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ANGELA Y. DAVIS

Undergraduate thesis

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ANGELA Y. DAVIS

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## **Abstract**

The Civil Rights Movement was a fight for the equality and justice of African Americans which took place in the 1950s and 1960s. Many African Americans were standing up for themselves and the rights they were not given, due to the systematic racism of the US. An active member of this movement was Angela Davis, who witnessed the oppression and racial injustice firsthand, growing up in an area very much affected by segregation. Angela Davis became known for her radical activism. As a proponent of revolution and influenced by *The Communist Manifesto* and other communist work, she denounces passivity and advocates for the active fight for one's rights and equality. Being that she is an intersectional feminist, Davis's ideas apply to everyone. There is no exclusion based on gender, sexual orientation, social status, race, and physical abilities. During the Civil Rights Movement, Davis got involved in numerous cases revolving around racial injustice in the prison system, mostly about false accusations of black people, their imprisonment, and the sentences they would receive. This involvement also led to her imprisonment.

After years of witnessing how the prison system affected her peers and experiencing imprisonment herself, Angela Davis is to this day a vocal advocate for prison abolition. In her eyes, the system is not doing what it is supposed to do and is even doing more evil than good. Functioning in a capitalist society, the main purpose of prisons nowadays is to transform prisoners into sources of income and exploit their labor to the advantage of the companies and governments who are constantly opening new facilities to cultivate even more profit. This symbiotic relationship between the government and the prison system is known as the prison industrial complex. Davis offers alternatives to the prison system, focused on reforms of other systems and the rehabilitation of offenders.

**Keywords:** Civil Right Movement, oppression, injustice, communism, feminism, intersectionality, prison abolition, prison industrial complex, reforms

## Introduction

In recent years, the topic of systematic racial oppression and racial injustice in general, but especially towards black people, has once again become global. Cases of police brutality and the murders of George Floyd<sup>1</sup> and Breonna Taylor<sup>2</sup> started a worldwide conversation and inspired protests of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The Black Lives Matter Movement, according to its official website<sup>3</sup>, was founded in 2013 and it came as a reaction to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer. Trayvon Martin was a 17-year-old African American high school student from Miami Gardens, Florida, who was fatally shot by George Zimmerman, a 28-year-old neighborhood watch captain, on the 26th of February 2012. Zimmerman claimed that it was an act of self-defense.

These and similar events can be compared to former events that happened half a century ago and inspired the Civil Rights Movement. During the 1950s and 1960s, the civil rights movement unified black Americans in fighting for their basic human rights and equality. Although it had been almost a century since slavery had been abolished, black people were still experiencing segregation and discrimination. The most prominent political figures to arise during this period were, first and foremost, the leaders of the movement: Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Although they were both assassinated, that did not stop their fellow civil rights activists from continuing the active fight for their rights. One of those activists was Angela Davis.

Angela Yvonne Davis has been a prominent figure in black activism, feminism, and communism, ever since she became politically active in the 1960s by joining the Black Panther Political Party and Che-Lumumba, an all-black branch of the Communist Party. Davis is also a famous educator scholar and published multiple books on feminism, prison abolition, civil rights, and other social issues. While she was imprisoned, she became a symbol of resistance and inspired people to fight actively for their rights.

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<sup>1</sup> George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American man, was killed on May 25, 2020, during an arrest by Derek Chauvin, a police officer, who knelt on his neck for at least 8 minutes

<sup>2</sup> Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old African American woman, was shot dead in her own home on March 13, 2020, by the police who were executing a "no-knock" warrant

<sup>3</sup> "Home - Black Lives Matter." *Black Lives Matter*, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/>.

## **1. Early life and education**

Angela Yvonne Davis was born in Birmingham, Alabama on January 26, 1944, in the family of Sallye, an elementary school teacher, and Frank Davis, the owner of a service station. She spent the first few years of her life in a government housing project on Eighth Avenue, an area crowded with identical buildings made of bricks. In 1948, the family moved to a large wooden house on Center Street. As Davis describes in her autobiography<sup>4</sup>, her family was the first black family to move into this neighborhood and the white residents saw this as the beginning of an invasion. They proved to be right because more black families were moving in, whereas white families were leaving the neighborhood.

