

ANGELA DAVIS IS  
IN YOUR CLUTCHES  
**by Kristian Vistrup Madsen**

## OVER-RECRUITMENT: A LETTER

11 November 2015, London

Dear Michael,

Sorry for this obsessiveness of mine. Well, for this being my third consecutive, unsolicited letter, but also: I just looked up the prison where you are staying. Since you haven't been in touch for a while, I have sought to know you by other means; know your space, where you live. It occurred to me that I didn't even know where it was – lone California, Mule Creek State Prison – it hadn't even crossed my mind to check. Until now, although of course I know better, I had imagined prison as something more or less metaphorical, deterritorialised. An idea, you know, in the same way that California is an idea, or Los Angeles is an idea – or Hollywood, at least. The way in which Andy Warhol's Marilyn is Andy Warhol's Che is Andy Warhol's Electric Chair prison as the darker variation of a single glossy image. The metaphorical prison I imagined was somewhere in the vicinity of Los Angeles – a desert landscape maybe, a small town, but an idea nonetheless. A kind of deposit, a field, a space in the cultural imagination, an image reel.

So I looked it up, finally. Actually it is four hundred miles from Los Angeles, south east of Sacramento. In a book about prison obsolescence the philosopher Angela Davis writes that California prisons are built on devalued rural land as part of a 'recession-proof, non-polluting' scheme to 'jump-start local regeneration'. Google street view doesn't let you get close: you can only pass by on the motorway. I could see you have a baseball court, a basketball court. The buildings are a constellation of sharp objects, like a medieval European citadel. All those little shapes like crowns, or teeth. These are the yards you wrote about, they move you around between. There are

fifteen small geometric forms positioned in groups of five around a cluster of larger rectangular buildings in the middle. Between them, irrigated quads accommodate the courts: baseball, basketball. Around them a strip of dead land, beige gravel, and then the fence. Mule Creek has 1242 members of staff and an annual operating budget of one hundred and fifty-seven million dollars.

‘As of midnight October 31, 2015’, states a report from the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation for the State of California, ‘the population of Mule Creek Prison is 2847’. As of midnight, because every morning, the number changes – the building breathes out and takes in. A production line of people. And that midnight, you. It continues: ‘167.5% of its designed capacity of 1700’. Startling fact: the prison population of California rose from 20,000 in 1980 to 160,000 in 2000. Always taking in more than it breathes out, the prison is like a concrete balloon, a never-bursting bubble, ‘recession-proof’. Mule Creek is the third most over-populated prison in California, lagging slightly behind Calipatria and Wasco. Not one prison in California is at or below its designed capacity – not even close. As October became November in 2015, 126,947 people were sleeping in just over 87,000 beds across California prisons.

167.5%. Did you know this? Can you feel it? Life like a discount airline: less legroom. Fewer toilets in the bathrooms, and fewer sofas in the TV lounge? It’s weird, this pushing of a building to its limits. I wonder what they do to accommodate the extra number of inmates in prison. Maybe you weren’t meant to have a ‘celly’, or maybe, as if in a state of emergency, some people sleep on the floor, in gymnasiums. Which prognosis determined that Mule Creek needed to house 1700 prisoners when it opened in June, 1987? Did it have, worked into it, this idea of *planned obsolescence*? If prison is a business, is opening another like opening a new branch of a supermarket?

Does the increase in supply – 1700 – also increase demand? Keeping more prisoners in the same space not only saves money, it makes money. Do you work while you're in prison? If so, who do you work for?

I'm clutching at straws here, clutching at what politicians call the 'War on Drugs' and 'Tough on Crime' and what Davis calls the 'Prison Industrial Complex' – I'm not an economist, but it all adds up. Referring to the volume of black people in the United States in the 1960s, the writer James Baldwin said: 'There are 20 million people in this country – you can't put them all in jail.' When Angela Davis first became involved with prison activism, also in the 1960s, she was astounded to learn that there were close to two hundred thousand people in prison. 'Had anyone told me that in three decades *ten times as many* would be locked up in cages', she writes,

I imagine I would have responded something like this: 'As racist and undemocratic as this country is, I do not believe that the U.S. government will be able to lock up so many people without producing powerful resistance. No, this will never happen, not unless this country plunges into fascism.'

