

# VARIETY

Oct 30, 2020 3:23pm PT

## Coco Fusco on Angela Davis, Racial Representation, Citizen Surveillance

By Will Tizard



Courtesy of Video Data Bank, [www.vdb.org](http://www.vdb.org), School of the Art Institute of Chicago

The thoughtfully curated doc tribute section Black Cinema Matters has generated wide interest at the [Jihlava Intl. Documentary Film Festival](#) – and not just among Czechs.

Screening 13 films covering three decades, ranging from the 1963 polemic “Take This Hammer” through Madeline Anderson’s provocative 1969 doc “Tribute to Malcolm X – Black Journal Segment” to 1995 intimate portrait of queer siblings “Vintage: Families of Value,” the section showcases what the fest calls “a radical change in the perspective of the Black American narrative, which has long been dividing not only the American public but is also bogged down with a lot of prejudice, ignorance and lack of empathy.”

Filmmaker, artist and performer [Coco Fusco](#) contributed her frenetic 2004 sendup of the FBI surveillance that dogged [Angela Davis](#) in 1970 during the heyday of the Black Panthers, “a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert,” a work hailed as a brilliant use of irony in the face of police state tactics.

*Variety*’s interview with Fusco follows:

**The issue of surveillance of citizens is even more urgent these days than when you made the film in 2004, it seems. Did you have any hope back then that films like yours would have opened people’s eyes to this threat?**

Actually there was a great deal of attention to citizen surveillance in the U.S. in 2004. The attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 was the justification for the Patriot Act. This allowed law enforcement greater powers to surveil, including tapping domestic and international phones and reading personal email. There was a good deal of public discussion of these expanded state powers.

**How important do you think it is that people outside the U.S. come to understand the level of institutional racism that still exists there? Do you think this is something perhaps easier to see for non-Americans than for many Americans?**

Europeans have frequently pointed the finger at American racism. In some ways it is easier to recognize racist practices when one looks from a distance. While I have no problem with foreigners pointing to American hypocrisy and racism, I would not want that to serve as a way of avoiding racism in today’s Europe and the racism that is part of the European colonial legacy.

While there has been a good deal of reckoning in Europe with the history of Nazism and anti-Semitism, European countries’ involvement in colonialism, the slave trade, genocidal campaigns in Africa, the subjugation of colonial populations, and the suppression of nationalist movements in former colonies has not [been] dealt with sufficiently.

**Your doc “a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert” has a wonderful kinetic energy and satire mixed in with its serious subject, the hounding of Angela Davis and the embrace of stereotypes about appearance. How did you come up with this structure?**

I had been doing photography research for an exhibition that I curated in 2003 about racial representation. I found a lot of material about Angela Davis that I could not include in that exhibition and put it aside to create a video. I also read several accounts by former FBI agents that had pursued leftists in the late 60s and early 70s under the instruction of former director J. Edgar Hoover – many were remorseful as they recognized that their actions had been excessive and often laced with racist motives.

**And some of the voiceover we hear uses actual language from police reports by investigators focused on Davis’ links to the Panthers?**

After Hoover’s death a commission was set up in the U.S. Congress to examine the practices of the FBI and a great deal came to light about COINTELPRO and other illegal activities of the U.S. government against its opponents. Some former agents testified as part of that. So I thought it right to invent a character who was a remorseful FBI agent.

**The focus on hair styles – in particular the danger of sporting an afro – plays up the absurdity of some of the policing of the era. How did you decide to make this your central motif?**

I also met several women who had been arrested while Davis was a fugitive by police that went after any Black woman with an afro thinking she was Angela Davis. The reality of the confusion and the obsession, the ways that afros were demonized, this all fascinated me.