The bombing of a black minister's house in 1949 would prove to be further evidence of the hostility the white neighbors carried towards their black neighbors and made Angela more aware of racial prejudice and segregation even at such an early age. This bombing was only foreshadowing the constant bombings in the neighborhood which were to follow. From that point onwards, the neighborhood would infamously be called "Dynamite Hill" due to the number of black homes targeted by the Ku Klux Klan.

Her mother Sallye was involved in antiracist movements and had numerous white allies. She tried to erase Angela's anger towards white people, but Angela continued to feel envy and aversion towards them due to all the opportunities they had, and she did not, only because of her skin color. When she first visited New York, Angela realized how severe the segregation in the South compared to the East Coast still was - in New York, there were no separate seats for white and black people, and everyone could use the same bathroom and visit the same restaurants despite their skin color, whereas in the South black people could not eat everywhere they wanted, they had to find food stands which were designated for them.

### **1.1 Education**

After attending her local school, intended for black students, Angela Davis went on to continue her education at Elisabeth Irwin Highschool in New York. When she first arrived, she experienced culture shock. She was surprised by the openly liberal and radical professors. Then,

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<sup>4</sup> Davis, Angela Y. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. International Publishers, 1974.

she learned about socialism and eventually became enthralled by *The Communist Manifesto* and the idea of a communist revolution. During her time at Elisabeth Irwin, Davis met and befriended Bettina Aptheker, whose parents Herbert and Fay were members of the Communist Party. Bettina would also be the one to involve Angela in a Marxist-Leninist youth organization called Advance.

After graduating from Elisabeth Irwin Highschool, Davis started attending Brandeis University in Massachusetts, majoring in French. As she describes in her autobiography, she felt both physically and spiritually isolated at Brandeis, due to its location and the lack of other black students, respectively. As she was feeling alienated and alone, she refused to pity herself and turned to read. It was at that time that she grew an interest in philosophy. During her freshman year, in October of 1962, the African American writer James Baldwin, whose work Angela cultivated an interest in, was scheduled to hold lectures on literature. However, these lectures were cut short in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis<sup>5</sup>. This would also be the first time Davis heard the speech of Herbert Marcuse, a German-born American Marxist philosopher, who was a professor at Brandeis.

As she documents in her autobiography, Davis was at university when she learned about the Birmingham Church Bombing in 1963<sup>6</sup>, in which four girls Angela personally knew and grew up with had lost their lives. While the people around her were consoling her as if these girls died in an accident, Angela realized how oblivious they were. They were unaware that this event was inevitable, as a consequence of the hatred deeply rooted in the individual perpetrators and society in general. These 4 girls, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, Addie Mae Collins, and Denise McNair were not directly targeted. Anyone could have been killed and that is what showcases the horror of systematic racism.

After finishing her degree in French at Brandeis and considering her interest in philosophy, Davis decided to study philosophy at the University of Frankfurt, Germany. While living in Germany, she would participate in rallies against the Vietnam War, organized by the S.D.S. (*Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund*) the German Socialist Student League. Meanwhile, since she left the US in 1965, Davis was not present to experience the massive demonstrations that took place back at home. After two years of studying and living in Frankfurt, she decided

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<sup>5</sup> A thirteen-day long political and military standoff by the American and Soviet government, over the installation of nuclear-armed Soviet missiles, took place in October 1962, in Cuba.

<https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/cuban-missile-crisis>

<sup>6</sup> This event took place on September 15, 1963, when a dynamite bomb exploded in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, killing four young African-American girls and injuring more than 20 others,

<https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/baptist-street-church-bombing>



to return to the US and finish her degree as a doctoral candidate under Marcuse at the University of California in San Diego, where Marcuse was now teaching. In this way, Davis would finally be able to actively participate in the fight for equality, alongside her black brothers and sisters and white allies.

## 2. Political activism

In 1967, after returning home, Angela Davis participated in her first demonstration in the US. It was, again, against the war in Vietnam. This would result in her first prison experience. Soon after, Davis got involved in several politically active groups, first by attending meetings of the SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee), which would result in her involvement with the Black Panther Political Party. However, she would soon discover that the male members of the party separated black manhood from black womanhood:

“These men view black women as a threat to their attainment of manhood - especially those black women who take initiative and work to become leaders in their own right.”<sup>7</sup>

Her most notable involvement, however, was in the Che-Lumumba Club, an all-black section of the Communist party. Davis officially joined the group in 1968, after leaving the SNCC due to the anti-Communist notions prevalent in the group. That same year, on July 4, she would witness Charlene Mitchell, the founding chairperson of the club, being nominated by the Communist party to represent them in the upcoming presidential election, thus making her the first black woman to run for office<sup>8</sup>.

