headed by Ron Karenga called US Organization. Finally however, I decided that the organization I wanted to join did not really exist. So, I became active on the campus in founding the first Black Student Union there, which eventually developed into a movement demanding Black studies on the campus and an entire college devoted to the needs of Black students. As well as Latina students and White working-class students.

00:02:33:00

Interviewer:

Can you talk a little bit about the forces that came together behind the idea and, and the vision of that college? And then—

00:02:41:00

Angela Y. Davis:

Well, actually we were quite unique during that period. That was an era during which Black people were seeking to identify with a lost heritage, and it, of course it was extremely important that we understand what was necessary in order to feel comfortable calling ourselves Black, in order to talk about our African ancestry in a very positive way. So that many of us took on African names. My name during that time was Tamu. We wore African garb, and we were very much concerned about developing our Black identity. But at the same time, I felt perhaps because of my background, the way my parents reared me, that there had to be coalition work with other groups, that we could not so encapsulate ourselves that we were not aware of what was happening in the Chicano community, we were not aware of what was happening with White working class people who were also oppressed. So, I convinced a couple of students to begin organizing the Black Student Union when finally we had gotten enough Black students together. And I should say there were, there was only a handful on the campus at that time. Then we approached the Chicano students who began to organize and created a Chicano students organization. We realized that we had to come together because separately we were so few that we would accomplish absolutely nothing. We connected with a group of progressive White students on the campus and decided that we would make the demand that the next college to be established on the campus of the

University of California San Diego be called Lumumba-Zapata College. And that its curriculum, as well as its faculty reflect the specific needs of Black students, Chicano students, and White working-class students. It was a very militant movement I should say. We were forced to break in at one point to an academic senate meeting and of course ignore all of the decorum that is usually reserved for such meetings, and we simply demanded that the professors listen to us about the needs of those of us who had been marginalized for so long within academia. The professors eventually listened. They were of course absolutely outraged that we would dare to disrupt their deliberations. But they listened, and some of them joined us. Eventually we decided to occupy the registrar's office, and Herbert Marcuse was the first person to walk through the door. We figured that if the most revered person on the campus participated in the occupation that that would legitimize our struggle. So that eventually we were able to muster support among the majority of the students on campus. We had a successful strike. And the third college, although it was never called Lumumba-Zapata College, eventually came into being.

00:06:23:00

Interviewer:

[inaudible] great. I'd now like to have you talk about your decision to join the Community Party and, and the, the vision for, for movement that, that that en…that, that was inspiring you in that decision.

00:06:38:00

Angela Y. Davis:

When I returned to this country from Europe, I was very, very anxious to throw myself into organizing work in the Black community. I eventually became active in SNCC, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, in Los Angeles, even though I was commuting between San Diego and Los Angeles. And I was very excited about the work that we were able to do in the community. Within a very short period of time, we had hundreds of active members of the organization. I was the head of the liberation school, which I found extremely exciting because I had always felt somewhat uncomfortable in the purely academic environment. There I was able to teach Marx to community people, to young people. Eventually we had some problems within the organization, Los Angeles SNCC. They had to do with the part played by women in the organization. It was a very difficult period. Eventually the organization itself became defunct. It was at that time that I decided to join the Communist Party. I joined the Communist Party because I had come into contact with a number of Communists, Black Communists in particular, in working with SNCC and doing community work in San Diego and, and Los Angeles. And I was always very impressed by their vision, which seemed to go much further than what was happening at the moment, which seemed to be much broader than specifically the issues confronting Black people at that particular moment in history. They had a long-range vision. They also had a sense of how to involve other progressive people. And I associated myself in general with, with their vision. For example, when we were in San Diego, there was the case of a young Black man by the name

of Ed Lynn at that particular time. His name, he eventually changed his name…who was charged with, I can't remember the exact charges. But he—

00:09:04:00

Interviewer:

Can I—cut. Let me just stop for a second. Let, let's, let's just talk about the Lynn, and I'm not sure—

Angela Y. Davis:

That you want to, OK.

Interviewer:

—yeah, yeah. I think it may—

Angela Y. Davis:

Well—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:09:11:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark two.

[slate]

00:09:14:00

Interviewer:

OK. How would you characterize the growing opposition that the movement was confronting during this period?

