

WE CANNOT STOP DREAMING LEGACIES AND UNFINISHED ACTIVISMS

By Angela Davis

The author is a US writer, activist and distinguished professor emerita in the history of consciousness and feminist studies department at the University of California, Santa Cruz.



Angela Davis (Source: www.speakoutnow.org)

Our understandings of the past are very much determined by our positions in the present and how we imagine the future.

We are called upon to celebrate those whose dreams and activism made it possible for us to inhabit this present. And as dissatisfied as we may be – and in fact should be – with the present, it was ushered into being by the transformative impact of past revolutionary struggles.

The disjuncture between what we once imagined as a future of freedom and justice and the present, whose unfreedoms and injustices have become as apparent to young people as those of the past were to us, produces new dynamics of struggle. I must constantly remind myself that

the revolution we were fighting for at some point began to recede to the background and become the constantly unacknowledged background of the victories we did win. The revolution we wanted was not the revolution we helped to produce.

So when I reflect on the current moment in the United States, I ask myself what might we have done differently had we known that the election of the first black president would be followed by the farcical election campaign we are currently experiencing.

I ask myself whether a greater insistence on the hidden structural dimensions of racism, the economic, cultural and generally institutionalised forms of racisms which fostered the continued development of a huge psychic reservoir of racism, might have made a difference. The kind of difference that might have prevented the Trump campaign – and I will mention his name only once – from trafficking with the white rage that is a product of the growing inequalities generated by global capitalism. These white people who are suffering, who know that their children will be worse off than they are, are led to attribute their misfortunes to the rise of people of colour. And so the open appeal to racism comes in the form of the representation of Mexican undocumented workers as rapists and

“

The revolution we wanted was not the revolution we helped to produce.

criminals and the equation of Islam with terrorism. The subtext, of course, with the open attack on President Obama, is that black people and other people of colour have usurped the places and privileges that rightfully belong to white people.

THE SOURCE OF OUR LEGACIES

From a very early period of my activism, South Africa was our primary beacon of hope. From my earliest years as an activist, I eagerly read Sechaba and The African Communist. My comrades and I embraced the leaders of the ANC and the leaders of the South African Communist Party as our leaders. Solidarity with the anti-apartheid struggle infused our movements against racism, our movements for social justice, with a vast reservoir of energy. The release of Mandela in 1990 and the victorious

election in 1994 brought collective euphoria to black communities and anti-racist struggles everywhere. Here at last was the path to freedom. I would not have been able to imagine then that, two decades after the defeat of apartheid, we would be confronted with militaristic responses to peoples' protests.

But before we immerse ourselves in the chaos of current moment, let us visit the source of our legacies. This evening we are memorialising Steve Biko. Steve Biko offered us a politics of blackness that released it from the constraints of inferiority and let us know that black people could collectively embody humanity and the foundational impulse toward freedom. Blackness was to be reimagined and reconstructed in the very process of collective struggle. As Mandela said,

“

Women have always been at the heart of anti-racist progressive activism.

Steve Biko was the spark that lit a veld fire across South Africa. His message to the youth and students was simple and clear: Black is Beautiful! Be proud of your Blackness! And with that, he inspired our youth to shed themselves of the sense of inferiority they were born into as a result of more than 300 years of white rule.

Black was not only proclaimed to be beautiful; black would become the sign of a trajectory toward human emancipation. In Biko's own words, it becomes more necessary to see the truth as it is if you realise that the only vehicle for change are those who have lost their personality. The first step is make the black man see himself; to pump life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity; to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth.

I must also point out here that the political discourse of the time had the effect of foreclosing the participation and the acknowledged conscientisation





Learning how to imagine the possibility of something different is the very essence of education.

of those that did not fall under the sign of the male gender. As we know, some of the most passionate activists in the student movement of that period were women.

We know that the first major protest – so to speak, the “mother of all protests” – had been the women’s march to Pretoria on August 9, 1956. And so I have kept in my mind the image of that monumental gathering. Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Albertina Sisulu, Fatima Meer, Florence Matomela, Ruth Mompati, Sophie Williams-De Bruyn and all of the 20 000 women staging a silent protest here in Pretoria in front of Union Buildings: “Now you have touched the women; you have struck a rock; you have dislodged a bolder, you will be crushed.” Women have always been at the heart of anti-racist progressive activism. We thus have to give ourselves permission to honour the women activists as we celebrate the legacies of the men who have come to represent the struggles of the past.

And those men who most deserve to be celebrated – men like WEB du Bois, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X in the United States; men like Nelson Mandela, Chris Hani and Steve Biko in South Africa: as influenced as they may have all been by ideologies of patriarchy, their work helped to create a discursive arena for the development of black feminist consciousness. They were also aware that their leadership was precisely enabled by those with

whom they struggled, the men and the women as well. We are profoundly thankful for these legacies, but we do not receive them uncritically.

