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# CRAVE

## “THE MAKING OF A FUGITIVE” UNRAVELS A HISTORIC AMERICAN TROPE

The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago presents “The Making of a Fugitive,” a powerful exhibition that explores the implicit biases created by the state and the media.

by Miss Rosen Oct 3rd, 2016



Artwork: Dennis Adams, Patricia Hearts -- A thru Z, 1979/90. Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, gift of Howard and Donna Stone.  
Photo: Nathan Keay, ©MCA Chicago

On August 7, 1970, Jonathan Jackson, a 17-year-old African-American high school student brought three guns into the Marin County Hall of Justice during the trial of San Quentin inmate James McClain. Jackson, McClain, and Black Panther party inmates Ruchell Magee and William A. Christmas took Superior Court Harold Haley, Deputy D.A. Garry Thomas, and three female jurors hostage. The group exited the courthouse and attempted to flee in a van. The police opened fire, starting a shootout that left Jackson, Haley, McClain, and Christmas dead.

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It soon came to light that that Jackson's guns had been purchased two days prior to the incident by Angela Davis, then an assistant professor in the philosophy department at UCLA. The state of California considers "all persons concerned in the commission of a crime, whether they directly commit the act constituting the offense...principals in any crime committed," and charged Davis with "aggravated kidnapping and first degree murder in the death of Judge Harold Haley." \*

A warrant was issued for her arrest and Davis went on the lam; FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover declared Davis to be one of the FBI's Ten Most Wanted, making her the third woman to make the list. For the next two months she hid, until finally captured on October 13 at a Howard Johnson Motor Lodge in New York City.

In September 1970, *LIFE* magazine put Davis on the cover with the words "The Making of a Fugitive" superimposed over her hair. It was the prototypical construction of black criminality that the mainstream has long used to fan the flames of extreme bias in the service of the state. By reporting only one side of the story, the one that inflamed racist fears, *LIFE* reinforced and sensationalize the narrative of lawlessness in the black community in order to whitewash the context for issues at hand.

In May 1971, from Marin County Jail, where she would be kept for 16 months awaiting trial, Davis penned an essay, titled "Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation, that speaks to the fundamental construct of black criminality, both then and now: "The announced function of the police, 'to protect and serve the people,' becomes the grotesque caricature of protecting and preserving the interests of our oppressors and serving us nothing but injustice. They are there to intimidate blacks, to persuade us with their violence that we are powerless to alter the conditions of our lives. Arrests are frequently based on whims. Bullets from their guns murder human beings with little or no pretext, aside from the universal intimidation they are charged with carrying out. Protection for drug-pushers, and Mafia-style exploiters, support for the most reactionary ideological elements of the black community (especially those who cry out for more police), are among the many functions of forces of law and order. They encircle the community with a shield of violence, too often forcing the natural aggression of the black community inwards."

Forty-five years since Davis first wrote those words, we live in a country where extrajudicial killings continue to be sanctioned by the state; lynchings are repeatedly televised, to traumatic effect; murderers are rewarded with raises, promotions, and accolades; and the media lines its pockets with blood money.

To right these wrongs is a battle that never ends, but one many feel charged to contribute in whatever way they can. The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago presents ***The Making of a Fugitive***, on view now through December 4, 2016. Organized by Faye Gleisser, Marjorie Susman Curatorial Fellow at the MCA, the exhibition showcases showcases mixed media, prints, photographs, and sculptures made from 1970s to the present, with works by Dennis Adams, Chris Burden, David Hammons, R. B. Kitaj, Barbara Kruger, Glenn Ligon, Bruce Nauman, Huong Ngo, Carrie Schneider, and Xaviera Simmons.

*The Making of a Fugitive* invites viewers to consider their biases in a safe space: the privacy of their own minds, where no one but they themselves can overhear. For the first step towards justice is to distinguish truth from lies. Perhaps the first way to know is to recognize the urge to defend the status quo. In the words of Mark 8:36, "For what shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and lose it soul?" \*Let the record show that Davis was found not-guilty of all charges by an all-white jury.