00:09:21:00

Angela Y. Davis:

There was terrible repression during that period. I, I had never experienced anything like that in my life. And I realize looking back that we lived in a war zone. I could receive a telephone call from someone with whom I was active in SNCC for example, and she or he might say, My house is surrounded by the police. Call as many people as possible because we need support. That was quite usual. So, that we expected at every moment that we might be confronted with an armed attack. And I, I don't know if I can get that across, that feeling today except by saying that it was as if we were involved in battle. Now, many people during that era precisely because of the organized police attack on the Black liberation movement and specifically on the Black Panther Party, we know that J. Edgar Hoover orchestrated a national assault on the Black Panther Party in particular and other organizations that were militant representatives of the Black community at that time. There were many people who as a result of that repression called the period fascist. I was one of those who was opposed to arguing—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Angela Y. Davis:

—that we lived in an era of full-blown fascism.

00:11:11:00

Interviewer:

I'm just gonna run out of film on this magazine. So, we just need to switch over.

[cut]

[camera roll #3108]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:11:15:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark three.

[slate]

00:11:17:00

Interviewer:

All right, again. How would you characterize the opposition that you were, you were facing? And, and what did that make you feel, and, and, and empower you to do or, or feel that you needed to be empowered to do?

00:11:28:00

Angela Y. Davis:

Well, it was a very frightening phase of my own life as I'm sure it was of all of those who participating during that particular moment of, of our movement. We were confronted with the possibility of being attacked by armed police at any given moment. I purchased a weapon. Most people had guns, and we bought guns not because we were intending to use them in any offensive way but because it…we needed them in order to protect ourselves, to defend ourselves. We learned how to use weapons because we had to be able to guarantee that we would not be senselessly shot down by the police as were so many people during that period. The police or infiltrators. We knew that there was a nationally coordinated effort to wipe out the Black Panther Party and to wipe out the militant Black movement in general. And of course many people argued that because of the nature of this repression, we lived in a society which had embraced a full-blown fascism. I personally was not one who argued that that era was a fascist era. I felt that the repression was definitely fascist like in character, but there were still things that we were able to do within the traditional channels of the society. I mean there was still some democratic rights that we enjoyed, and we had to take advantage of those. Those who argued that we lived in a fascist country, if they followed the implications of that would then say that our organizing has to be clandestine, that we must arm ourselves, and we must engage in guerilla activity. And of course there were those who felt that way at that time, but I felt that we could openly organize. The people with whom I worked were for organizing in an open manner in the community, doing the kind of work we did with SNCC for example, bringing people together around instances of police brutality, organizing the community to fight back whenever there was a, a police killing in the community or when a liquor store owner for example might kill a young Black man whom he thought was about to rob his store. So, that was the kind of work that we were doing then despite the repression.

00:14:31:00

Interviewer:

I would like to now move on and have you relate what happened to you and your job at UCLA, and how that, because of the notoriety it brought you, drew you into the prison movement. You, you had made that wonderful link before about George Jackson contacting you and the other Soledad Brothers contacting you.

00:14:52:00

Angela Y. Davis:

Well, I was hired to teach in the philosophy department at UCLA in the fall of 1969. I had joined the Communist Party a year earlier. Before I had the opportunity to teach my first class, I was fired by the regents of the University of California, an ex-officio member of which was Ronald Reagan. As a result of the enormous amount of publicity that was focused on me by virtue of that firing, I received letters, countless numbers of letters from prisoners all over the country. George Jackson wrote me. Ruchell Magee, who was my codefendant wrote me. And later, I began to recognize through the work that I did in the case of the Soledad Brothers that it was very important to bring into the movement of that period a consciousness of what was happening to people in prison. Previously we had worked primarily around political prisoners or primarily around people who had been arrested because of their political beliefs and political activities. Huey Newton, Erica Huggins, Bobby Seal, the New York 21, the LA 18, all of those cases. But we hadn't really taken a look at the function of the prison system in our society. As a result of working to free the Soledad Brothers, I became increasingly aware of the need to integrate an understanding of the social function of the prison system into the work that we were doing, calling for political equality, the work that we were doing in the community against police crimes and police brutality so that when I fought for my right to teach on the campus at UCLA, I always included in that analysis the fact that there were three young Black men who were victims of the very same repression which I was confronting. But they stood to lose their lives as a result of the political work they had done within the prison system. I stood to lose my job as a result of my political activities and, and my work.

