

3.C.9.

Angela Davis

“Keynote Speech Delivered at CAAAV’s Fifteenth Anniversary Fundraiser in New York City” (2001)

In this speech, given just over two weeks after the attacks of September 11, Angela Davis addressed the importance of distinguishing grief from nationalism. She spoke at a gathering celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities, an event that had been planned before September 11 and now took place in an altered political context. Founded in 1986 as Communities against Anti-Asian Violence, CAAAV organizes low-income Asian immigrant communities in New York City on issues ranging from police brutality to housing to street vendors’ rights.

As the US flags wave against the backdrop of such evocative phrases as “we as a nation” and “we as Americans” (when what is really meant is “we as US citizens”), CAAAV compels us to respond in a way that moves beyond the easy and dangerous frame of US nationalism with its bellicose anthems and its hateful exclusion of those who are or appear to be noncitizens. This is a nationalism that requires leaders on which to displace the responsibility of national salvation.

So a major question for the people of this country—those who a few weeks ago were not so quick to accept George W. Bush as their leader (or New Yorkers not so quick to accept Giuliani as their leader)—is how to maintain a critical posture toward the current leadership. This requires us to maintain a critical historical memory. We have heard the media indicate many times that after September 11, things will never be the same. Yes, this is true—never again can we assume that the United States is invulnerable. But we cannot assume that everything has changed. The attack on the World Trade Center and on the Pentagon does not annul the history of US militarism. It does not cover up the fact that people of Japanese ancestry were held in internment camps during World War II. It does not diminish the meaning of war against Vietnam. And it should not camouflage the fact that the US significantly helped to create the conditions that led to the violence of September 11. It should not blind us to the fact that—if Osama bin Laden is indeed the culprit and that if the Taliban is supporting him and his organization—that the US supported both bin Laden and the Taliban against the former Soviet Union. It should not blind us to the fact that the US has refused to listen to the impassioned pleas of Afghan women who try to resist the patriarchal policies of the Taliban.

Why has George W. Bush suddenly emerged as a heroic figure, when not long ago, the results of the election were severely questioned all over the country and throughout the world? Thousands of innocent people were killed on

September 11—and many of us have personal experience of this loss. Those of us who have no direct personal loss feel that we or our families could just as easily be among those who died. But this is a time to distinguish between the people of this country and the government and institutions that control the country. It is right to claim the innocence of those who died, but when we look at the governing institutions and leaders, we do not discover the same innocence.

The attack on September 11 has been represented as an attack against global capitalism and the US flag as its symbol. But we must consider that many of those who died were already targets of the daily violence of global capitalism. This is not a time to wave the US flag, to claim the superiority of America and American citizens. This is not a time to claim the preeminence of Western civilization as Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi did on Wednesday. In his words, according to the *New York Times*, “We should be confident of the superiority of our civilization, which consists of a value system that has given people widespread prosperity in those countries that embrace it and guarantees respect for human rights and religion.” He went on to say that the West “is bound to occidentalize and conquer new people.” Berlusconi also implicated the antiglobalization protestors in Genoa in a terrorist project linked to the violence of September 11. What is important about Berlusconi’s remarks is that he gave voice to the civilizational thinking that lurks about official discourse today. As the attack is described repeatedly as not just an attack against “America” but against “civilization,” Bush makes reference to “smoking the terrorists out of holes” and “tracking them down in their caves.”

This is why [Senator] Dianne Feinstein feels justified in calling for a six-month moratorium on student visas. But let us not forget that the so-called superiority of American freedom means oppression for the people of the southern region, and when convenient, it also excludes workers, citizens, and noncitizens alike. The government is willing to bail out the airlines, but the airlines invoke their emergency clauses to avoid giving severance pay to laid-off workers.

I want to suggest that we need to take our emotional responses seriously, that is, we should understand them as emotional and not as the basis for foreign policy, not as the basis for new ways of thinking about entire populations, cultures, and religions. Some of you may remember the initial responses to the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building. In a recent interview in *Z* magazine Noam Chomsky pointed out:

When a federal building was blown up in Oklahoma City, there were immediate cries to bomb the Middle East. These terminated when it was discovered that the perpetrator was from the US ultra-right militia movement. The reaction was not to destroy Montana and Idaho, where the movements are based, but to seek and capture the perpetrator, bring him to trial, and—crucially—explore the grievances that lie behind such crimes and to address the problems. Just about every crime—whether a robbery in the streets or colossal atrocities—has reasons, and commonly

we find that some of them are serious and should be addressed. Matters are no different in this case—at least, for those who are concerned to reduce the threat of terrorist violence rather than to escalate it.

