

# Radical Resistance: Constructions of a Transnational Self in Angela Davis's and Cynthia McKinney's Memoirs

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## Introduction

At a research meeting at the University of Amsterdam in 2017, Africana scholar Anthony Bogues admonished participants to look at Black people's life narratives not only as manifestations of the "Black experience," as has often been done in the past, but also to acknowledge the intellectual achievements they express.<sup>1</sup> In *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals*, Bogues has insisted that the study of texts by Black political intellectuals take into account both their "intellectual independence and originality" and their "complex engagement with the Western intellectual tradition."<sup>2</sup> The memoirs of Angela Davis and Cynthia McKinney offer both independence from and engagement with Western thought, features which run through their life narratives and are closely related to the transnational scope of their thoughts, actions, and resistance. Since this study deploys a "transnational optic," it is based on the one hand on the premise that "social worlds and lives are inherently transnational," and on the other hand attempts to reveal and interpret this transnationalism.<sup>3</sup> The discussion of the two memoirs will thus focus on how and to what ends their authors embed transnational impulses and activism in their constructions of Self, transgressing Black and any other nationalism. When political and intellectual impulses from other countries are mentioned in this article, the intention is not to marginalize the contribution of Black intellectuals nor to question their independence, a reductive move which Bogues disapproves of, but to situate

them in the networks of radical ideas and political activism of their time through which they analyse and attack existing ideological, political, legal, and economic structures that foster inequality, injustice, and repression. That these structures also function transnationally has increasingly been acknowledged by historians who support an “imperial view” of postwar US history,<sup>4</sup> but this analysis is already strongly present in these two Black activists’ memoirs.

Furthermore, it needs to be recognized that Black lives have been transnational for as long as there are records, and canonical Black life narratives such as *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* of 1789 testify to Black people’s transatlantic mobility and agency, as has been reflected in recent interpretations.<sup>5</sup> This transnationalism continues in the twentieth century, as exemplified by W. E. B. Du Bois and his interest in and travels to the USSR, Japan, China,<sup>6</sup> and other countries. Nevertheless, at the height of the Civil Rights struggle, the focus of Black radical intellectuals’ activism and life narratives alike was predominantly on the situation in the United States, leading Angela Davis in the 1970s to demand a “breaking out of the narrow nationalism so prevalent in the Black Liberation Movement.”<sup>7</sup> Choosing a transnational perspective for this study of Black autobiography means challenging as well as complementing the strong paradigm of Black nationalism. Although more work has been dedicated to the exploration of the transnational character of Black lives since the rise of transnational studies in the 1990s, many texts and events are still awaiting their rediscovery, reinterpretation, and realignment honoring their transnational qualities.<sup>8</sup> This study, however, adhering to the understanding of transnational American studies as “a critical venture that destabilizes and challenges the idea of a monologic and monolingual America,”<sup>9</sup> explores how two African Americans write their lives and Selves as deeply connected and engaged with other countries.

By turning to Angela Davis’s *An Autobiography* (1974) and Cynthia McKinney’s *Ain’t Nothing Like Freedom* (2013), two life narratives by Black radical female intellectuals, this study seeks to “trouble” the canon of African American life narratives and contribute to the expansion of the repertoire of texts beyond those “that have been traditionally accepted as the most representative documentation of the lives and experiences of African Americans.”<sup>10</sup> In the forty-five years since its publication, Angela Davis’s *Autobiography* has been the subject of a number of scholarly articles and books but has not entered the canon, while the rather recent memoir by McKinney has not yet attracted much scholarship.<sup>11</sup> This comparative study of the two autobiographical texts will explore whether there are similarities in their conceptualizations of the Self despite the historical distance between them, and also how their constructions of the—resistant—Self diverge. McKinney calls herself “a product of the treeshakers” of the Civil Rights Movement of which Davis was a part, thereby locating herself in this line of political tradition.<sup>12</sup> If Davis as a declared communist writes and practices international solidarity in the universal struggle against oppression, colonialism, and injustice, as inherent in the communist worldview, McKinney as a Congresswoman and

Green Party presidential candidate describes her resistance as a battle for truthfulness and transparency in politics and against imperialist US foreign policy and war-mongering.<sup>13</sup> In this struggle for truth, her narrative, like Davis's, becomes transnational in its critique of Black nationalism and embrace of Black heritage and solidarity.