STUDENTS AT THE FOREFRONT

Our understandings of the past are very much determined by our positions in the present and how we imagine the future. From the perspective of the present, we can apprehend what was hidden behind the restrictive discourses of the past.

Steve Biko died so that we would be able to develop these perspectives today and we understand today some of the silences, the erasures, and the foreclosures of those past struggles. We have also learned important lessons from the arrest Biko endured: from his imprisonment, from the torture, from the long struggle to reveal the true circumstances of his death.

Biko organised students. Students have always been at the forefront of radical change. An essential dimension of the learning process is critical thinking, learning how to question things as they are. Learning how to imagine the possibility of something different is the very essence of education. Facts are easily attainable, especially today as people with access to the internet have access to infinite libraries. But what do we do with that information? Steve Biko and his comrades led vast numbers of students to ask questions about apartheid and to imagine a different world, even as they clashed with the world as it was. Knowledge is useless unless it assists us to question habits, social practices, institutions, ideologies and the state. This questioning cannot end, even when victories are won.

Students are now realising that the legacies of past struggles are not static. If these legacies mean anything at all, they are mandates to develop new strategies, new technologies of struggle. And these legacies, when

taken up by new generations, reveal unfulfilled promises of the past and therefore give rise to new activism.

As an activist of Steve Biko’s generation, I have to constantly remind myself that the struggles of our contemporary times should be thought of as productive contradictions because they constitute a rupture with past struggles but also reside on a continuum with those struggles. They have been enabled by activism of the past. They are unfinished activism. Activism enabled by the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, which was at its core a women’s boycott; by the Women’s March 60 years ago; by the founding of Black Panther Party almost exactly 50 years ago, by the uprising Soweto 40 years ago, by the struggles undertaken by Biko and his comrades to create the South African Students Organisation, by the struggles of Nelson Mandela and the heroic members of the ANC, by uMkhonto we Sizwe.

This is the genealogy that young activists share across oceans. The young activists of today stand on our shoulders and precisely because they stand on our shoulders, they see something of what we have seen but they also see and understand a great deal more. They are beginning to address unresolved questions. They stand on our shoulders, but we do not provide a steady foundation precisely because our questions were questions of a different era, our critiques were expressed in the inadequate discourses of the past. The young activists want to reveal the erasures. They want to question what we did not have the full capacity to question in our time. Therefore they sway. They totter. They falter. They make terrible mistakes just as we did at their age when we stood on the shoulders of those that came before us. But just as we learned from our mistakes, they must be allowed to



We are profoundly thankful for these legacies, but we do not receive them uncritically.

learn from theirs, even when it appears that they are simply repeating our mistakes.

One of the truly exciting dimensions of the activism both here and in the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States is that they are being led by women. I had the honour of meeting Nompendulo Mkhathshwa, who is the current president of the Student Representative Council at Wits and Shaera Kalla, who is the past president. Under their leadership, the contestation about tuition fee hikes began to resonate across the country and across the world.

Some have said that the students' demands for free education are unrealistic, but they are only unrealistic because we continue to live with the mandates of capitalism and we are compelled to think of education as a commodity. This is not the way things should be. Freedom should mean in the very first place the freedom to learn, and the prerequisite for enjoying freedom of education should not be the capacity to pay. If students are calling for free education, they are reminding us how retrograde our social priorities have become. They remind us of the world we should be inhabiting, and of the legacies that produced impulses toward the future. When they move from "no fee hikes" to "free education", they remind us of the revolution we need to be fighting today.

BLACK LIVES MATTER

Three young women in the US – Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi – first produced the hashtag #blacklivesmatter in the aftermath of the vigilante racist killing of Trayvon Martin. They went on to create the Black Lives Matter network when the Ferguson protests erupted two years ago. These young women are collectively striving to remind us of the revolution we need as they try to develop strategies for struggle today.

There has been an uneasy relationship with the veterans of the movement that came before them. The veterans often take themselves, their knowledges, too seriously. Sometimes we assume that our questions and the tentative answers we provided deserve a permanence that silences future questions and answers. Sometimes we look for leadership in the familiar guise: the charismatic male leader who, in the US, has historically emerged from church and religious circles. When we cannot find that, we say that their movement has no leaders. They answer back: We are not a leaderless movement; we are a leader-full movement. The Black Lives Matter movement seeks to build new forms of leadership, feminist leadership, whether of women, men, queer, trans or straight. Leadership that is collective, inclusive and democratic.



The particularity of the black predicament is precisely that which is capable of yielding a robust universality.

Perhaps we need the leadership of those who have historically been barred from leadership positions, those who have been silenced. Perhaps we need leadership that will assist us to develop new vocabularies that encourage inclusiveness and interconnectedness, that recognise the interdependences, intersectionalities and internationalisms of our struggle. In other words, vocabularies that highlight the feminist dimensions of all of our social justice struggles.