00:17:50:00

Interviewer:

Tell me, can you describe how—you were talking before about how the definition of a political prisoner expanded.

Angela Y. Davis:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

Can you, can you relate that, that transformation that went on within the prisoner movement?

00:18:01:00

Angela Y. Davis:

Well, initially when we talked about political prisoners, we referred to those who had been sent to prison as a result of their work, their political work in the community. And of course

we had scores of Black Panthers who were political prisoners. I was a political prisoner because I was arrested and charged with murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy, not because I had committed those crimes but because of my political work. We began to realize that the definition of political prisoner also needed to include those who did not necessarily go to prison because they had been politically involved but who became politicized within the prison system and therefore were subjected to long prison terms and other forms of repression as a result. George Jackson for example, who was sent to prison as a result of being convicted of a seventy dollar robbery. When I met George Jackson, when I became aware of his case and became active in the Soledad Brothers' case, he had been in prison for ten years for seventy dollars. And it was clear that, that they had refused to release him on parole because he was trying to organize his colleagues in prison. He was doing the kind of work that was very threatening to the prison system because he was calling for unity. He was calling upon people to demand better prison conditions, better food, the, the right to read whatever they wanted to read. So, definitely George Jackson was a political prisoner even before he was charged with the killing of the Soledad guard. And then we came to realize that there was a whole category of prisoners who may not have been politically active in the community, may not have been politically active in prison, but were in prison for political reasons. They were in prison because of the function of racism in society. They were in prison because of the, the function of, of class exploitation. We, we took a look at the prison system and realized that if you were wealthy, you didn't go to prison. If you did at all, you went to what we used to call the country club prisons, you know, [plane flies over] where you could play tennis, and ride horses ,and, and that type of thing. So, that expanded into a movement of support within the community taking on the function of the prison system in general and calling for the abolition of the prison system as it exists, as, as it existed then, as it exists today.

00:21:01:00

Interviewer:

Can you talk about how—

Camera Crew Member #3:

[inaudible]

Interviewer:

Is that, should we stop for a second?

Camera Crew Member #3:

[inaudible] plane.

Interviewer:

OK. It's just the airplane.

[cut]

[camera roll #3109]

[sound roll #349]

00:21:09:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:21:14:00

Interviewer:

OK. What was the prison movement in terms of, of how did you see the prison movement fitting into your overall notion of the revolutionary movement or a, a full scale, you know, liberation movement in this country? What was the part it had to play?

00:21:30:00

Angela Y. Davis:

Well, although in the Black community at that time virtually everyone had some personal contact with the prison system. I know in my family I could count several cousins who had gone to prison. But it was one of those things that we never approached politically. We never integrated what was happening to thousands and thousands of Black people and other poor people into our analysis of the exploitative and oppressive character of this society. [plane flies over] So, George Jackson, for example, was very enlightening in his ideas when he, you know, pointed to the—

00:22:28:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. Do we—

[cut]

00:22:32:00

[slate]

00:22:34:00

Interviewer:

How did the prison movement fit into a large, your larger vision of, of the Black liberation struggle?

00:22:41:00

Angela Y. Davis:

Well, virtually every Black person had some personal relationship to the prison system. In my family, I had several cousins who had spent time in jails and prisons. And that was the case with virtually everyone. However, we had not analyzed the prison system with a view towards integrating it into our overall conception of the function of racism in the society, of the function of, of class exploitation. ***We had talked about police brutality. The Black Panther Party talked about the police as an occupying force in the community. But we had not really understood the extent to which the whole criminal justice system, the police, the courts, the prison system, is very much intertwined with the economic*** ex…***oppression of Black people.*** There are no jobs for certain numbers of young people in our community. [plane flies over] What happens to them? There's no recreation available. The schooling is, is, is, is not the kind of enlightening process that it should be. So, what happens to these young people? They might go out and get involved in petty criminal activity as a result of the lack of these facilities in the community. And then they end up of course spending many of them the rest of their lives in, in prison. George Jackson was charged with and convicted of a seventy dollar robbery. He went to prison incredibly on a sentence which ranged from one year to life. He received an indeterminant sentence. And had George Jackson not been assassinated, I'm convinced he would have spent the rest of his life in prison. So, what does that mean? How does the prison system function to reinforce the economic exploitation of, of our people? How does it function to prevent the kind of organizing, challenging these injustices? These are questions that we had not really explored until as a result of working around the case of the Soledad Brothers we began to become acquainted with some of George Jackson's ideas on the relationship between prison and society, on the function that the prison system has in relationship to the perpetuation of, of racism in a larger society.