### **The Texts in Context**

To permit a comparative discussion of the two autobiographical texts with regard to the role of resistance from a transnational angle, two major sources of difference require attention. The first concerns the disparity in the historical contexts of the two works, and the second, the respective positions of the two Black intellectuals in relation to the political institutions within and against which they acted. The historical contexts of the two life narratives differ in terms of race relations, the international political situation, and radical agendas, and these differences pertain to both the lifetime narrated and the period during which the retrospective narratives were written and published. The time that Davis (born 1944) recounts in her memoir stretches from her childhood in segregated Birmingham, Alabama, through her acquittal from kidnapping and murder charges in San Jose, California, in June 1972 to an epilogue of 1974. With regard to resistance movements in the US, Davis's formative years coincide with the rise and climax of the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement, but also with the era of decolonization and international solidarity with liberation movements in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. These movements can be considered as part of the Left Wave of the postwar period characterized by David C. Rapoport as a global phenomenon with a "special international dimension shaped largely by the Cold War" that affected Asia, Africa, and Latin America in particular.<sup>14</sup> Fidel Castro's revolution in Cuba in 1959 was a key initial event which, because of the radical redistribution of wealth it entailed and the revolutionary enthusiasm it incited, generated vivid interest and solidarity among the Left internationally.<sup>15</sup> This particular Left Wave, however, dissolved in the course of the 1970s and 1980s, although radical leftist ideas have continued to flourish in various contexts.

In her autobiographical narrative, McKinney (born 1955) covers the time from the 1980s through the 2010s, in which she encounters a domestic and international set-up different from that of Davis's time, with US military activities in the Middle East, the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, and the ensuing "war on terror" to name but a few examples of major events of international scope. Furthermore, powerful new movements such as those driven by environmentalist and human rights organizations have risen to global prominence since the 1980s. US activists participated in the global Green movement, which resulted politically in the foundation of the National Green Politics Organization in the United States in 1984 and of the Green Party of the United States (GPUS) in 2001, which endeavours to bring "an eco-

social vision and analysis to issues of public policy.”<sup>16</sup> The GPUS as a new “third party” follows a rather radical leftist agenda by supporting not only environmental issues but also, for example, electoral reform and workers’ rights.

With regard to the second field of distinction, i.e., the writers’ positions in and towards political institutions, the most striking difference is that Davis as a Civil Rights activist and communist mainly writes about her massive clashes with institutions of power while McKinney describes her resistance from within one of the most powerful political institutions, US Congress, having started as a Democratic Representative in the Georgia Legislature and continuing to Washington, DC. Davis, involved in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Black Panther Political Party (BPPP), and the Communist Party (CP), remembers her struggles with the legal and political establishment in the form of the FBI, police, courts, and the prison system, but also the solidarity among those who opposed these powers and the vigorous campaigning at grassroots level to free political prisoners, protect civil rights, and achieve social justice. She presents her time in prison in 1970 and the period of her trial as the climax of her resistance.

McKinney joined the Democrats and was voted into the Georgia legislature in 1988. She later served six terms as a Democratic Congresswoman in the House of Representatives (1993–2003, 2005–2007) before running as the Green Party candidate in the 2008 presidential election. Many of the transnational activities she recounts resulted from her tenure in the House International Relations Committee from 1993 to 2003.<sup>17</sup>

### **Black Radical Intellectuals’ Life Narratives: Constructing the Political Self**

The centrality of the political Self emerges not only at the beginning of each of the memoirs, but also through their narrative structure and specific form. Neither of the two texts is an autobiography in the narrow sense of “a retrospective prose narrative” of a real person’s “individual life, in particular the story of his [or her] personality” told by him- or herself.<sup>18</sup> Rather, both texts are memoirs that start *in medias res* at a decisive point in the life narrative, in Davis’s case in 1970, when she was hunted by the FBI, arrested, and moved from prison to prison before being extradited to California for trial. This is followed by a chronological account of her life from her childhood to her trial, in which she is cleared of accusations of murder and kidnapping. For her part, McKinney opens her autobiographical account with her leaving Washington, DC, in the immediate aftermath of her unsuccessful re-election campaign in 2007, reflecting on her time as a Congresswoman and also recounting the many instances of her being stalked, intimidated, and harassed by racists, the FBI, and the pro-Israel lobby, which she had angered by her support for the people in Gaza.<sup>19</sup>

These structural decisions have two major effects on the construction of the Self. Firstly, the person is introduced as being involved in acts of resistance which are invigorated in both cases by the temporary victory of the forces of the establishment,

the FBI for Davis and the party machinery in McKinney's case. Secondly, the focus is not predominantly on the story of their personality and individual development but on their struggles within social and political frameworks, the Civil Rights Movement and Congress respectively. A consequence of this clear focus on the political struggle is that, although both writers talk about their parents, childhood, and education, they keep references to their own private life and intimate relationships rather short.<sup>20</sup> In fact, most of the personal information McKinney shares has to be garnered from her speeches and letters. This means that both authors write themselves primarily as public and political personae, which McKinney enhances further by the liberal use of photographs and other documents of her transnational political activism. However, the plentiful documentary material functions not only as evidence but also as a carrier of information about her life and worldview, thus contributing to the discontinuous, fragmented structure of her memoir.