Our languages and our institutions participate in the reproduction of ideologies of gender that violently exclude those who cannot find themselves within binary gender structures. Trans women of colour have brought new analyses of our institutions, especially the institutions of punishment, which have deepened our understanding of the importance of abolitionist approaches. The abolition of imprisonment as the dominant form of punishment and the abolition of policing as we know it must also involve the abolition of racism and the abolition of gender policing and a constant critique of hetero-patriarchy.

We have learned about the symbiotic interconnectedness of state violence and intimate violence. We now perceive an economy of violence in which the symbiotic relationship of various modes of violence – state, institutional, intimate – thrive on excess violence directed at certain communities, including trans communities of colour. Revealing these reservoirs of violence and openly challenging them helps to diminish the overall economy of gender violence. The message of the Black Lives Matter movement is that black lives are not abstract and not fungible lives that can be subject to oppression under the sign of universal equality of human beings. The movement challenges what we might call the "tyranny of the universal" and says that black lives offer very important and very powerful histories and temporalities >>

and languages and aesthetics and possibilities of freedom.

This tyranny of the universal was first challenged in political social action, I believe, by the Haitian Revolution. If we examine struggles against slavery everywhere, we find resonances of the Haitian Revolution, of the insistence of women and men who would come to call themselves Haitian that to be human is to collectively struggle to be free. There is no such thing as “free” for a single individual. Bourgeois democracies have always conceived a limited freedom, a freedom accorded to racial, class and gender elites that acquires its value precisely because of its powers of exclusion.

There is a direct line from Haiti to the Black Lives Matter movement. The insistence on the particularity of the black predicament is precisely that which is capable of yielding a robust universality because, for most of our history, the very category “human” has not embraced black people. Its abstractness has been coloured white and gendered male. There are those who think removing race from the equation – by saying All Lives Matter instead of saying Black Lives Matter – we somehow magically transcend race. But if, in fact, all lives mattered, we would not need to emphatically proclaim that black lives matter.

If you look at the Black Lives Matter website you will see that black women matter, black girls matter, black gay lives matter, black bi lives matter, black boys matter, black queer lives matter, black men matter, black lesbians matter, black trans lives matter, black immigrants matter, black incarcerated lives matter, black differently-abled bodies matter. Therefore, to say that black lives matter is to say that Latino and Asian American and Native American and Muslim and poor and working-class white people’s lives matter. It is to say that all lives matter.



And so as it turns out that the very particularity of the claim that black lives matter leads us to a richer, more inclusive and less hierarchical universal. It leads us not toward narrow exclusive nationalism but rather toward expansive, capacious internationalisms. These internationalisms are symbolised by the strong ties that have been developed between Palestine solidarity and Black Lives Matter. A strong affinity emerged two years ago, when activists on the ground in Palestine become the first to offer solidarity and advice to the Ferguson protestors through social media. The Palestinians recognised that the teargas canisters thrown by the police in Ferguson were from the same company that made the canisters used by Israeli police and military in Palestine. They tweeted advice to their sisters and brothers in this small town in Missouri about how to deal with the militarised police that were attacking them. The globalism of police militarisation was challenged by the globalism of resistance.

POSSIBLE FUTURES

History tends to elude us in the very process of its becoming. We always seem to falter when it comes to realising the present as history. Clarity only seems to emerge when we can no longer affect the passage of historical time. We can never predict definitive outcomes when we are entangled in

the complex circumstances of the present. Stuart Hall pointed out that there are never any guarantees for our struggle.

Nonetheless, it is our collective duty to imagine possible futures. When Mohammed Ali refused to be inducted into the military in 1967, we could not know that this would become an iconic historical moment. Just as was the raising of the fist by Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the Mexico Olympics in 1968. Perhaps [NFL football player] Colin Kaepernick’s refusal to stand during the singing of our militaristic national anthem will become another such moment. Or perhaps the actions by Zuleika Patel and the other girls at Pretoria High School.

This moment very well may be the historical juncture that we have been waiting for. We cannot really know. But we cannot let it pass without asserting collective agency in order to begin to purge our societies of racisms including Islamophobia and settler colonialism as well as anti-Semitism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, assaults against immigrants and refugees, and the unremitting capitalist assault on our environment and on our food sources and on the sentient beings that endure pain and torture as they are transformed into food for profit, food that generates disease in humans whose poverty compels them to rely on McDonalds and KFC for nourishment.

Even though there are never guarantees that we will reach the future we dream, we cannot stop dreaming. We cannot stop dreaming and we cannot stop struggling even if – and I say *when* – we see the crumbling of capitalism. There will always be vibrant legacies. There will always be unfulfilled promises. There will always be unfinished activisms. [NA](#)

NOTE

This is an edited transcript of the 17th Steve Biko Memorial Lecture, given in Pretoria on 9 September 2016.