Before she started to work as a lecturer at the University of California in Los Angeles, Davis visited Cuba as a member of the Communist party. After this trip, she felt more politically mature and enthusiastic. However, after her membership in the Communist party was publicized, Davis almost lost her teaching position. Although she took this case to court and managed to win, meaning she could continue lecturing, her communist ties were not without consequences. She was receiving threats and hate mail, as well as being under constant surveillance and questioned by the police daily. Angela Davis was not only afraid for her safety but also the safety of her family members and friends.

### 2.1 The Soledad Brothers

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<sup>7</sup> Davis, Angela Y. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. International Publishers, 1974. (pp. 161)

<sup>8</sup>Mitchell, Charlene. “First Black Woman Presidential Candidate: The Communist Party's Charlene Mitchell.” *People's World*, 10 Mar. 2021, <https://www.peoplesworld.org/article/first-black-woman-presidential-candidate-the-communist-partys-charlene-mitchell/>.

The lecturing position at UCLA allowed Davis to raise more awareness of the case of the Soledad Brothers. Fleeta Drumgo, John W. Cluchette, and George Lester Jackson were three black prisoners of the Soledad prison. They were falsely charged with the murder of John Mills, a white prison guard, although there was no evidence to prove that they had committed this crime,

In the first chapter of her autobiography, Davis gives insight into the events that followed the Marin County Courthouse Rebellion, which came as a response to the conviction of the Soledad Brothers. On August 7, 1970, Jonathan Peter Jackson, the 17-year-old brother of George Jackson, entered the Marin County Hall of Justice armed. Accompanied by prisoners James McClain, Ruchell Magee, and William A. Christmas, he kidnapped Judge Harold Haley, the judge ruling over McClain's case, Deputy District Attorney Gary Thomas, and three female members of the jury. The main reason why Jackson and the others decided to hold the judge and deputy district attorney hostage was to start the negotiations over the freedom of the Soledad Brothers. However, the hostage situation ended unsuccessfully. The shootout with the police was fatal for Jackson, McClain, Christmas, and Judge Haley, whereas Magee and Thomas received serious injuries, but lived.

Days after the rebellion, Angela Davis was wanted by the police. In her autobiography, she recollects what happened two years before this event. There was a gathering of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) hosted by Francis and Kendra Alexander, which was interrupted by a police raid. The hosts had been arrested and the money and guns found in their home were confiscated. One of the guns, a .380 automatic, belonged to Angela, and this led to her being called in for questioning. Now, the same gun had been found at the courthouse.

Angela Davis was now suspected by the FBI. She was wanted on the charges of murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy in connection with the Marin County Courthouse shootout. The police search even extended to Canada, which meant she had to leave the state.

In her autobiography, Davis explained how anxious she was feeling and how, ever since she was a child, she was aware and fearful of a presence lurking over her. As a child, she couldn't find the words to describe it but now she knew that it was the police: "They were clear pictures of machine guns breaking out of the darkness, surrounding Helen and me, unleashing fire." Based on the, unfortunately, normalized police brutality against African Americans, Davis already pictured herself and her friend Helen getting killed.

Moreover, it was reported that she was likely armed, and this only intensified her fear of getting shot by the police. Although she was not carrying any weapons on her, Davis still thought that the possibility of her being armed would only taunt the police to open fire on her,

because she was perceived as “the big bad Black communist enemy”. After two months of hiding, she was caught by the FBI in the Howard Johnson Motel in New York.

## 2. 2 Imprisonment awaiting trial

Leading up to her trial, Angela Davis was placed in the Women’s Detention Center in Manhattan, New York. Before entering the facility, she had to undergo vaginal and anal inspections for the examiners to discover any possible weapons or other items that would be regarded as contraband<sup>9</sup>. She describes how, as she was sitting in the receiving room, a woman approached her and informed her that people were protesting outside the facility for her freedom. This made Davis feel relieved and made her believe the people from the movement were near. While thinking about the Soledad Brothers and Jonathan Jackson, Davis was prepared for the struggle that was in front of her, but the ongoing protest gave her hope that this was a step forward for the movement.