The introduction of the memoirists at a critical point in their political activism is accompanied by another feature in common, which is an emphasis on social connectedness in opposition to dominant political and ideological frameworks. In her 1988 introduction to her *Autobiography*, Davis emphasizes that she did not want to "contribute to the widespread tendency to personalize and individualize history," felt embarrassed to be writing about herself and therefore did "not really" write about herself but rather about the "political significance" of her experiences.<sup>21</sup> Her anti-individualism is supported by her refusal to render her life "a personal 'adventure'" and by her assertion that she was only exposed to the "same forces that have shaped and misshaped the lives of millions of [her] people" and that her "response to these forces has been unexceptional as well."<sup>22</sup> Programmatically, she not only claims that she intends to present her life as unexceptional, but also that she intends to convey her "overwhelming sense of belonging to a community of humans—... of struggle against poverty and racism."<sup>23</sup> Combined with her observation of the "bankruptcy of the global system of capitalism," these articulations of her transnational perspective come in the now old-fashioned looking but nevertheless fitting guise of socialist internationalism.<sup>24</sup>

Like Davis, McKinney expresses her commitment to transnational political issues right from the introduction, this time by naming people and movements around the world to whom she feels indebted.<sup>25</sup> She describes her political mission as serving "as a voice to the voiceless, a sojourner for truth, and a champion for peace, justice, and human rights," holding on to dreams not only for a better America but also for "a more responsible America in the global community," thus using slightly different words to express a similar internationalism.<sup>26</sup> For the Congresswoman of the 1990s and 2000s, resistance happened at various levels, from criticism of both Republican and Democratic politics and her refusal, through her opposition to military spending and her "lone 'No' vote on the Pentagon budget each year," to her support of Indigenous rights not only in the US but also in Colombia and Australia. She defines herself as an "outsider" to the political system, a status brought about as a result of

her holding onto her values.<sup>27</sup> This spatial metaphor expresses her moral disengagement from the political system of which she was part and contrasts with her identification as a member of the global community.

It must be added, though, that Davis becomes rather emphatic in her attempt to present her life as unexceptional and her experience as one shared by many. In autobiography studies, this attitude, which can also be found in working-class autobiographies, for example, has been discussed as the “social atom phenomenon.”<sup>28</sup> It becomes particularly clear when, while she is imprisoned in the House of Detention in New York and a crowd gathers in the street demanding her freedom, she frames her response as follows: “While the chants of ‘Free Angela’ filled me with excitement, I was concerned that an overabundance of such chants would set me apart from the rest of my sisters.”<sup>29</sup> To reduce herself to one of innumerable oppressed incarcerated women, she shouts the names of the other women on her floor, “Free Helen!” and so on, resisting the glamorous role of the heroic individual. Although Davis frequently expresses her appreciation for the work of the campaign groups and feels invigorated by it, she notices how she is rendered an icon to which international solidarity becomes attached, and knows that in order to maintain her deliberate self-conceptualization as one of millions of oppressed people she needs to resist this iconization.<sup>30</sup> It is an indication of the centrality of this concept of Self as a social atom that she returns to it in the chapter about her trial and assigns it a global scope by writing: “The more the movement for my freedom increased in numbers, strength and confidence, the more imperative it became for everyone to see it not as something exceptional but as a small part of a great fight against injustice ... . And it was not only within the United States of America, but in countries like Vietnam, with the bombs falling like rain from U.S. B52’s.”<sup>31</sup>

McKinney pursues a different strategy of self-representation when she calls herself a political outsider, the “lone No-vote,” someone who never compromised her key values even if this isolated her and exposed her to vicious attacks from inside and outside the Democratic Party. Although she expresses her gratitude to the people who supported her, she does produce a significantly more individualistic self-portrait by emphasizing how, without much support from political insiders, she pursued her political agenda of speaking for the common people of her constituency and revealing the truth behind the lies and silences of the political establishment.<sup>32</sup> The political persona that acts alone against all odds is frequently foregrounded in her self-narrative, as when she reports “I did the only Congressional investigation into the Republican theft of the 2000 election.”<sup>33</sup> McKinney claims that when she left Congress, “so did any Congressional quest for 9/11 Truth,” and that “virtually no one else in Congress wanted to do anything more to get to the root of the issue.”<sup>34</sup> She presents herself as confident and proud—not only of her integrity and achievements but also of her sharp intellect when she proclaims, “I’d put my brains up to theirs any time. And ... I learned that I could beat them with my brain” (55).<sup>35</sup>

Although such confidence can sound like self-aggrandizing, McKinney's book can also be read as a spirited rejoinder to the resistance she met from Congress and a response to the defamation she faced. As evidence, McKinney includes a selection of hate mails (140–44) and adds an unusual number of documents, some scattered throughout her narrative, others assembled in the fifty-page appendix "For the Records" (236–89). McKinney herself confirms the latter interpretation, suggesting that her autobiographical book "ought to be on an official public record, like the Congressional Record" (14). She asserts that whenever she questioned those in authority, she tried to "verify" for herself everything she had been told, enjoying the research (88). By adding profuse evidence in the form of textual and photographic documents, she raises both the truth value of her accounts and the political relevance of her actions of resistance, and counteracts the lies and defamations that belittled her personality and distorted her political activism.

