Davis Discusses Issues Concerning Black Women

By Rishi Shrivastava

Angela Y. Davis spoke in Kres- ge Auditorium on Saturday after- noon, at the closing of the "Black Women in the Academy: Defending Our Name 1894-1994" conference.

Davis, a professor at the Univer- sity of California, Santa Cruz, has been a spokeswoman on racial and economic issues, as well as women's rights, for more than twen- ty years.

She addressed the conference's theme at the beginning of her speech. "We've been called upon to defend the names of many of our sisters in sometimes new and provocative ways," Davis said.

Recently, black women came to the defense of Anita Hill, Lani Guinier, and Johnnette B. Cole when they were attacked by the right wing. However, black women could have defended Guinier better when she was considered for Asstis- tant Attorney General for Civil Rights in the Clinton Administra- tion, she said.

She stressed the need to further define black women such as Sur- geon General Joycelyn Elders. Elders had the courage to suggest drug discrimination problems for black women and racism in the workplace. Since black women held mainly domestic jobs from the end of slavery to World War II, they were particular- ly susceptible to sexual harassment, Davis said. Furthermore, the white public would wrongly blame these black women when harassment occurred, she said.

In other matters, more education is necessary to prevent the spread of AIDS, she said. Davis called for campaigns to acknowledge the "sexual autonomy of young black women."

Four guidelines

Davis outlined four major guide- lines for black women to follow. First, "we can no longer assume that there is one monolithic force against which we position ourselves in order to defend our name. It's not just the white establishment," she said.

Also, "there is a sense in which neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism are coming dangerously close together." For example, Davis said both groups are raising reverse discrimination arguments and are also taking stances against affirmative action.

Her second guideline was that black women refrain from talking to each other in ways that they them- selves do not wish to be addressed by others. "We can no longer ignore the ways in which we some- times end up reproducing the very forms of domination which we like to attribute to something or some- body else."

Davis's third point concerned society's criteria for characterizing black women. "We have to go out of the habit of assuming that the masses of black women are to be defined in accordance with their strin- gent as victims. Furthermore, she said, it is wrong for blacks to portray themselves as victims to gain advantage "like when Clarence Thomas invoked the idea that he was the victim of a high-tech lynching."

In her final recommendation, Davis argued against damaging race relations with other minorities. "We cannot afford to commit ourselves so fervently to defending our names that we end up poisoning ourselves against other races."

Opinions on recent issues

Davis also expressed her opin- ions on recent controversial issues. She criticized the government's treatment of Illegal immigrants. "Black migrant workers from the South were historically treated in very much the same way as undeclan- ced Latinos are treated today." We must all discourage backlash against immigrants and understand that they are not responsible for high unemployment, she said.

In addition, socialism is not an em- ptyly flawed concept, Davis said. "It's because socialists have fallen ... for reasons that had much more to do with a lack of democracy than with socialism itself, this doesn't mean that social- ism is an obsolete political project."

Regarding criminal issues, sen- tencing guidelines are inherently biased against blacks, Davis said. For example, she said, that the sen- tence for possessing crack is the same as the sentence for possessing 100 times as much powdered cocaine to get the same sentence as one who possesses crack. This law is discriminatory because blacks use crack more often than they use pow- dered cocaine, she said.

Also, increased prison construc- tion only promotes crime, and incor- rectation should be abolished for many groups, she said. In fact, Davis suggested the possibility of releasing women from jails since they are generally involved in less violent crimes.

Davis said prisoners should be given voting rights. She said state laws prohibiting inmate voting rights discriminate against minori- ties because a disproportionate num- ber of inmates are black or Latino. Approximately four million pris- oners in the United States are denied suffrage, she said.

She concluded by emphasizing the need for a new United States- Caribbean policy, especially for Cuba and by encouraging the audi- ence to attend a 1995 women's con- ference in Beijing.