At first, Davis was put in sector 4b, the prison psychiatric facility. Some of the black prison guards would tell her that they supported her, but she did not want to give in to their kind words. Davis explained that she would rather be too paranoid than too trusting because she was afraid it could lead to her death. “I didn’t want to be paranoid, but it was better to be too distrustful than not cautious enough. I was familiar with jailhouse ‘suicides’ in California.”<sup>10</sup>

The explanation the guards gave her as to why she was located there was not that they deemed her as mentally ill, but for her safety. Allegedly, there was a possibility of other inmates attacking her. When she encountered the supposed ‘dangerous women’ on the floor and they told her that they were on her side and would even fight along with her, this was enough evidence that the administration locked her up there for her to be perceived by the public in a certain way.

Davis describes how nothing was allowed in the cells from clothing and cigarettes to books and even toilet paper. when they had to use the toilet in the cell, the inmates were put in an extremely humiliating situation: “Like dependent infants, each time we wanted to use the toilet, we had to call the officer to bring us paper.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> contraband - not legally permissible to possess, import, or export

<sup>10</sup> Davis, Angela Y. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. International Publishers, 1974. (pp. 23)

<sup>11</sup> Davis, Angela Y. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. International Publishers, 1974. (pp. 31)

The guards informed Davis that she could order books from the library or items from the prison commissary, but after not receiving anything she had asked for, she started to question the functionality of those institutions.

During her time in 4b, Davis's childhood friend Margaret Burnham<sup>12</sup>, whom she considered a family member, was contacting every possible person of different hierarchical positions trying to relocate Angela Davis from the psychiatric facility to the main population. At first, Davis was relocated to a dormitory shared by hundreds of women, but later she was put in solitary confinement, where she was under constant surveillance. She decided to go on a hunger strike for the whole duration of her isolation. She explained that the decision was not difficult to make: "If the food had looked palatable, it would have been hard; but the unsavory dishes they placed before me actually facilitated the strike."<sup>13</sup> Many women decided to join Davis's hunger strike, which she survived by consuming juice at mealtimes three times a day and huge quantities of water and working out.

Angela Davis could not directly credit the prison guards who treated her with kindness because that could result in them losing their jobs if she put on paper how they had treated her nicely. She described how some of the black female guards, some younger, some older, were in some kind of prison themselves because their job was one of the best-paid jobs in New York one could have without graduating from college. These guards could not reform the whole prison system themselves, but they decided to help. They would serve as 'portals' for sharing messages between the inside and the outside world, i.e., the prison and outside. They also served as a 'wall' between the administration and the inmates - they would provide the inmates with contraband items and would not break up study groups organized to teach women of color about the African American and Puerto Rican Liberation movements.

On December 21, 1970, a demonstration took place around the facility. People were shouting Angela Davis's name and demanding her freedom. Not wanting to be the center of attention, Davis herself started shouting the names of her fellow inmates. This protest made her and her supporters feel triumphant as if this was a hit to the government. The following day, one of the guards who treated her nicely took her from her cell to an alleged meeting with her team of lawyers. Being that this was happening in the middle of the night, Davis soon realized

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<sup>12</sup> Margaret A. Burnham became the first African American woman to serve in the Massachusetts judiciary when she was appointed to the Boston Municipal Court by Governor Michael Dukakis in 1977.

<http://www.longroadtojustice.org/topics/leadership/margaret-burnham.php>

<sup>13</sup>Davis, Angela Y. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. International Publishers, 1974. (pp. 42)

she was tricked. Once she left the elevator, she found herself in a room filled with white policemen and the deputy warden. After they ordered a strip search, which Davis refused to, two members of the riot squad attacked her. Soon the two female guards joined this altercation, but, as Davis mentioned, she noticed they were hitting the men because they seemed too eager to injure her. They informed her that she was being extradited to California.

### **2.3 Imprisonment in California and the trial**

On the 22 of December 1970, Angela Davis arrived in California. She was placed in the Marin County prison which was visually the opposite of the Women's House of Detention in New York, in terms of sanitation and brightness. She was awaiting her team, Margaret, and John, to find her a different lawyer who would help her win this case. Her main goal was to find someone who agreed that this case was a political one. She wanted to prove her innocence and stand by the Communist party and her political ideology. Soon, she and her team contacted Howard Moore<sup>14</sup> who would be her attorney.

On January 5, 1971, her first court meeting took place. As she entered the courtroom, Angela Davis was welcomed with thunderous applause, and she greeted the gathered audience by raising her fist. When she sat down, she noticed Ruchell Magee sitting on the other side of the courtroom chained up. Although they had not met before, she smiled at him to show him support and he smiled back. After the hearing, the press tried to put them against each other, by emphasizing how different their upbringings and their circumstances were.