Before embarking on a further exploration of transnational aspects in the memoirs, two further shared issues deserve to be mentioned, which are slavery and inner motivation. In the rhetoric employed in the construction of the Black activist and intellectual, references to slavery are bound to come up because Black activism is rooted in the oppression under slavery and the resistance to it. Not surprisingly, Davis establishes the strongest connection to slavery in her narrative of her running from the FBI, which she likens to the experience of the fugitive slave: "Thousands of my ancestors had waited, as I had done, for nightfall to cover their steps, had leaned on one true friend to help them ... I had to be worthy of them" (5–6). She evokes the courage and resourcefulness of the fugitive slave as both a means of heartening herself and as a legacy to live up to. She resorts to historical parallels again when describing Black prison officers, who, "like their predecessors, the Black overseers ... were guarding their sisters in exchange for a few bits of bread," but who were oppressed themselves (43).

In this second context, Davis uses the historical reference to highlight the permanence of structures of exploitation and oppression and their entanglement with the racial order. But beyond the references to Southern plantation slavery, she clearly perceives slavery as a transnational social formation, because when the Cuban performance at the International Youth Festival in Helsinki ends with a conga, Davis muses that this was "a dance brought into Cuban culture by slaves dancing in a line of chains" (124). Her adding this historical background to her otherwise cheerful account of hundreds of young people joining the conga in the streets of Helsinki illustrates particularly well how she applies an analytical transnational lens to her memories.

McKinney assigns her "ancestors who braved slave rebellions" a prominent place in her pedigree, along with Civil Rights activists, and evokes her political ancestry, including "enslaved Sojourner Truth," in moments of fear.<sup>36</sup> When criticizing the racist actions of the Anti-Defamation League, she recognizes the lasting impact of slavery as the reason for present-day racism and places herself in the prevailing system of discrimination that ensued from slavery, writing ironically, "I am a Black woman,

descendent of enslaved Africans. I am not supposed to question the acts of certain individuals” (120). More so than Davis, McKinney acknowledges the two sides of Black heritage, the persistent patterns of discrimination and oppression which she detects in other countries, too, as a result of colonialism, but also the empowering tradition of resistance.<sup>37</sup> Like Davis, she assigns the legacy of the struggle against slavery an importance for international politics today when, in her “Acceptance Remarks” after her nomination as Green Party presidential candidate in 2008, she draws a historical line from Sojourner Truth’s speech to crimes against the global community and the complicity of the Democratic Party, claiming that women together should be able to turn the world right side up again, “[a]s it was in 1851, so too it is in 2008.”<sup>38</sup> McKinney leaves the Democratic Party and joins the Green Party because she realizes that with her beliefs, she cannot be anything but Green (72). Similarly, Davis, who was active in various Civil Rights groups but disappointed by their in-fighting, nationalism, and anticommunism, decides in 1968 to join the Communist Party, feeling the need “to become a part of a serious revolutionary party.”<sup>39</sup> Both political activists construct their joining of political organizations with a radically international outlook as a result of disillusioning experiences with other groups, including the nationalism within Black organizations such as the SNCC and BPPP in Davis’s case, and that within the Congressional Black Caucus of the Democratic Party in McKinney’s case.

### **Transnationalism: Experience and Intellectual Input**

With regard to the role of the transnational in the life narratives of these two radical intellectuals, there are also some rather straightforward similarities such as a delight in travel and in personal friendships with people from many other nations. While personal contacts form a recurring element in the narratives of learning, experience, personal growth, and political activism in both texts, travel for the two authors happens at different points in their lives and is embedded differently in the construction of the Self. Because Davis wrote her *Autobiography* in her late twenties, her stays abroad are mainly related to her education, with a second highlight being her trip to Cuba, where she would later spend several months completing her manuscript.

Exposure to socialist internationalism started when Davis was in high school in New York and learned about utopian socialist experiments. She remembers that studying *The Communist Manifesto* made her see the situation of Black people in the context of a larger working-class movement. Her praise of the *Manifesto* is followed by a list of the many indignities Blacks experienced in the segregated South, and she concludes that “it all fell into place. What had seemed a personal hatred of me, an inexplicable refusal of Southern whites to confront their own emotions and a stubborn willingness of Blacks to acquiesce, became the inevitable consequence of a ruthless system which kept itself alive and well by encouraging spite, competition and the oppression of one group by another.”<sup>40</sup> The final call, “Workers of all countries, unite!” makes her want to throw herself into the communist movement (111). She