00:25:50:00

Interviewer:

I would like you to go back and talk about George Jackson, his initial sentence, and then what he faced without foreshadowing his death. Because I…as we watch the film, the viewers will, will learn about his death.

Angela Y. Davis:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

So, I don’t want to introduce him as a person—

Angela Y. Davis:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

—who, who is already dead. But if you could talk about the sentence he, he received [plane flies over] and then how that sentence was extended.

Angela Y. Davis:

Well—

Camera Crew Member #3:

Let’s, let’s stop because—

Interviewer:

OK.

[cut]

[recordist error]

00:26:23:00

Angela Y. Davis:

We learned about the indeterminant sentence—

00:26:26:00

Interviewer:

Can, can you start again? Sorry.

00:26:30:00

Angela Y. Davis:

OK. We learned about the indeterminant sentence as a direct result of becoming acquainted with George Jackson's background. And it seems as if we should have been aware of this before, but many of us were absolutely shocked seasoned activists as we were to learn that George Jackson had been initially arrested in connection with a seventy dollar robbery but had received a sentence ranging from one year to life. One year to life for a seventy dollar robbery of which he says he was not even guilty.

00:27:12:00

Interviewer:

Can you speak some about the collection of letters, *Soledad Brother*, and, and the impact that that had on the prison movement? Inside the prisons and, and, and for those of you who were working for prisoners.

00:27:30:00

Angela Y. Davis:

Yes. When *Soledad Brother* was published, the collection of George Jackson's letters, it was an extremely important moment for the prison movement both inside and outside. For the first time, there was an attempt to develop an analysis of the relationship between what was going on in our communities, in the streets, in the factories, in the schools, on the campus, the campuses, and what was happening inside the prison. Large numbers of prisoners of course could relate to what George Jackson said in his letters. The, the stories about the horrible repression that he suffered, the fact that he was never able to spend time with his younger brother, Jonathan, outside of the manacles and chains that, that, that he wore so that there was a very important emotional effect of his book on people both inside prison and perhaps more importantly outside. Because those of us on the outside had generally not taken the time to try to understand what the experience was. We might have at that time being, been fighting for the freedom of political prisoners or challenging the prison sentence. But what George Jackson managed to do was to make that experience palpable, make it concrete so that it became something that people could relate to as human beings. ***There is always the tendency to push prisons to the fringes of our awareness so that we don't have to deal with what happens inside of these horrifying institutions.*** And there is the tendency also to look at prisoners as having deserved what they have met with there so that the criminal is a figure in our society who has very little credibility. And what George Jackson demonstrated with his letters was that prisoners are human beings. Prisoners are intelligent human beings. Prisoners have families. They have feelings. And at the same time, he laid the basis for an important political analysis, which was lacking. I was very moved when I first saw the published version of the letters. I was in jail myself by that time because I had worked on the manuscript and worked with those who were involved in, in publishing it. I received a copy of the book when I was in jail in New York, in the Women's House of Detention. And at that particular time, the authorities banned that book from the jail population. They allowed me to

read it in a library to which no other prisoners were allowed entrance at the time I was reading the book. Eventually we were able to get a clandestine copy, [plane flies over] a copy which was brought in by one of the, the woman officers who felt that we had the right. Or the other women had the right to, to read this. So, the book circulated all over the corridor where I lived, all over the floor, all over the jail as a matter of fact. And there were often long discussions about what George Jackson wrote about in that book.

00:31:30:00

Interviewer:

Now, cut for a second.

Camera Crew Member #3:

What I'll do is just cut.

[cut]

[camera roll #3110]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Hit it.

00:31:35:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark seven.

[slate]

00:31:41:00

Interviewer:

How did your own prison experience expand your notion of what the prison movement had to be?

