

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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The BSO invites its most controversial speaker

By Ronda Racha Penrice

In an unprecedented show of campus unity, the Black Students' Organization (BSO) with the support of the Board of Managers, the Jewish Student Union, the Columbia College Student Council, the Center for Research on Women, and a host of other cosponsoring groups presented political activist Ms. Angela Yvonne Davis to give the keynote address for Black History Month. Ms. Davis, sometimes singled out for her placement on the FBI's Most Wanted List during the height of the Black Power Movement in the late '60s and early '70s, addressed a standing room only crowd on Saturday, Feb. 22 in Wollman Auditorium.

In light of all the administrative and student body rhetoric that has clouded so much of the programming that the BSO has facilitated over the years, the presentation by Ms. Davis, who by all historical comparison is indeed "the most controversial speaker" in recent memory to be invited by the BSO, was a landmark event and one of the most thought-provoking campus forums.

Analyzed in the context of other lectures presented by the BSO this year—including lectures by Dr. Na'i, Akbar, Rev. Al Sharpton and Dr. Leonard Jeffries—one cannot ignore the common thread that ties

such a diverse roster of speakers together: a concerted effort to validate the African-American perspective of society's problems and to unflinchingly discuss its impact and what we, as students and future leaders, can do to change a society that vacillates between racism and prejudice while giving lip-service to the unfulfilled egalitarian agenda of the nation's founding documents.

The African-American community, like any other, has numerous opinions and proposals regarding today's most pressing dilemmas. The BSO and all people should firmly denounce those who would seek to tell them, as Joshua Prager did in his *Spectator* column ["What the BSO can do to fulfill the legacy of Martin Luther King," Jan. 22]. How preposterous it would sound if black students wrote "What Chinese students can do to fulfill the legacy of Mao Tse Tung" or "What Jewish students can do to fulfill the liberal legacy of William Kunstler." We must all acknowledge that no one speaker can possibly summarize the experience of any one group, especially one as diverse as the African-American community.

While acknowledging the complexity of the diversity of opinions

within the black community, Ms. Davis expertly consolidated the plethora of issues that face not only the African-American community but society in general. She presented her perspective as clearly and as intelligently as any other lecturer this year. Furthermore, as the keynote lecturer of Black History Month, Ms. Davis delivered a powerful presentation that framed a truly remarkable evening.

In the gospel tradition of African-American culture, the event began with selections sung by the Barnard-Columbia Gospel Choir. Following the Gospel Choir, BSO President Steven Antwi welcomed the crowd to this historic event emphasizing the diversity of co-sponsoring groups that made the lecture possible. Antwi encouraged the crowd to unite in a similar fashion in the struggle to maintain

need-blind admissions at Columbia.

When finally Angela Davis took the stage accompanied by Rodney Crump, BSO Political Committee Chair and BSO Vice President Khadijah Sharif, the crowd rose to its feet. After the crowd settled down, Crump gave an impassioned introduction of Khadijah Sharif who later introduced Angela Davis. Noting Ms. Sharif's landmark lawsuit against the New York State Department of Education's gender-bias in administering Regent and Empire State Scholarships and her integral role in the historic mayoral delegation to South Africa last fall, Crump said that Ms. Sharif had demonstrated that she was the Angela Davis of the future.

Somewhat taken aback by Crump's praise, Sharif reminded the crowd that they had not gathered to honor her, but to hear the message

of Davis. Citing Ms. Davis' lifetime of political activism and a litany of her outstanding accomplishments, Sharif then personally concluded her introduction with how Davis' legacy continues to inspire her.

After a sisterly embrace, Sharif gave the podium to Davis who was immediately greeted by enthusiastic applause as the crowd stood on its feet. With a special message to the Columbia community, Davis reminded the crowd that the retention of need-blind admissions was a struggle in which we should all be involved.

Davis then launched into an impassioned speech commemorating the 27th anniversary of the assassination of Malcolm X. Mindful of the media's iconization of Malcolm as a black separatist and sexist, Davis reminded the crowd that Malcolm "was a man who was not afraid to change." Using

Malcolm's break with the Nation of Islam as evidence, Davis asked the crowd, "Is it possible to speak of Malcolm X as an emerging feminist?"

Davis warned the crowd that it was "not consistent with the legacy of Malcolm X to look back at Malcolm and try to do in 1992 what he did in 1962." Instead, she urged us to reformulate the legacy of Malcolm X in order to battle the problems of AIDS, sexism, and environmental racism (shown by the fact that three out of every five African-Americans live near a toxic waste dump).

Regardless of what one thinks of Ms. Davis' feminist reinterpretation of Malcolm's evolution, she forced the crowd to confront the real Malcolm—a very complex figure who cannot be captured on hats and t-shirts and in "sound-bite quotations." She challenged us to per-

sonally emulate the legacy of Malcolm through action.

She encouraged every member of the audience to join some organization so that her or his voice could be a more effective instrument for change particularly in times of necessary mobilization.

Though she acknowledged her own contribution to the struggle, Davis implored the youth of the audience to rise up and take the baton of leadership, for the work of 1992 must be done by the Khadijah Sharifs of the world. Like Malcolm, Barbara Jordan, Dr. Martin Luther King, and yes, Rev. Al Sharpton and Dr. Leonard Jeffries, Davis tells us, "Do not be afraid to question, do not accept one-dimensional depictions of the truth, and most importantly do not be afraid to act and always *remember the struggle!*"

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