clarifies that it is her transnational worldview which coincides with the fundamentally global perspective of socialist internationalism. Davis remembers that she felt physically and spiritually isolated as a Black student at Brandeis (118), and was drawn towards foreign students, with whom she felt she had most in common (120). She remembers that, when her Indian friend Lalit talked about the misery of people in India, she immediately thought of the situation of Black people in Birmingham, Alabama, and Harlem (120). Her first foreign trip, though, takes her through London, Paris, and Switzerland to the Eighth World Festival for Youth and Students in Helsinki. In her account of her stay in Paris, where she witnesses racism and discrimination against Algerians and other postcolonial French citizens,<sup>41</sup> she calls the actions of the French police “as vicious” as those of the police in Birmingham, Alabama.<sup>42</sup> In 1967, when she passes through London on her way from Germany to the US, she attends meetings “in London ghettos” and is struck “by the degree to which West Indian communities in London were mirror images of Black communities at home” (150). Whenever she is confronted with oppression and discrimination in another country, she immediately links it with the situation of Black people in the US, which is a result of Marxist analysis as well as a clear expression of her transnational view. Even Rudi Dutschke’s assassination enables her to draw a connection to the US, because the “would-be assassin . . . said he was inspired by the assassination of Martin Luther King” (143).<sup>43</sup>

Interpreting her first experiences in Europe retrospectively, Davis realizes “how important it was to be able to tear down the superficial barriers that separated us. Language was one of those barriers which could be removed easily” (125). She decides to study French and do her third-year studies in Biarritz and Paris, but amongst a community of predominantly white students in France, her “old familiar feelings of disorientation” (127) return, while she feels drawn, for example, to the Vietnamese community in Paris. However, before receiving her degree in French literature, she resolves that she really wants to study philosophy—Marx and his predecessors and successors in particular. She reads Herbert Marcuse, meets him at Brandeis, and studies with him, developing a deep interest in European philosophy and going on to study philosophy at the University of Frankfurt.

Several aspects of her stay in Germany emerge as important to her life narrative and her construction of her Self: Firstly, the intensive learning experience offered by classes given by Theodor Adorno, Jürgen Habermas, and other thinkers, and the intellectual pleasure the study of philosophy gave her (142). Secondly, the protest rallies and demonstrations held in the spirit of internationalism prevalent in the 1960s in which she was able to participate. Thirdly, the opportunity to follow her communist leanings by exploring East Berlin and getting a glance at “Socialist Germany” (140). In 1967, she leaves Germany to take part in the Black Liberation Movement that was gaining momentum at the time. Her description of the inner conflict she experiences by having to choose between staying in Frankfurt to complete her doctorate and leaving for the US to participate in the movement attests to her sense of herself as

both a transnational scholar of philosophy and a transnational political activist. She solves the conflict by completing her studies in the US but simultaneously taking her critical transnational perspective to the struggles for civil rights, demanding a “breaking out of the narrow nationalism so prevalent in the Black Liberation Movement” (199). And despite preparing so intensely for her doctoral exams that she actually dreams about “Spinoza, Kant, Hegel” (190), she also becomes a member of the Communist Party and continues her political activism, always from an internationalist point of view.<sup>44</sup>

Her intellectual and political entanglements with Germany and France pave the way for another transnational experience: Cuba. Traveling with a delegation of communists, Davis spends a month in “the ‘first free territory of America’” (200). She describes this trip as a great “climax” in her life, an experience which leaves her feeling politically much more mature and inspired by revolutionary enthusiasm (216). Though her “Epilogue,” written a year and a half after the Cuban trip, emphasizes ongoing injustices and the necessity of continuing her activism to free political prisoners (with the help of international campaigns), she also proudly reports the successful forging of a wide alliance and unity among the many groups fighting racism and political repression (399). The optimistic spirit of unity and internationalism that pervades the final parts of Davis’s narrative is not quite mirrored in McKinney’s concluding paragraphs written forty years later, which do mention some successful “Freedom Revolutions” but also call for efforts to organize for freedom—from warmongers, special interests, and the like.<sup>45</sup>

Unlike Davis, who spent some of her formative years in Europe, McKinney travels later in her life, and her travels are part of political missions undertaken in the name of checking the truth of the US government’s official stories on site, and of supporting political groups abroad in their struggles against oppression. One continent with which she connects particularly strongly is Africa. About a visit to the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1996, McKinney remembers, “Everywhere I went, Africans knew my name,” and she finds that everybody had heard about her “heroic struggle” to stay in Congress (95). McKinney confidently reports how she relished her international reputation, but she also, almost like Davis, establishes a systemic connection between her own struggle for political participation and the Congolese fight for self-determination, which she feels allows her to write: “My victory presaged their own ability to win in a system terribly tilted against them. They were one with me. I was so proud to be able to tell them that I was one with them” (95). Her identification with Africa—she also visits other African states—is based on her sharing not only African heritage but also the social position of those repressed and denied self-determination worldwide. Furthermore, in claiming that one of the reasons she went to DRC was to “finally correct a tremendous wrong visited upon the Congolese by the United States” in the form of the murder of Patrice Lumumba (95) (amidst reports of US involvement in the assassination of Laurent Kabila), she presents herself as a US American activist with a social and political conscience.