00:31:47:00

Angela Y. Davis:

When I went to jail in New York, it immediately occurred to me that there were whole areas that we had totally neglected within the prison movement having to do with women's

imprisonment. While we had developed a, a solidarity movement designed to support prisoners, we had not taken on issues like the separation of mothers and their children, like the treatment of…the specific treatment of, of women who were pregnant. As a matter of fact, women had been relatively invisible in the prison movement. It was if there were no women who ever went to prison. And this of course reflected the lack of awareness within the Black movement in general during that era of the particular role of, of women within the movement and the nature of women's oppression so that I began immediately to write to Erica Huggins, who was in jail at the same time. We shared our experiences being women in prison. We could see very concretely the open role of racism in New York. Over ninety percent of the women were either Black of Puerto Rican so that racism became something that was very palpable, and very visible, and very hurtful. Because we could see White women come in and go out immediately on their own recognizance. Not that the White women were responsible for that, but the judges were who would not give Black women OR or the right to leave on their own recognizance. I, I learned what many of the people whom I had been working around must have to go through every day for weeks, and months, and, and years. I was in solitary confinement for approximately one year. And as hard as that was for me to endure, I realized that there were many others who did not have the opportunity to make their cases heard as I did. At least I was aware of the fact that there were hundreds, thousands of people out organizing for me all over the country, [plane flies over] all over the world. So—

00:34:42:00

Interviewer:

Can you just, just stop for this one? And what I'd like to do is pick up with exact—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Hit it.

00:34:48:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark eight.

[slate]

00:34:53:00

Interviewer:

What were the, the particular reactions of some of your fellow female inmates to, to some of the content of George Jackson's letters?

00:35:01:00

Angela Y. Davis:

Well, the women in the New York Women's House of Detention who had the opportunity to read George's book felt extremely enlightened by his ideas. But they were also disturbed by his negative attitudes towards women and in particular his mother but specifically his attitudes towards Black women. And of course that was a direct reflection of the ideological climate. The period following 1965 saw concerted systematic propagandistic and ideological attacks on Black women. We were called emasculating females. We were being held responsible for collaborating in the oppression that hurt Black men. And George Jackson unfortunately accepted some of these ideas in an uncritical fashion which come through in *Soledad Brother*

00:36:10:00

Interviewer:

What was the response that you heard? And, and what was the discussion around those issues that—

Angela Y. Davis:

[truck drives by] Well—

Camera Crew Member #3:

Let's, let's just wait for this to pass. Keep going.

Interviewer:

OK. Still rolling?

00:36:21:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

OK.

00:36:22:00

Interviewer:

It was just a truck. What was the response to those [unintelligible]?

00:36:25:00

Angela Y. Davis:

Well, they couldn't understand what George Jackson had against his mother, for example. [plane flies over] And, you know, why is it that Black women are being held responsible for a, a system of oppression that emanates from people who are wealthy, from, you know, White men, the ruling class. And of course this was very intentional. I, I, I think that George later realized as a result of a correspondence that I carried on with him and, and a result of discussions with other people that he had unwittingly accepted ideas that were designed to create that kind of division within the community. And that as a matter of fact Black women were playing extremely important roles. The civil rights movement would not have been what it was without the roles of, of Fannie Lou Hamer, and Daisy Bates, and Ella Baker, and Ruby Doris Robinson, and Jo Ann Robinson. And we can go on, and on, and on. So that the women in, in the jail in New York had the same reaction that I did, which confirmed my own criticism of George's notions of Black women. And I should say that George changed. He began to critically examine his acceptance of ideas that emanated with the government. The Moynihan Report, for example, which was published in 1965. And eventually he did agree that he had been influenced in a very negative way by these ideas and that women should play equal roles in the community, and Black mothers should not be held for responsible. Black mothers who, who care for their sons and their daughters should not be held responsible for preventing or should not be accused of preventing their sons from being warriors in the struggle for Black liberation. Because Black women have done a lot of those battles themselves. [plane flies over]

00:38:59:00

Interviewer:

Let's just cut for this airplane.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

00:39:03:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark nine.

[slate]

00:39:06:00

Interviewer:

What, what allowed your, your, your legal victory in your—the legal victory in your case? And what did it forecast?

Angela Y. Davis:

Well, it was very important to be able to win victories during that period. It was a very difficult juncture of our history. It was, it—

Interviewer:

Can you just start by defining that period?

00:39:28:00

Angela Y. Davis:

OK.

