

**Commendations of
Angela Y. Davis
recipient of
honorary doctorate,**

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Angela Y. Davis was born in 1944 in Birmingham, Alabama at a time when Jim Crow segregation laws were in force and the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) perpetrated such a reign of terror in the neighborhood where she grew up that the area acquired the infamous moniker of ‘Dynamite Hill’ due to the number of terrorist bombs unleashed by the Klansmen. In 1959, Professor Davis moved to Manhattan, where she attended a private high school as a beneficiary of a Quaker educational program. During this period, she studied Marxism and joined a youth group associated with the Communist Party. She was then awarded a scholarship to Brandeis University in Massachusetts and, through her experiences of study abroad at the Sorbonne and the University of Frankfurt, Professor Davis gained an awareness of the liberation struggles of other peoples throughout the world.

The 1960s upsurge in white supremacist terrorist attacks against Black activists prompted Professor Davis’ return to the US to pursue her doctoral studies at UC San Diego under the direction of the leftist German philosopher Herbert Marcuse. At the same time, her involvement in the Civil Rights struggles against racism and for economic and social justice led her to join the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Party (BPP). The masculinist views of the SNCC and the BPP drove her to leave those groups and inspired her to develop one of her most original and powerful arguments: that the struggle for gender justice need not be sublimated to the general goal of social justice. After joining the Marxist Che-Lumumba Club of the Communist Party in Southern California, which militated against police brutality and extrajudicial execution of Blacks, Professor Davis deepened her understanding of the indissoluble connection between the Civil Rights struggles against the racist oppression of African Americans and the international communist workers’ movements against capitalism and imperialism.

Explaining these connections has been one of the enduring themes in her academic writings, as we expound in the first part of this laudation, and acting upon these struggles has been a leitmotiv for her, as we discuss in the second part of our tribute to Professor Davis.

Liberation must be liberation for all

One of the most significant intellectual contributions of Professor Davis is the way she has systematically integrated gender, class and race into her academic analyses. She has been a formidable critic of the gender, racist, and class biases that historically have obscured women’s participation in and contributions to Marxism, communism, abolitionism, and other liberation movements. Professor Davis forged new ground in acknowledging the existence of multiple feminisms that reflect the diverse experiences of Black women and other women of color. In the same vein, she has powerfully argued against the false dichotomy that expects oppressed women of color to choose between the struggle for political liberation of the collective and women’s empowerment. Part of Professor Davis’ achievements entails recovering the voices and agency of forgotten women, such as Mary Church Terrell, who drew attention to the links between slavery and the Convict Lease System.

Women, Race and Class, published in 1981, was groundbreaking in its analysis of how the legacy of racism and class produced profound differences between elite white women's feminist struggles for suffrage and liberation and the experiences, struggles and goals of Black, communist and working-class women. In 1989, Professor Davis published *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. While this book illuminated the particular contours of Black feminism by demonstrating how Blues legends Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billy Holiday influenced Black feminism, *Women, Culture & Politics*, published in the same year, broached the subject from a comparative perspective. Dr. Davis combined in-depth analyses of specific issues such as Black female empowerment and the impact of structural racism on African-American women's health and physical integrity with a global perspective on the interconnectivity of international feminist struggles of women in South Africa, Kenya and Egypt. Her insights into the manifestations of the "deformed equality" of American slavery system revealed that Black enslaved women were subjected to the gendered violence of being raped and sexually brutalized by their white slave masters, even while they were treated the same as men in terms of their economic exploitation and oppression. Simultaneously, slavery produced the social, existential and often physical emasculation of enslaved Black men. Professor Davis showed how the concept of the "deformed equality" of enslaved Black women and men contributed to the disruption of 'normative' male-female gender hierarchies.

Her subsequent research on prison abolitionism further demonstrates that the repressive regimes of slavery and what she has dubbed "the prison industrial complex" cannot be fully understood, much less fully dismantled, unless gender, class and race are taken into consideration. Her work exposes the various and often contradictory ways that "the deformed equality" of African Americans and other minorities is perpetuated in the prison industrial complex and its military counterpart. As with the slavery system, Black, other minority or poor female prisoners are particularly vulnerable to gendered forms of violence and degradation, and are far more likely to be labelled as mentally unstable in comparison with male prisoners. Yet in her book *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (2005) we find another significant observation: that "Gender equality in the military is represented as the equal opportunity to participate in every aspect of military life, including equal opportunity to participate in the violence previously assumed to be the purview of men." Hence the spectacle of female soldiers who, rather than challenge the *statu quo*, willingly participated in the torture of male prisoners at Abu Ghraib.