Her analysis of US interventions and the misdirection of truth in the media is yet more comprehensive with regard to Rwanda, and it concludes with a list of five different activities McKinney personally undertook, such as writing to Bill Clinton when he was president and testifying in France before a terrorism judge about the Rwandan genocide (97). She also exposes the interplay between the United Nations, NGOs, human rights groups and others on the one hand and the US and its interests on the other, and reveals how key players in the cover-up of the Rwandan genocides received promotion (98). She does not even spare the Obama administration, in which some of the same people surfaced and which McKinney repeatedly criticizes for its continuation of policies of the Bush administration and its lack of engagement concerning Gaza.<sup>46</sup> She opposes the Obama administration for “expanding the U.S. war machine into Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, and extending the U.S. mandate in Iraq” and for its unfair treatment of whistle blowers (217), placing her global search for truth and justice above her ties to the Democratic Party. She lists many more promises broken by US administrations, numerous violations of human rights, and political and economic crimes in the Americas, Africa, and Australia, which she tried to expose to the public. She likens herself to “one of the American people’s canaries in the mine shaft” (218), singing to warn Americans of the lies and aggressions in the air. This is only one of numerous sections in McKinney’s narrative in which she presents herself as a Black activist with a clear view of the American impact on other parts of the world, emphasizing her radical resistance to government lies and aggressive actions. Critical events in the US are always connected with their global impact.

But what are these fundamental analyses based on? Like Angela Davis, McKinney as a Black radical intellectual and academic teacher presents a life-changing reading experience as the key. In her case it is John Stockwell’s *In Search of Enemies: A CIA Story* (1978), which she reads as a student of International Relations at the University of Southern California.<sup>47</sup> She cites long passages from his book and lectures in which he lays open how the American public and Congress had been lied to countless times and how cynically and ruthlessly US leaders had pursued their goals. Stockwell’s insights make her vow that she will always obtain her own, reliable, information and never rely solely on the official sources. Another analytical impetus comes from postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon, whose *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) are among the formative reading experiences she acknowledges (94). While McKinney expresses her love of learning on the one hand, she greatly values political and intellectual independence on the other, even formulating her own Declaration of Independence: “As an American of conscience, I hereby declare my independence from every bomb dropped, every threat levelled, every civil liberties rollback, every child killed, every veteran maimed, every man tortured” (161).<sup>48</sup> This is the statement with which she declares her independence from the political order after leaving the Democrats, and proclaims a new start running for president as the Green Party candidate in 2008. But even as she recognizes the

transnational scope of the Green movement and political success of Green parties in European and other countries, she criticizes them for their occasional support of wars and suspects that the reason is that nobody wants to lose their “White skin privilege,” supporting her analysis with academic sources (179–80). We may also take McKinney’s chapter on her time as a Green Party presidential candidate as an example of her particular autobiographical technique, since here as in other chapters she not only recounts experiences and memories but uses documents to convey information, package herself and her knowledge, and simultaneously confirm the truthfulness of her account.

### **Conclusion**

Both Black political intellectuals present themselves as engaging in Western intellectual traditions and feeling indebted to thinkers like Marx and Stockwell. Simultaneously, they emphasize their independence of thought when applying radical ideas in their activism. These ideas form the basis of their social and political analyses, which are inherently transnational in revealing the systemic character of oppression and injustice. Both oppose the dominant political structures to the point of imprisonment and defamation.<sup>49</sup> Both identify themselves as Black people but reject Black nationalism in favor of support for the global struggle against oppression and for peace and justice.

McKinney never ceases to question institutions, resist the power of the political and media establishments, and counter their propaganda with sharp analyses and academic references, working for transparency. In doing so, she emerges from her memoir unquestionably as a radical as well as an intellectual. With her peculiar combination of personal memories, speeches, letters, government documents, emails, cartoons, and photographs, she produces an autobiographical text as unruly and challenging as her life, and she resists conventional forms of narrative as much as she shuns and counteracts conventional politics. Compared with McKinney’s memoir, Davis’s is a more stringent narrative, starting with events right before her arrest but then proceeding chronologically from her youth and intellectual development to her liberation. As such it testifies to the success of her project to “preserve the history” of the struggles for Civil Rights and for her freedom.<sup>50</sup> As neither Davis nor McKinney endorse Black nationalism, they try uncompromisingly to get to the systemic roots of war, oppression, injustice, and lies, which necessitates that they view the situation from a wide transnational angle in their analyses of the events of their time. In the era of the Trump Administration, McKinney’s critique of the role of the “military–industrial–Congressional complex” and of government lies has not lost any of its topicality.<sup>51</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Bogues was keynote speaker at the symposium “Unhinging the National Framework: Perspectives on Transnational Life-Writing” held at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam on 8 December 2017, where international autobiography scholars presented their research. They also addressed, for example, Dutch colonialism, and slavery, which connects with Bogues’s work. He is professor at the Department of Africana Studies at Brown University, which is “researching and teaching new and innovative knowledge produced by the critical study of the intersections of class, gender, nation, race, and sexuality informed by multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives” (“Africana Studies,” Brown University, 2017, [http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Africana\\_Studies/](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Africana_Studies/)).