00:39:30:00

Interviewer:

And saying, "The period when I was in prison or, or, or the, the period of the, late '60s and early '70s…"

00:39:35:00

Angela Y. Davis:

OK. The period, the period of the late '60s and the early '70s was a very painful period. The repression was so total that no one could escape being hurt in some way or another by the death of someone, an activist who was killed in the communities. I…when I look back on that period, I see myself attending funerals and, and, it was important at that time that we recognize that we could be victorious. That we were not simply the targets of repression but that we were active historical agents who could set an agenda, fight for that agenda, and win. And that is why I think my particular case, my legal case and the organizing that went on around it was so important. Because it did demonstrate that with organizing, with coalition organizing, it was possible to defeat the agenda of the president of the United States because Richard Nixon was very much involved in creating the impression that I was a terrorist. It was, it was possible to defeat the agenda of Ronald Reagan, who was the governor of the state of California at that time. People responded at, at first spontaneously to my case. And I

think that a lot of that had to do with the fact that I was out there as an activist, that I was attempting to organize people, to defend the rights of political prisoners, to free Huey Newton, Erica Huggins, Bobby Seale, George Jackson, John Clutchette, Fleeta Drumgo. [dog barks] And that as a matter of fact, I had often said that we all need to be involved in this movement because we don't know who will be the next to go. And if we don't build a basis for a strong movement and if one of us happens to be hit by the repression, we won't be able to count on the support that we will personally need. And of course at that time, I had no idea that I would be one of the next who would be imprisoned in, in that way. I think that the spontaneous response was important. But alone it would not have guaranteed the victory because the, the response initially would have petered out. It would have withered away. My case spanned a period of almost two years. And certainly organization was needed in order to build the kind of movement that would endure throughout that period from the fight for bail, for example, to the actual legal acquittal. I think—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Angela Y. Davis:

—that we were successful because those who were organizing around my case—

00:42:43:00

Interviewer:

OK. You need to change? We just need—this is, we're just at the very end of the roll.

Angela Y. Davis:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #3:

Just switch.

[cut]

[camera roll #3111]

[sound roll #350]

[slate]

00:42:52:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

Ten.

00:42:53:00

Interviewer:

What was the importance of the coalition that made your ultimate legal victory possible? What was the importance historically for this period? And what was that coalition?

00:43:05:00

Angela Y. Davis:

Well, there was a spontaneous response. The spontaneous response was not sufficient to serve as the basis for a movement that had to endure two years of support activities so that what was key to achieving my acquittal was the organizing, very serious organizing work that took place on a community basis in factories, and churches, and schools, and every existing institution in our country. Some 250 committees were organized from one end of the country to the other. And those committees were always multiracial. The committee was a multiracial community. It was a committee which brought together workers and students, a committee that brought together religious activists and people who might be involved in the women's movement, the peace movement. It was an important lesson because the lesson learned was that we could indeed be successful if we could bring together all of the progressive forces in this society. And of course I shouldn't be saying "we" because I sat in jail during the time all of this work was going on. I did have a part in developing the strategy, both the legal strategy and the political strategy. And I was not always correct in the suggestions that I made. I can remember that I was opposed to organizing around a bail movement because at that particular time, I was charged with three capital crimes. And at that time of course, if you were charged with a capital crime, you were not eligible for bail. But there were those on the committee who argued that a bail movement should be established. That there might be people, for example, who would be willing to stand up for my right to bail but who might not yet be willing to call for my freedom outright. And I felt at that particular time that that was not a realistic goal because the legal possibilities of achieving bail did not exist. As it turned out, I was wrong because the California Supreme Court overturned capital punishment, which made me then eligible for bail. In the meantime, people all over the country and all over the world had gathered thousands and thousands of signatures so that as soon as the California Supreme Court overturned capital punishment, there were letters, and telegrams, and telephone calls flowing into the judge who then did establish bail. But he set bail at 100,000 dollars, which was absolutely exorbitant during that period. We didn't have 100,000 dollars. And a White farmer from a rural area of California came forth and said that he would put up his farm as bail.

00:46:28:00

Interviewer:

What, was the lesson of that coalition for this period in history? I mean, in, in your, in your thinking. What—where, what, what did that signify in terms of what was possible in this very dark period?

