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1967's Unclaimed Experience: Philip Roth's Newark and the Legacy of Angela Davis

“At the kitchen table one night Angela Davis appears to the Swede “ (160). So begins a sentence in Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral* (1997) about a third of a way through a ten-page sequence that has the novel’s protagonist, Seymour (The Swede) Levov, imagining a conversation with the radical Black feminist activist, Angela Davis. The moment is striking, not only because it is narrated by the unreliable Nathan Zuckerman, who has already confessed that he is going to get people wrong (35). It is also striking because Zuckerman invokes, in the persona of Angela Davis, the most unlikely figure for the Swede to engage on the status of Black workers. There is a discussion (wholly imagined) that takes place in the wake of the Swede’s daughter’s own radical act of bombing the local post office to protest the Vietnam War, a form of revolt that unexpectedly connects the two. In this extended conversation between a Jewish factory owner and a Black, Communist revolutionary, Roth offers here a figure for what these kinds of dialogues might look like in the wake of the traumatic 1967 riots in Newark. Significantly, the two characters are able to sit down at a literal and metaphorical table to understand how to piece together fractured families (in the case of the Swede) and fractured movements (in the case of Angela Davis). Closely reading this scene allows us to reflect on the political and cultural legacies of Civil Rights—not only with renewed focus on the significance of Angela Davis for this novel, but also on the racial (and, possibly, radical) politics of Newark’s own Philip Roth, whose representations of Blackness have been called into question by such recent works as Jacques Berlinerblau’s *The Philip Roth We Don’t Know: Sex, Race, and Autobiography* (2021).