<sup>2</sup> See Anthony Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1–4.

<sup>3</sup> Peggy Levitt, “Transnationalism,” in *Diasporas: Concepts, Intersections, Identities*, ed. Kim Knott and Sean McLoughlin (London: Zed Books, 2010), 40.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *Cultures of U.S. Imperialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), and Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*, 2 vols. (London, 1789), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/equiano1/equiano1.html>. See, for example, Eric D. Lamore, “Olaudah Equiano in the United States: Abigail Mott’s 1829 Abridged Edition of the ‘Interesting Narrative,’” in *Reading African American Autobiography*, ed. Eric D. Lamore (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017), 66–88.

<sup>6</sup> Etsuko Taketani, “The Manchurian Philosopher: W. E. B. du Bois in the Eurasian Pacific.” in *American Studies as Transnational Practice: Turning toward the Transpacific*, ed. Yuan Shu and Donald E. Pease (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth University Press, 2015), 169–212.

<sup>7</sup> Angela Davis, *An Autobiography* (New York: International Publishers, 1988 [1974]), 199.

<sup>8</sup> Eric D. Lamore’s collection *Reading African American Autobiography* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017) may serve as evidence that transnational approaches play a minor role in the scholarship on African American autobiography in general. In another recent publication, *Obama and Transnational American Studies*, edited by Alfred Hornung (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2016), the transnational perspective is also applied to Black lives and life narratives.

<sup>9</sup> Stephanie Siewert, “‘America at Large?’: Inter-American Studies, Transnationalism, and the Hemispheric Turn: Research Survey and Review of the Book Series Inter-American

Studies/Estudios Interamericanos (Vol. I–V),” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 60, no. 4 (2015): 533.

<sup>10</sup> Lamore, “Oludah Equiano in the United States,” 4.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Melissa Dearey, “Soledad Sister: On the Absence of Angela Davis’s An *Autobiography* from Contemporary Historiographies of 1960s and 1970s Black Power Movement,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 21, no. 2 (Winter 2016): 222–46; Alice Kaplan, “French Lessons: How Paris Changed Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 58, no. 31 (April 2012): B11–B14; Kenneth Mostern, *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Racialization in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Leroy Hopkins, “‘Black Prussians’: Germany and African American Education from James W. C. Pennington to Angela Davis,” in *Crosscurrents: African Americans, Africa, and Germany in the Modern World*, ed. David McBride, Leroy Hopkins, and C. Aisha Blackshire-Belay (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1997), 65–81.

<sup>12</sup> Cynthia McKinney, *Ain’t Nothing Like Freedom* (Atlanta: Clarity Press, 2013), 125.

<sup>13</sup> Stefan Berger and Sean Scalmer emphasize that much of today’s activism is about transparency, and activists want to be models of transparency. See Stefan Berger and Sean Scalmer, “The Transnational Activist: An Introduction,” in *The Transnational Activist: Transformations and Comparisons from the Anglo-World since the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Stefan Berger and Sean Scalmer (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 14.

<sup>14</sup> David C. Rapoport, “Reflections on the Third or New Left Wave: 17 Years Later,” in *Revolutionary Violence and the New Left: Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Alberto Martín Álvarez and Eduardo Rey Tristán (New York: Routledge, 2017), 24.

<sup>15</sup> Rapoport, “Reflections on the Third or New Left Wave,” 27. See also John A. Gronbeck-Tedesco, *Cuba, the United States, and Cultures of the Transnational Left, 1930–1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> John Rensenbrink, “Early History of the United States Green Party, 1984–2000.” Green Party US, May 15, 2017, [https://www.gp.org/early\\_history](https://www.gp.org/early_history).

<sup>17</sup> McKinney, *Ain’t Nothing Like Freedom*, 107.

<sup>18</sup> Philippe Lejeune, “The Autobiographical Pact,” in *The Routledge Autobiography Studies Reader*, ed. Ricia Anne Chansky and Emily Hipchen (London: Routledge, 2016), 34–35. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson suggest that the memoir differs from a conventional autobiography in that it “directs attention more to the lives and actions of others than of the narrator” and “takes a segment of a life, not its entirety, and focusing on interconnected experiences” (Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography* [2nd ed., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010], 274). This appears to apply

fully to Davis's and McKinney's life writing. "Life writing" is commonly used as an umbrella term for the various forms of auto/biographical writing.

<sup>19</sup> McKinney, *Ain't Nothing Like Freedom*, 33–36.

