

**Angela Y. Davis'
acceptance speech as
doctor honoris causa**

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**Universitat
Pompeu Fabra
*Barcelona***

Thank you so much for conferring upon me the doctor honoris causa. It is indeed a profound honor to accept this degree from Pompeu Fabra University. Thank you to the Rector, Jaume Casals, and to all of those who have participated in the process as well as in the actual program, I think a phenomenal performance for such a moving rendition of our struggles for justice.

In accepting this honorary degree, I am aware that, even though I am the individual recipient, the work that has led you to designate me as being worthy of this high honor has never been the work of a lone individual. Plus, I feel compelled to acknowledge all those both within and outside the university, including those who were or continue to be incarcerated, without whose ideas and practices I would never have come to your attention as a potential recipient of an honorary degree from your University. I also thank you for organizing this beautiful ceremony under the very difficult conditions of a global pandemic, and at a time when you in Catalonia continue your own struggles for justice and equality. While I can only be present virtually at this time, I do look forward to the future possibility of an actual visit to Pompeu Fabra University.

In the remarks I offer you today I acknowledge the current historical conjuncture as one of great pain and suffering throughout the world. But at the same time this is a moment of hope and optimism for the future. I refer to the emerging collective consciousness of the fact that we in the contemporary world, we who constitute the human population cohabiting this planet, along with other animal species, are called upon to prevent the conflagration that is inevitable if we do not discover ways of transforming our manner of living on this planet. This planet whose flora, whose soil, whose oceans are also suffering as a consequence of the human practices primarily designed to produce wealth. Wealth for a few that coexists with impoverishment of the many.

In different economic and political contexts, we could all be living fulfilling, flourishing lives. But as it stands, under current conditions of capitalism, increasing wealth for the few is the foundation for increasing impoverishment of the many.

For the first time in human history, vast numbers of people in many parts of the world are seriously reflecting on the structural consequences of colonialism and slavery. Those of us who are of African descent here in the Americas constitute a human evidence of the ways in which colonialism and slavery shape the mode of human habitation of the planet. We are the bearers of a legacy of struggle for freedom that is many centuries old. We look at our social, economic, and political institutions recognizing the ways in which they literally embody processes that minimize indigenous or black life, seen as either impediments to the production of wealth, or as the laboring bodies capable of generating wealth for the slaveholders.

This is a moment of intense suffering, not only because of the direct consequences of the covid-19 virus, but because the planet is afflicted with this virus at a peak moment of capitalism, at a time when the planet's wealth has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of relatively few people, and at a time when human institutions that should be devoted to the well-being of humans, other animals, and indeed of the Earth, are subordinated to the needs of capital.

Therefore, our health crisis here in the US is a crisis produced by the privatization of healthcare, and by the fact that empty hospital beds are deemed unprofitable by the

global capitalist corporations that now dispense medical care to those who can afford it. But these institutions were gotten rid of, these beds were gotten rid of. So that a crisis such as the one we continue to experience today not only involves the damage done by the trajectories of the virus, but its intersection with privatized healthcare which, as we know, has proved fatal for many people.

I say that this is a moment of hope and optimism because we are finally acknowledging the entanglement of structural racism within this crisis. In fact, the crisis itself, arriving at a time of intense educational efforts both within professionalized institutions like the university and within the context of social movements and political organizing, has helped to promote a collective consciousness of the structural character of racism.

Here in the US, racism has been largely treated as an individual defect, as a product of individual attitudes and individually motivated acts of discrimination. The past assumption was that one defeats racism by convincing individuals to transform the way they think about indigenous and black people, Latinx and Asian people. However, the recognition that vastly disproportionate numbers of people were dying as a result of the coronavirus, combined with the fact that for many scholar activists we have been calling for an approach to racism that highlights the structures that incorporate and reproduce processes of oppression, that in turn keep people of color in a state of superexploitation and hypermarginalization.

Today we look back at the 19th century and say, “of course slavery should have been abolished”. The arguments to abolish slavery were of course compelling. Slavery was immoral, and the very idea of one human being owning another was entirely unethical. But there were also other arguments. Slave labor was not as efficient as wage labor. At the same time there were those who insisted that the institution of slavery in the South was far more humane than the wage slavery of the North. After all, the slaveholder had a stake in keeping slaves alive, because to brutalize and enslave a human being to death meant a decrease in the wealth of the slaveholder.

Scholars who have studied the post-slavery convict lease system have pointed out that what followed was in many respects worse than slavery. As a matter of fact, some of the titles of the books exploring the convict lease system include *Worse Than Slavery; One Dies, Get Another; or Slavery By Another Name*.

I offer this because our history continues to be haunted by slavery. At virtually every historical juncture, when we have collectively considered issues of justice and democracy, the question of slavery has arisen. And here we are, over a century and a half since the formal abolition of slavery, still dealing with the contemporary ramifications of that institution, and the ways in which racism overdetermines the institutional and structural makeup of our society.

While Europeans did not adopt slavery to the extent that it was adopted in the Americas and what was then considered the New World, European countries relied on the wealth produced by the slave trade and they benefited from the racial capitalism that was forged at the intersection of colonial invasions, indigenous genocides, and the enslavement of Africans.