In prison, she was again put into solitary confinement. Davis and her team tried to appeal this decision, but the administration used the same argument, that it was for her safety. The guards and the administration were acting blatantly racist and sexist. During an evacuation caused by a bomb scare, Davis and three other women were being relocated to a shelter. Davis was handcuffed, two of the other women, one Chicana, and one black woman were chained together and the last woman, who was white, was not restrained at all. The evidence of the prison administration's sexism was visible in terms of furniture. The female common room had a washing machine, a dryer, and ironing equipment, whereas the men had their clothing washed by a second party. "The reasoning behind this was presumably that women because they are

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<sup>14</sup> Howard Moore is a civil rights attorney who worked on numerous important civil rights cases, including the trial of Angela Davis <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/howard-moore-jr-b-1932/>

women, lack an essential part of their existence if they are separated from their domestic chores.’<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, when women wanted to partake in this activity, out of pure boredom, black women were denied, whereas when no one wanted to do these chores, black women were forced to do them.

In July 1971, Davis and her team managed to arrange meetings with each of the Soledad Brothers. Davis and Magee were working together on their defense and tactics for the trial but eventually decided to do different approaches, meanwhile it was decided that George Jackson would testify at the hearing. However, one month later, George Jackson would be killed by the police, around the first anniversary of his brother Johnathan’s death.

After some hearings took place in the Marin County Civic Center, Davis and her legal team were asked for a change of venue, due to the prejudice potential jurors could have. Based on the statements of Judge Keating, whom they saw as a representative of the local community. The team wanted the trial to take place in San Francisco. In the end, the court decided that it would be in San Jose.

Being that they did not inform her when the trial would take place, on December 2, 1971, Angela Davis was once again woken up in the middle of the night and driven to the prison in Palo Alto. However, this time it was not her typical prison experience. After the protests about the conditions, she was held in, things were changing. There was heat, the clothing and shoes were also different, the meals were now prepared by a cook, and she was allowed to have a television in her room. Furthermore, the guards were treating her differently, they were nice to her. But this was, as Davis put it, only a ‘farce’.

After news about the abolition of the death penalty broke, Davis’s whole team was euphoric, and they decided to lodge an appeal and request a bail hearing. They managed to do so, and Angela Davis was soon walking free, until her trial.

On March 27, 1971, after the whole process of picking the jurors ended, it was the first day of trial. During recess, Davis found out that the Soledad Brothers were acquitted and took it as a good sign. On the second day of trial, however, a group of men attempted to escape from the county jail and the supposed leader of the group was shot by a police officer. This reminded them of the events that took place in the Marin County courthouse. Davis and her team believed the press and the prosecutors would try to blame them for this event.

On the first day of deliberations, a hijacking took place. The FBI informed Angela Davis that four black men hijacked a plane and requested, 500 thousand dollars and five parachutes

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<sup>15</sup> Davis, Angela Y. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. International Publishers, 1974. (pp. 309)

on the end of the airport runway. It was discovered later that no one mentioned Davis and that there were not even four hijackers.

On June 4, 1972, after thirteen weeks of trial and thirteen hours of deliberations, Angela Davis was found not guilty on the counts of murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy.



### 3. The prison abolition movement

The concept of a punitive institution has been present since the first civilizations. A place where lawbreakers would be placed due to their defiant and criminal behavior. Therefore, as Davis explains, prison is today simultaneously present and absent in people's minds. The thought of a place where all the 'evildoers' and criminals are put to secure the safety of local communities is comforting, but at the same time, most try to avoid thinking about what goes on behind those bars. Many, due to how life in prison is represented in today's media, for example in tv programs like *Oz*, *Orange is The New Black* and *Prison Break*, think that they are well informed on what happens in those facilities. In reality, the only ones who know the full truth are the convicts, the prison personnel, and the corporations who nowadays run those punitive facilities. With that in mind, Angela Davis proposes the question of whether there is still a need for prisons as such.