As is well known, Angela Davis' earliest writings on the US prison system are informed by her activism on behalf of Black *political prisoners* such as the Soledad Brothers and her own incarceration on political grounds, which she recorded for posterity in her memoir, *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance*, published in 1971 while she was still held in the Marin County jail. During this same year, she penned "Political Prisoners, Prisons and Black Liberation," a manifesto that documents the awareness of Black, Chicano and Puerto Rican prisoners that they were essentially political prisoners victimized "by an oppressive politico-economic order" and dominated by a network of authoritarian mechanisms that had transformed prisons into veritable "fascist concentration camps."

Professor Davis first described the genealogy that directly links the modern American prison system to the legacy of slavery in her "Lectures on Liberation" and her important essay, *From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison: Frederick Douglas and the Convict Lease System*. Here she convincingly showed that while the Thirteenth

Amendment to the US Constitution abolished slavery, it simultaneously paved the way for its continuation under the (dis)guise of legalized practices of “involuntary servitude”, such as the Convict Lease System, peonage and the Chain Gangs. These institutions redefined and identified Blackness with criminality and, in so doing, ushered in a racist penal system that disproportionately deprives African Americans and other racialized minorities of their freedoms. In a devastating critique, she argues that in purely economic terms, the conditions of imprisonment were actually worse than slavery. Whereas slaveholders were responsible for the entire collective of enslaved peoples, including non-working children and the elderly, lessees were only responsible for individual convicts. Accordingly, imprisonment cheapened Black lives and made them expendable in ways not contemplated by slavery, because this would have been economically counterproductive.

While Professor Davis was not the first intellectual to observe these connections—she acknowledges the insights of D.E. Tobias, W.E.B. Dubois, and Mary Church Terrell—, she went further than her predecessors by exposing how the criminal justice system perpetuates notions of black criminality and by interrogating “the structural role of the expanding network of penitentiaries and convict labor camps in constructing and affirming these [racist] ideologies.” In her provocative groundbreaking book, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003), Dr. Davis investigated the structural parallels between the chattel slavery, lynching and Jim Crow segregation practiced in the US and South African apartheid and proposed that the prison industrial complex should be abolished along with these other avatars of institutionalized racist tyranny and exploitation. Her subsequent book, *Abolition Democracy*, elaborates on the three goals of abolitionism: the comprehensive abolition of slavery, the abolition of the death penalty and the abolition of prison, which she proposed should be replaced by “the creation of an array of social institutions that would begin to solve the social problems that set people on the track to prison, thereby helping to render the prison obsolete.”

Not only have Angela Davis’ writings deepened our understanding of the underlying structural economic and political functions of the criminalization of African Americans and other racialized minorities in the US, as mentioned, she has also increasingly adopted a global perspective by highlighting parallels between Black, Latin-x and Native American experiences of systemic racism and the oppression faced by minoritized populations across the globe, from South African apartheid to the second-class status of Algerians in France. In 2016, she developed these global connections further with the publication of *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine and the Foundations of a Movement* where she analyzes how the malignant triad of racism, political oppression and economic exploitation operates in the global war on terror. Professor Davis argues that the war intensified anti-Muslim and anti-Arab racism in the US, Europe, Israel and other countries of the Global North and devolved into a global prison industrial complex whose technologies of racist violence are increasingly indistinguishable from its military counterpart.

Freedom as a constant intellectual effort and an ongoing social struggle

Professor Angela Y. Davis is known worldwide for her outspoken commitment as a scholar and activist-organizer to combating all forms of oppression. Academic knowledge and knowledge generated in the course of actively struggling for social change have converged in the life of Professor Davis, oftentimes at a high personal cost. Her communist affiliation resulted in her removal from her teaching position at UCLA in 1969, and her advocacy to free the Soledad Brothers, three African-American prisoners (George Jackson, Fleeta Drumgo and John Clutchette) leaders of the California prisoners' rights movement who had been falsely accused of murdering a police guard, led to her incarceration in 1970 on false charges of conspiracy, murder and kidnapping. The FBI placed Professor Davis on their Ten Most Wanted List and branded her an enemy of the State. Thanks to local and international pressure generated by the Free Angela Davis Movement, she was acquitted of all charges in 1972. In spite of these attempts to discipline and silence her voice, Professor Davis has lived up to one of her most notorious and inspiring statements: "I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change; I am changing the things I cannot accept".