<sup>20</sup> In his discussion of Davis's identity politics, Kenneth Mostern finds that she resists sexuality as an aspect of Black politics because she views it as a distraction, and that her remarks about her passionate relationship with George Jackson are the only instances where gender becomes relevant. Even there, however, she emphasizes the political aspect. See Mostern, *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics*, 184–87. McKinney mentions her marriage and divorce once (McKinney, *Ain't Nothing Like Freedom*, 36).

<sup>21</sup> Davis, *Autobiography*, viii.

<sup>22</sup> Davis, *Autobiography*, xv.

<sup>23</sup> Davis, *Autobiography*, xvi.

<sup>24</sup> Davis, *Autobiography*, xvi.

<sup>25</sup> McKinney, *Ain't Nothing Like Freedom*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> McKinney, *Ain't Nothing Like Freedom*, 18.

<sup>27</sup> McKinney, *Ain't Nothing Like Freedom*, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Regenia Gagnier, "The Literary Standard, Working-Class Autobiography, and Gender," in *Revealing Lives: Autobiography, Biography, and Gender*, ed. Susan Groag Bell and Marilyn Yalom (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 103.

<sup>29</sup> Davis, *Autobiography*, 65.

<sup>30</sup> For a further discussion of her public image and self-perception, see Yvonne Gutenberger, "I Am Remembered as a Hairdo: Angela Davis's *Autobiography* as a Revision of the Public Persona and Self-Reconstruction as Political Activist," in *Western Fictions, Black Realities: Meanings of Blackness and Modernities*, ed. Isabel Soto and Violet Showers (Munich and East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 297–315.

<sup>31</sup> Davis, *Autobiography*, 382.

<sup>32</sup> McKinney, *Ain't Nothing Like Freedom*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> McKinney, *Ain't Nothing Like Freedom*, 42.

<sup>34</sup> McKinney, *Ain't Nothing Like Freedom*, 60.

<sup>35</sup> McKinney says, for example, "I'm proudest of the dissent I wrote to the FY2007 Pentagon budget" (McKinney, *Ain't Nothing Like Freedom*, 48).

<sup>36</sup> McKinney, *Ain't Nothing Like Freedom*, 40–41.

<sup>37</sup> One of the most striking incidents McKinney describes is her encounter with a taxi driver in Tunisia who careened into a woman begging on the street but insisted that he was not African like her, causing McKinney to realize that “colonialism has done a job on people of color” (McKinney, *Ain't Nothing Like Freedom*, 209).

<sup>38</sup> McKinney, *Ain't Nothing Like Freedom*, 166–67.

<sup>39</sup> Davis, *Autobiography*, 187.

<sup>40</sup> Davis, *Autobiography*, 110.

<sup>41</sup> For a detailed discussion of her stay in France, see Alice Kaplan, “French Lessons.”

<sup>42</sup> Davis, *Autobiography*, 122.

<sup>43</sup> Rudi Dutschke (1940–1979) was a sociologist, activist, and leader of the socialist student movement in West Germany. He was shot in the head by a neo-Nazi on April 11, 1968 and died eleven years later from the injury. See Irmgard Zündorf, “Biografie Rudi Dutschke,” *LeMO-Biografien, Lebendiges Museum Online*, 2016, Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, <http://www.hdg.de/lemo/biografie/rudi-dutschke.html>.

<sup>44</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, which are covered in Davis's memoir, it was internationalism, which emphasizes solidarity between peoples, rather than transnationalism, that was part of the political-ideological setup, particularly in the context of socialist and communist activism. Analyzing Davis's autobiographical reconstruction of her views and actions in 2019, however, I employ “transnational” to indicate that I situate myself in Transnational Studies, leaving the confines of the paradigm of the nation and foregrounding aspects of border-crossings and interconnectedness of people, ideas, and movements.

<sup>45</sup> McKinney, *Ain't Nothing Like Freedom*, 221.

<sup>46</sup> McKinney, *Ain't Nothing Like Freedom*, 98 (people resurfacing); 123 (in 2010: no participation in Durban III Conference), 155 (“the Bush-Obama transition”); 197 (Obama to speak up about Gaza).

<sup>47</sup> McKinney, *Ain't Nothing Like Freedom*, 83.

<sup>48</sup> McKinney delivers her “Declaration” in 2007 as part of an antiwar speech after the Democratic failure to oppose President Bush's war in Iraq and establishes a historical parallel to the American women's Seneca Falls Declaration of 1848 (McKinney, *Ain't Nothing Like Freedom*, 161).

<sup>49</sup> McKinney reports that, in 2009, on her way to Gaza on a humanitarian mission with the “Free Gaza Movement,” she was kidnapped by the Israeli military, held under arrest for

seven days, and released after international protests (McKinney, *Ain't Nothing Like Freedom*, 200–06).

<sup>50</sup> Davis, *Autobiography*, vii.

<sup>51</sup> McKinney, *Ain't Nothing Like Freedom*, 98.

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