When Davis wrote this in 2000, more than two million people were living in prisons and jails in the United States, the largest incarcerated population of any country in the world, and one that is made up of a disproportionately vast majority of blacks and Latinos.

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I never sent this letter to Michael, in fact, writing the word Latinos, I stopped and thought: Why would I? We've been exchanging letters for six or seven months, back and forth between London and California. *I know* he knows all of

this, although he hasn't said it in so many words. He knows it intimately, personally: overcrowding, industrial complex, vast majority. Michael is Latino – I would have to write him a different letter, but the question then arises: who am I writing this one to? The final paragraph sits there like a bridge across water with no other side.

## POLITICAL GLOW: A TIMELINE

Jean Genet knew who to address when he was recorded for French television, high on Nembutal, in a hotel room in Paris on 16 October 1970:

I'm speaking to [President] Nixon and [Vice President] Agnew; I'm speaking to white liberals and to the white American nation: we know your plan ... you will try to eliminate Angela Davis, and black people, you hope, will be scared into more and more indirect action, into serving you and keeping quiet. Your plan is ready.

The matter was urgent. Angela Davis had been arrested three days before on 13 October at a motel in New York, after having been on the run for two months. Davis was considered 'armed and extremely dangerous', on the FBI's most wanted list. On the day that she was apprehended, Ronald Reagan – then governor of California – popped the cork on a bottle of champagne. *True story.* In Paris, Genet was making a public appeal in support of his friend.

1970 was an intense year. I have been able to imagine it only written in bent iron at the end of a stick, held inside the flames of a blacksmith's fire until almost see-through like glass, just *so hot* it is glowing. I have always had an almost masochistic desire for this year: Branded with a burning iron, the smell of burnt flesh and then the pleasure of certainty. *I know* its glow is enhanced by my distance, cubed by both space and time, but just think, what hope, what action, how determined, how *sure* people must have been. But flicking back through the calendar of that year undoes this image. October, September, foliage reattaching itself, folding into buds, like a count-down; waning glow, backward timeline.

On 7 August, seventeen year old Jonathan Jackson

walked into a courtroom in San Rafael, California armed with two guns purchased by Angela Davis – communist, Panther and once professor of philosophy at UCLA. Jackson freed two black prisoners and took five hostages including the judge, who he intended to exchange for imprisoned Panthers, among them his brother George. Driving off in a van Jackson was killed, along with the judge and two other black men, by an indiscriminate rain of police bullets. Soon after, Davis was charged with accessory to murder and kidnapping.

But what about Genet? Although insistently apolitical with his first novels published in the 1940s and 50s, as his writing practice slowed down, Genet became increasingly aligned with organised political movements. His play, *The Blacks*, was popular among radicals when staged in New York City in the late 1960s, and the spring of 1970 would see Genet at a pool party in the Hollywood Hills carrying Jane Fonda's business card with instructions to 'call anytime'.

Genet had been invited by the Black Panthers to take part in a lecture tour of American universities, in order to help reach out to white progressives to support the black struggle. Looking back, it would have been *right place, right time*. That spring, the United States was blazing.

On 6 May, as Genet would later write, police killed 'eight – that's right eight – young blacks in the South (an 'incident' about which the press had very little to say),' who were protesting the US intervention in Cambodia.

On 4 May, four white students were killed, also by police, during a similar protest at Kent State University. It would definitely have been right place, right time, right: the height of the politicisation of US campuses. *You know* that picture of the dead body – one of the bodies of Kent State – with the woman sitting by him, her luminous white scarf tied in a bow, her arms stretched out to the side and her mouth wide open in horror.