Although there have been many official pleas against racial profiling, there have also been innumerable attacks on people and institutions perceived to be associated with the individuals and organizations that may be responsible for the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. Muslims, Arabs, [and] South Asians have borne the brunt of this racial profiling. Mosques have been attacked. South Asians have been murdered. People perceived to be of Middle Eastern descent have been removed from airplanes for no other reason than their physical appearance. This means that we will have to think more deeply about ways in which racism stimulates militarism and vice versa, how militarism promotes racism.

I must tell you that of the many thousands of candidates for whom I have ever voted in my life, there is one person who will always stand head and shoulders above all the rest. I voted for Barbara Lee to represent the congressional district in which I reside and I want to publicly congratulate her for having had the courage to stand up against militarism.

The use-of-force resolution passed 98–0 in the Senate and 420–1 in the House. Lee was the only person who voted against giving Bush a blank check for war. John Lewis said that “several other members wanted to be there also but at the same time, like me, they didn’t want to be seen as soft on terrorism.”

Barbara Lee has reminded us that it is precisely in times of crisis like this that we must hold on to our principles, that we should treasure our political memory. In this moment of intense communal mourning, we should be aware of the ease with which collective emotions can be politically manipulated toward ends that promote more violence and racism. Violence, as CAAAV points out, that will also be intensified by the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service]—the federal agency that has more armed agents than any other, the FBI included. There are countless numbers of people of Middle Eastern descent who are currently being held by the INS, who have joined the thousands of others who languish in detention centers or jails and prisons. As the INS is a significant component of the prison industrial complex with evident links to the military industrial complex, it should be clearer than ever that prison activists need to join activists who work against racist immigration policy and practices.

In this context, I must mention the recent appointment of Tom Ridge to head the newly created Office of Homeland Security. Imagine now that Condoleezza Rice and Tom Ridge are in charge of the security of the country. Ridge has signed more than two hundred execution warrants since becoming governor of Pennsylvania in 1995, including two warrants for Mumia Abu-Jamal. The fascist resonances of this notion of “homeland security” should not be ignored, nor the fact that this is throwback to the internment camps for people of Japanese descent and a throwback to the McCarthy era.

The invocation of freedom as what the announced war against terrorism is

designed to defend is the kind of ideology that has led historically to attacks on countless number of people—on their bodies and on their rights. When I hear the word “freedom” emanating from the mouth of Bush, from the mouths of Bushes, I ask—whose freedom and freedom toward what end? The market’s freedom? Freedom to hire Filipina women at subminimum wage to provide domestic service for the affluent? Freedom to refuse to send a top-level delegation to the World Conference against Racism? Freedom for the delegation to walk out of the conference and thus to refuse to help chart a global course to eradicate racism, including racism against Palestinians perpetrated by the Israeli government? Including reparations for the historical and current damage created by slavery and by genocidal colonialist practices against indigenous peoples throughout the world?

This is not the kind of freedom most of us would want to support. If we wish today to look toward a world in which we can engage in the practice of freedom, the major question confronting us today is how to rebuild a strong antiwar movement with an equally strong antiracist consciousness. In South Africa, at the World Conference against Racism, many people learned that instead of looking toward the US government, they should look elsewhere in the US for leadership—to organizations like Third World Within, like the Women of Color Resource Center from the Bay Area (my own delegation) and, of course, to CAAAV: Organizing Asian Immigrant Communities.

3.C.10.

Purvi Shah, Sakhi for South Asian Women

“The Rain of Sorrows” (2001)

Founded in 1989, Sakhi for South Asian Women works to address domestic violence in New York City’s South Asian communities. In the following excerpt, Purvi Shah (then a board member of Sakhi, later its executive director) speaks to the experiences of South Asian communities targeted in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

September 11 is a day that changed all of us. As a board member at Sakhi for South Asian Women, an anti-domestic violence organization based in New York City, I grieve for a longtime friend and fellow volunteer who worked on the ninety-fourth floor of 2 World Trade. Swarna Chalasani is still “missing”: for me the world has taken on a haunting quality and signifies not the possibility of return but that I miss Swarna’s presence in my life and will do so for the rest of my life.

Swarna gave so much love and attention to the Sakhi survivors she supported. She provided women who wanted to break free of violence a chance to do so, not only by offering emotional support but also by giving women fac-