This current reckoning involves a recognition not only of the ways in which colonialism and slavery created the economic social and political worlds of the Americas, where slavery provided the recognizable foundation of our histories, but also in Europe and other parts of the world whose linkages and relations were forged by settler colonialism.

Black freedom struggles have never unfolded in a historical vacuum. They have never been about only black people. When we point out that there has never been a time in the history of the forced African presence in the Americas where there has not been resistance –and this is true not only in North America but in the Caribbean, in South and Central America as well–, we acknowledge that African descended people have always been in community with people of other ethnic backgrounds. In many instances resistance was enabled by indigenous people, and the histories of black and indigenous people became intertwined, as scholars like Tiya Miles have documented.

But we should point out that the feminist movement, in fact the mainstream white feminist movement in the US, has its historical origins in the movement to abolish slavery. Many white suffragists in the 19th century understood their own predicament by comparing the English common law doctrine of coverture, that made married women entirely subject to the power of their husbands, to the institution of slavery.

Today, when we acknowledge that black lives matter, we are not simply saying that black people deserve justice, equality, and freedom. We are pointing out that the positionality of black people in US society is one of the best measures of the meaning of democracy, and of course not only in the US.

Our current efforts to identify and to begin to dismantle structural racism in policing, in prisons, in the healthcare system, in education, in jobs, in housing, is a collective effort to ameliorate our society, to break down impediments to democracy, not only for black people but for everyone. And not only in this part of the world, but globally. I say this because there is a very patronizing way to look at black struggles, as if they only affect people of African descent or more broadly people of color.

21st century abolitionist discourses have emerged as the most radical calls for a better democracy. Their significance resides not primarily in the fact that we want to dismantle imprisonment and policing, which of course we do, but because we see these institutions as profound impediments to the emergence of radical democratic socialist futures.

Many of us argue that evolution is not primarily about the negative process of dissolution and elimination, but rather about clearing space so that we can imagine new institutions, new strategies of addressing issues that have been so overdetermined by structural racism that it is not possible to remove the racism without the entire institution collapsing.

We have believed in reform for so long that we have persuaded ourselves that reform is the only way. The history of both prisons and the police has always been the history of efforts to reform prisons and the history of efforts to reform the police. But at some point, we have to realize that reform itself is a myth, and that reform has been the very glue that has held these institutions together. If there have been protests directed at these institutions for the entire duration of their histories, doesn't it make sense to try something new?

And we cannot separate the development of abolitionist movements in this century from the emergence of a feminism that not only seeks gender equality but also defines itself as antiracist and anti-capitalist. We are of course familiar with the term intersectionality introduced by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, but we may not all know that this logic was introduced long ago by black feminists such as Anna Julia Cooper and Mary Church Terrell, who was mentioned in the laudation, Ida B. Wells and many others who understood that racism could not be effectively challenged without also contesting the structural oppression defined by gender, and economic oppression defined by class within the framework of capitalist societies.

This approach to feminism has helped us to assume myopic logics that assume that gender can be separated from race and class. Because of the way racism has crept into the very logic we rely on, it has been unfortunately assumed by some that we can examine gender by itself, that is to say, unraced and unclassed. But when this is attempted, the default context is whiteness. And therefore, whiteness has informed the development of mainstream feminism, without its proponents even realizing the impact of racism. This is the framework we critique as carceral feminism.

Much of the work of early black feminisms and radical women of color feminisms consisted of attempts to correct the historical record, pointing out that white women were not the only women who challenged misogyny and patriarchy, and that often times women of color engaged these challenges in a much more complex intersectional way.

When second wave women's movements emerged during the latter 1960s in the US, the catalyst was precisely the recognition of the ubiquity of physical and sexual abuse of women. This form of violence has always crossed borders of race and class. But the speak-out and consciousness-raising sessions that attempted to break the silence regarding rape and domestic violence were primarily associated with white middle class feminism. The strategy consisted of encouraging women to reveal violence within intimate relationships that had been previously kept secret.

So how does our view of gender violence change if we look at it from the vantage point of black women or indigenous women, or working class and poor women of all racial backgrounds? By way of beginning to formulate an answer I would say that we would have to be critical of the way in which middle-class white women have come to stand in for all survivors of violence. Because of the assumed privatization of the lives of middle-class white women and because the private sphere is imagined as a haven of freedom, repressive apparatuses can be called upon to secure that freedom. And this is why we refer to those feminists who believe that more police and more prison terms will protect them, we refer to them as "carceral feminists". And this is also why we employ the phrase abolition feminism to refer to a robust approach to feminist research and activism that is not afraid to acknowledge its interdisciplinarity, not only academic interdisciplinarity but a movement-based interdisciplinarity as well, one that is not afraid to attempt to raise class, gender, sexuality, and environment simultaneously and always recognizing their linkages and inter-relationalities.

This approach to feminism has also allowed us to understand that abolitionist movements are at their best when they incorporate global recognition and solidarity. And so, as I

conclude, I say that within this context we get to follow abolitionist feminist movements in Catalonia, in Brazil, in Palestine, and in South Africa, Uruguay and India, and we get to place our campaigns and struggles on the world historical stage by interacting with others who are also striving to create more habitable futures.

Thank you