Her global struggle for human rights spans from the Civil Rights Movement in the United States to the more contemporary Black Lives Matter movement; from participation in the Black feminism movement in the 1960s and 1970s to the Women's March on Washington in 2017; from campaigns to free political prisoners in the US, Turkey or Spain to the campaigns to abolish the death penalty; from supporting anti-colonial movements to the condemnation of the apartheid and occupation of Palestine; from raising her voice against Western countries' migration policies inflicted by xenophobia to advocating for the right of trans persons' to self-determine their gender identity. As Professor Davis claims, all these seemingly unrelated movements must stand in solidarity with each other for collective liberation.

Her enduring social commitment is informed by the motto that social change does not just happen. As Professor Davis has pinpointed in her writings and speeches, legal forms of racial segregation were not disestablished because of politicians' or judges' epiphany of the injustice and immorality it entailed. Rather, it was the result of ordinary people becoming collectively aware of themselves as active agents of social change, learning to adopt a critical stance toward social realities that allows seeing them as malleable. This requires a commitment to using knowledge in a transformative way to make the world a better place. In her own words, "knowledge does not exist in a dimension of its own, but rather it can be active. It can be practical", that is, it can be acted upon.

Fortunately, not all knowledge that matters is produced in universities, as Professor Davis constantly reminds us. Nonetheless, academia is an important strategic site for political contestations of injustice. Universities cannot be ivory towers, especially in a context of democratic regression, violation of political and civil rights, and the backlash against women, people of color, LGBTI people, refugees or migrants. Professor Davis calls upon universities to expose students to critical habits of perception, analysis and imagination of a world without racism, sexism, classism, xenophobia, transphobia, war, political persecution of dissidence, or violence against women in the public and the private sphere. "We have to talk about liberating minds as well as liberating society", as she brilliantly put it.

For example, as remarked in her academic contributions about the abolition of prisons or the police, imagining a world that does not rely on institutions of violence and repression to provide security leads us to imagine a world in which the physical and mental health of underprivileged communities are guaranteed. In other words, in order to avoid perpetuating the statu quo, universities should contribute to raising radical questions—radical as in going to the root causes—about the organization of the larger society. And, for Professor Davis, feminism plays a crucial role in this intellectual endeavor. For her, feminism encourages us to adopt critical habits toward the conceptual tools used to make sense of the world. She invites us to regard feminism as a vaccine against deep-seated ideas that have considered great heroic male leaders as the motor of history, against the imposed forgetfulness of women’s contributions to both knowledge and the social struggles for a better world. While the women’s movement has been and is a source of multiple social platforms for justice across the world, feminism provides a valuable methodology to make connections, to avoid individualizing problems and solutions that leave structures of inequality intact. Particularly, intersectional feminism helps to avoid the compartmentalization of inequality and to question the extent to which the aspiration of reforming institutions that have historically been exclusionary and violent to oppressed people must give way to the aspiration of fundamentally re-envisioning and building anew these institutions.

Professor Davis also reminds us that the very same boundaries of academic institutions are configured by race and gender, including both biases and silences such as the absence of an engagement with race and gender as legitimate categories of study. If universities are to address the pressing injustices of our democracies by empowering students to effect change in their communities and in their future professional practice, the curricula must be revisited to provide knowledge about systemic racism and sexism, about white and male privilege, about Eurocentrism, and about how economic injustice sustains racial and gender injustice. This profound transformation must be coupled by the creation of welcoming campus environments in which racial and gender equality prevails.

For some people, activism, on the one hand, and teaching and research, on the other hand, are two separate spheres. Yet, such a divide between academia and community is no less of a political positioning than the commitment to liberating minds and society in all spheres in which we participate as students, staff or faculty. Professor Davis’ scholarly contributions and activist work constitute a powerful legacy, that of dismantling the false dichotomy between theory and praxis; a legacy that continues to inspire many of us both within and outside academia.