00:46:39:00

Angela Y. Davis:

At a, at a time, at a time when there was not a great deal of unity embracing people from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, embracing, you know, workers and students, there tended to be unfortunately a kind of competition among those of us who considered ourselves as the oppressed. One group would argue that they were more oppressed. The other group would say, No, you know, women are more oppressed than Black people. And, and unfortunately that's the kind of climate that prevailed during that era to a certain extent. In any event, there was not a great deal of multiracial organizing going on. There was not a great deal of efforts designed to allow people to cross bridges from various political points and various personal experiences. And those who organized the campaign for my freedom reached out to everyone and were able to figure out a strategy which allowed everyone to feel connected with my case. The women's movement, and of course the Black movement, the working-class movement. I was a union member as a, a faculty member at UCLA. I, I belonged to th-the union. The church movement. And I think it was a real lesson on how to achieve the maximum possible political force and, and, and a lesson in pointing out that even though there may be differences separating various groups of people in our society, there are also things that we have in common. And if we are in some way the target of an oppressive socioeconomic system, we should be able to figure out how to stand together. And by bringing literally tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of people together, it was possible to build a movement which did seep into the court room and did influence people not in terms of, of the jury deciding, Well, there is this movement that is going to get me if I do not vote for the acquittal of Angela Davis, but rather because the jurors themselves recognized that it was not a [plane flies over] question of simply being accountable to me as one individual. That they would have to be accountable to enormous numbers of people. They would have to be en—accountable to their own church members. They would have to be accountable to their own union members. They would have to be accountable to their, to the students who attended college with their sons and daughters. It was by building that kind of movement that it was possible to achieve victory.

00:49:55:00

Interviewer:

How did the victory feel?

Angela Davis:

Well—

How did that moment feel?

00:49:57:00

Angela Y. Davis:

—it was the happiest day of my life. When I was arrested, I did not know whether I would ever again see what it was like to live on the other side of the walls. I knew that the repression of that era was a very destructive repression and that many people had fallen. And I did not know whether I would survive so that on that day when I was pronounced officially not guilty, I celebrated. But at the same time, it occurred to me immediately that we needed to keep that movement together so that all of the sisters and brothers whom I had left behind could benefit from this organized might of, of the people of this country.

00:51:00:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut for a minute. That's great.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Cut.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:51:03:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

Eleven.

00:51:05:00

Interviewer:

When did you hear Malcolm speak? What was, what was that occasion like?

00:51:11:00

Angela Y. Davis:

I heard Malcolm X speak when I was a student at Brandeis University. And it was one of the most enlightening moments of my life. I was attending a university which was predominantly White. As a matter of fact, I had spent two years in a high school that was predominantly White, and I had come to feel very alienated in a way that I could not even articulate myself because we had not yet developed the language that allowed us to talk about the way racism functions in those kinds of unspoken situations. So that I had been attending this university, doing well and feeling okay. But at the same time feeling very alienated. Feeling OK in my academic life but feeling very alienated because I didn't see myself anywhere. I didn't see myself in the, in, in the courses that I taught. I didn't see myself in the faculty members. I didn't see myself in the students. And so when Malcolm came and spoke and affirmed what it was to be Black and, and, and talked about the quest for Black equality in a very passionate and, and militant way, it made me feel good. It made me feel OK. It made me feel that as a human being, I was as important as were all of the White people sitting around me. As a matter of fact, at that particular time, Malcolm spoke to the, the White audience in a very…I would say negative kind of way. He spoke, he astonished the, the, the largely White audience because he called them all kinds of names and, and, and ran down the, the list of their his-historical crimes. And, you know, while I, I, I wonder what good evoking guilt really does in terms of, of creating the right kind of basis for a movement, I can say at that time it made me feel good because he said a lot of the things that I probably would have wanted to say if only, if I had been in possession of the language that would—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Angela Y. Davis:

—have allowed me to say them at that time.

00:53:54:00

Interviewer:

What was the response of the White—can, can we just change…?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yeah, we'll just change.

Interviewer:

Yeah, great. That's on there though. That's—

Camera Crew Member #1:

We got that one.

[cut]

[camera roll #3112]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Speed.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Hit it.

00:54:02:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark twelve.

[slate]

00:54:04:00

Interviewer:

What was the response of the predominantly White audience to Malcolm’s speech?