But look behind her: a man walks across the grass with his hands in his pockets, he might be wearing sunglasses. A woman walks by with her sweater tied around her waist, and turns her head, not her body, towards the scene – is she just ‘passing by’? This drama, this tragedy, is flanked on all sides by something else, something like ... indifference? Non-hot, non-glowing normalcy?

On 29 April, when Nixon launched his Cambodian Campaign, Genet was with the Panthers at a big conference in New Haven speaking to the students at Yale University.

So here’s a scene: that spring, Genet, the famous and well-renowned French writer and intellectual, would one day find himself facing a full lecture theatre. He would begin perhaps in a similar manner to the way he began his May Day speech at Yale: ‘Racism here is widespread and growing fast. I noticed as soon as I arrived in the United States.’ The crowd stirs and whispers. After about fifteen minutes, a member of the audience asks Genet, finally, to speak of himself and his work. ‘No, I’m not here to talk about literature or my books,’ he said, ‘I came to defend the Black Panther Party.’ ‘Then, something deeply shocking occurred,’ Angela Davis would recall years later, ‘half of the audience progressively left the place.’ Speech is punctuated by the ruffle of bags and the slamming of the door as students walk out, sunglasses and sweaters tied around their waists.

Edit scene: *that spring*, 1970, Genet, famous, well-renowned, in a *half-empty* lecture theatre.

On 14 January, members of the Black Panther Party gathered in the elegant Park Avenue duplex of Leonard and Felicia Bernstein, who had invited New York’s finest round for canapés and to fundraise for the legal expenses of imprisoned black revolutionaries. Among the guests was a dapper little man, Tom Wolfe: flamboyant in his own way, conservative really, perhaps in a double-breast-

ed waistcoat and an azure necktie, maybe even a fedora. As he watched events unfold, a thought would begin to take shape in his mind: politics as commodity, radicalism as lifestyle, a cultural affectation, fashion. 'Radical Chic' he would call it when his article appeared in *New York* magazine later that year, a new logic printed in the broadsheets of the seminal.

As 1969 turned to 1970, it was perhaps not the beginning but the end of something: of pure politics, real solidarity. An end that would stretch out into the future, a permanence not like iron branding, but like the blue of veins already under the skin.

## RADICAL CHIC: A RESPONSE

*Everyone was talking about it.* And by everyone of course I mean all the people that I know. That is, all the people hanging around the art schools, the non-profit spaces, the inner-city queer clubs and the out-of-doors semi-legal techno parties. It was the highlight of the academic season: Angela Davis was coming to Mejan, and *everyone was talking about it*. Which room will host the event? Where is even big enough? Where did Mejan get the money? Why Angela, why now? Is the art world the hand-sanitiser of The Man?

Mejan is Sweden's Royal Institute of Art located on a charming island opposite the Royal Palace in the middle of Stockholm. Its nickname, Mejan – although few know this – goes back to the original home of the school, a stately building at Fredsgatan 12, which was donated to the cause by the wealthy patron Gerhard Meyer in 1780. Still state-run, it is not a big school – select, one might say – and the buildings are accordingly limited in capacity. An iconic African-American scholar and activist, Davis is a big name for such a small school (such a small city!) and a timely guest, given the circumstances. Stockholm is increasingly diverse but highly segregated. Racialised minorities are grouped in isolated suburban housing projects, which, in recent years, and following various incidents of police brutality, have been stirring with unrest. In Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, groups such as *Pantrarna* (a nod in Davis's direction) and *Megafonen* have been campaigning for political agency for the suburbs, unapologetically breaking with Scandinavian integration-as-assimilation discourse. Meanwhile, the youth of the vast, white middle class enrolled at Mejan may be privileged, but, for the most part, is not stupid. They know it's an industry, they know the value and the chic of 'The Radical', and as a result, that their signature ironic fashion accessory *must*

*at all cost* be spotted among the crowds in the lecture theatre. One might think, then, that Davis had come to the right place at the right time – these are certainly the reasons why everyone kept talking. However *everyone* also knows what is said about talk: it's cheap.