00:54:08:00

Angela Y. Davis:

Well, they were very shocked for—

00:54:12:00

Interviewer:

Can you say, can you say, "The predominant, the predominantly White audience…"?

Angela Y. Davis:

OK.

Interviewer:

Just so—

00:54:17:00

Angela Y. Davis:

OK. The response of the predominantly White audience at that address given by Malcom X I think was utter shock as a matter of fact. They applauded very amply after he spoke, but I think that they simply could not deal with the fact that here was a Black man who had the courage to stand up and, and not only, you know, criticize the, the system of racism but talked about White people and the historical crimes for which they are responsible in a way they had never heard before. I think that—I don't think that they took him as seriously as he should have been taken. Because at that particular time, he was not seen as the spokesperson for a movement that would be able to make good up on the words that were coming across during that speech. But I think that later on, they probably recognized as, as I did that, you know, what Malcolm was doing was representing patterns of political thought that would later become accepted by large numbers of people in this country and that would mark the, the, the beginning of a, of an, of an entirely new approach to the movement for Black liberation.

00:56:17:00

Interviewer:

Great. OK. Let's shut down there.

[cut]

00:56:20:00

[slate]

00:56:22:00

Interviewer:

What was your family's response? And, and, and the community that you had come from, grown up in response to the turn that you took to the left and, and…?

00:56:31:00

Angela Y. Davis:

My mother was active in left causes as a young person. She was active in the NAACP, which eventually became an illegal organization in the state of Alabama. She was active in an organization called the Southern Negro Youth Congress, which had been initiated by Black Communists. And as a matter of fact, my mother had many friends who were members of the Community Party. I did not initially join the Communist Party when I first became a political person because I had a tendency to see Communists as being my parents' age and not…I didn't see it as an option for myself as a young person. In a few years of course, I changed my mind. But my mother had been active in left causes for many years, and she would always, when I was growing up, told me that I should dare to be different. And she reminds, she reminded me of that over and over again. That I should not be afraid to stand up for what I believed. So that even though there were difficulties, my mother immediately supported me. My father immediately supported me. There were members of our community in Birmingham, Alabama who particularly during the time I was in jail played very important roles in the, the, the movement. My mother traveled all over the country speaking on my behalf. My father spoke. My brother spoke. As a matter of fact, my brother who was a professional football player at the time had very serious problems with his own career because he had decided to take a stand on, on my behalf. So, if there's one thing I had during that period, that was family support. And it was community support. Many people of course did not understand what it meant to be a Communist. I encountered many Black people who said that they really were not aware of, of what it meant to be a Communist, but they did know that every time anyone attempted to do something for the Black community, that person was called a Communist. So that they knew there must be something positive about it. So there was support despite the real viscous anti-communism that combined with the racism, and as I always point out, also the sexism to make me a, a target from three different directions. There was always a, a very strong support.

00:59:27:00

Interviewer:

Just last question. I'm wondering if you can give us a concise statement of, of how it was that the prison movement expanded the notion of what a political prisoner was. How, how it went from someone explicitly in prison for political activity to, to understanding that that was a lens through which to understand the whole society?

00:59:47:00

Angela Y. Davis:

Well, initially as we began to organize on behalf of political prisoners like Huey Newton, and Erica Huggins, and Bobby Seale, and the Los Angeles 18, and the New York 21, and the Soledad Brothers, we were not aware of the extent to which many, many more people who happened to be in prison were victims of a political system. We expanded the definition of political prisoners to include also those who had been imprisoned on nonpolitical charges or whose imprisonment resulted from no political activity on their part but who became politicized while they were in prison and were subjected to long prison terms and other forms

of repression as a result. We also recognized that, that we needed to understand the function of racism and class exploitation within the prison system because of the fact that a, a grossly disproportionate number of the prisoners at that time were Black, Puerto Rican, Chicano, Asian, Native American. And virtually none were wealthy. So that you could almost be sure that every single prisoner came from a working class or poor background. So that we had to talk about the political function of the prisons as well as political prisoners. And we began to see all of those who were in prison or the majority of those who were in prison as being affected in some way by the particular political institutions which determined the, the, the nature of the prison such as racism, classism, et cetera.

01:01:59:00

Interviewer:

Great. OK. Let's stop there. Thank you.

Camera Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

Camera Crew Member #2:

[coughs]

[cut]

[end of interview]

01:02:07