Personally rather deterritorialised, I boarded a plane at Arlanda just in time to miss the show, but a friend filled me in via email:

Hi Kristian,

Lovely to hear from you! I should definitely check out that Eritrean restaurant. Angela Davis was amazing. Everything you would hope she would be. But as you may have heard the event itself was really crazy, badly managed by the school as it reproduced a lot of the racist dynamics that Angela Davis talked about in her lecture. When I arrived there was a queue of people outside, mainly young black women, who had been waiting for about four hours. As a Mejan initiate I was able to walk my white body straight into the lecture theatre, only to find a room mostly full of other white people. I saw the (white) people who were responsible for keeping order literally slamming the doors of the lecture theatre closed against a load of young black people who were trying to get in and behaving in a way that was extremely rough. It was incredibly uncomfortable, so I decided to give up my seat for one of the people in the queue and ended up watching it on a TV screen from the balcony corridor. That felt much more comfortable and we were able to make space for more people by bringing chairs from our studio. The atmosphere was, as you can probably imagine, incredibly tense, but when Angela Davis arrived she really lifted the mood. The best was when she was answering questions, as she is so responsive to the crowd and able to

talk about any issue that came up, including racism in Sweden, how segregated it is here and so on. Inevitably the audience brought up how badly they had been treated when trying to come in. It was clearly a total PR fuck up for the school, as it has been branded as racist by a lot of activists writing in the newspapers, but it was kind of amazing as an event as the atmosphere was so electric.

Something was clearly at stake in the room. Most of the people who spoke and asked questions were young black women and the usual white male voices were incredibly subdued.

It would be lovely to see you in London! I'll drop you a line when I'm next heading there.

Keep in touch, Olivia

xx

This email sets off a twitching nerve in my left eye, that is, the I that – in this moment – had imagined writing as Tom Wolfe: the post-political, the deterritorial, begins to come undone. I mean, *can you imagine* how many ironic caps and over-sized Acne scarves there were in that room – haha – ‘politics’, *please!* That’s what Tom would say, right, that’s what I just said. My eye is twitching now because ‘the atmosphere was tense, electric, she was so responsive to the crowd’ – I mean, *excuse me*, hasn’t anybody heard of instant commodification, have you heard of ‘Radical Chic’? This logic that overpowers, *I say*, it numbs tension – is this the moment in which you choose to look past it, asks the conservative man who never thought to look in that direction in the first place, that is, before he coined its chic in *New York* magazine.

What came to an end in 1970 might be politics as

non-commodity, an end pivoted on Tom Wolfe's fedora – not for that reason, but no less of a fact. What stretches into the contemporary is the apathy, like 'backlash' like 'irony', that overflowed from this moment: the seeming end of ideology, the shift of politics onto culture and onto the everyday. But as Wolfe drips off my face like wax – melted not by the mythical glow of 1970, but by the continuous flow of blood running through the veins underneath, the stable continuity of repression and struggle – so does the question of *who am I writing this to*. It is a question of the legitimacy of any author's ownership over any set of politics, and what's in it for any audience looking for such a set in a lecture theatre, or at a protest. It is now in a viscous pool on the floor because it is not generative, because it is too easy an option to lean back in a despair fed by the false binary of *then* and *now*.

I asked Michael what he thought about this type of solidarity – ironic caps and Angela Davis; bridges across radical difference – whether he thinks it's possible.

'If two people are able to depict their experiences skilfully to one another,' he wrote,

– applying skill, taking time, *making effort* –

'then yes, emphatically'.

In the text I refer to Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003) and Jean Genet *The Declared Enemy: Texts and Interviews* (Stanford, CA: University of Stanford Press, 2003). The title is taken from the televised speech by Genet of the same name also published in the above collection.