The most recent report on the prison population worldwide shows that more than 10.77 million people are registered to be imprisoned but taking into consideration the data from some countries may be missing or incomplete, it is estimated that the real number is around 11.5 million<sup>16</sup>. The country with the highest number of incarcerated people is The United States, with the most recent data from 2021 showing that 1,774,900 people are behind bars. As Davis mentioned in *Are Prisons Obsolete?* around two hundred thousand people were incarcerated in the United States in the 1960s, which means that in 60 years, the prison population has increased by almost 10 times. In 2019, the number of prisoners in the US was 2,115,000, but due to Black Lives Matter protests, in some areas, immense pressure was put on officials to release prisoners in 2020 and 2021.<sup>17</sup> Out of these 1.77 million people, 42.4% are people of color. Although black people make up only 12.4% of the whole population in the US, they make up 38% of the prison population.

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<sup>16</sup> Fair, Helen, and Roy Walmsley. "World Prison Population List - Prison Studies." *World Prison Brief*, [https://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/world\\_prison\\_population\\_list\\_13th\\_edition.pdf](https://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/world_prison_population_list_13th_edition.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Kang-Brown, Jacob, et al. *People in Jail and Prison in Spring 2021 - Vera Institute of Justice*. <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/people-in-jail-and-prison-in-spring-2021.pdf>.

### **3.1 The prison system and race**

The racial imbalance of the prison population makes sense when one considers that the American judicial system is inherently racist. After the abolition of slavery, punishments that were used for slaves were later incorporated into the punitive system. Furthermore, the system was mostly focused on black people rather than white people. Even the so-called Black Codes were based on Slave Codes. These Codes defined that some actions, such as vagrancy, absence from work, breach of job contracts, the possession of firearms, and insulting gestures or acts<sup>18</sup> were crimes, but only if a black person has done them. Soon crime was associated with color, and the color was black. This was so ingrained into society that white people would paint their faces black, so nobody would suspect them of committing crimes. Davis mentions an event that Frederick Douglas described in 1883<sup>19</sup>. In Granger County, Tennessee, a man, presumed to be black, was committing a robbery, when the police shot him. After they approached the wounded man, it was revealed that it was a white man, a respectable member of society, who had painted his face black.

Furthermore, prison today is seen as an institution whose abolition is thought of as impossible, but so was slavery. Back when slavery was a normal practice, those who fought against it were seen as fanatics and idealists. Today, prison abolitionists are described with those same words. Before the abolition of slavery, even white allies could not have imagined black people as equals. In the same way, the notion of prison is so deeply ingrained into society that 'free' people often distance themselves from prisoners and sometimes forget that they are just people, too.

### **3.2 Women in prison**

While discussing women and prison, Davis explains, that one should not look at male prisons as the norm that should be reapplied to women's facilities, because the prison system as a whole should be abolished. Keeping that in mind, gender inequality is still present in the prison system.

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<sup>18</sup> Davis, Angela. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York, Seven Stories Press, 2003. (pp. 28)

<sup>19</sup> On October 22, 1883, Frederick Douglass made a speech about the Civil Rights Cases before the Civil Rights Mass Meeting. He expressed his dissatisfaction with these cases.

Criminality is seen as an inherently masculine trait. Throughout history, women were not ‘rights-bearing’ individuals. Considering that punishment usually consists of taking away those rights, women could not be punished in the same way as men. Many believed that male offenders could seek redemption and regain those rights, but female offenders cannot. Furthermore, male defiance is seen as criminality, whereas female defiance is seen as insanity. This explains why so many women have, historically, been placed in psychiatric institutions.

Because women’s main purpose was their domestic role, their husbands had the right to punish them if they did not fulfill their duties as they should. Although corporal punishment<sup>20</sup> was abolished long before, it would still be used in such cases. Davis considers this one of the reasons why domestic violence is still so prevalent today.<sup>21</sup>

On a similar note, to ‘cure’ female criminality, rehabilitation programs were launched, where women would, essentially, partake in everyday domestic activities, such as cleaning and cooking. By “assimilating correct womanly behaviors”<sup>22</sup> they would become ideal housekeepers, wives, and mothers. In reality, the women leaving those institutions would usually end up as servants and housekeepers for other women of higher social status.

As she describes both in *Are Prisons Obsolete?* and her autobiography, before even entering the facilities, women must undergo vaginal and anal inspections and strip searches. In case the woman is not willing to undergo this kind of search, force may be used. This is, by definition, sexual assault and it is, unfortunately, normalized and almost encouraged in this context. This could, again, be compared to slavery - female slaves were often sexually abused by their masters, and rape was even used as a punishment. One could also connect this because both black women and female prisoners, who are often women of color, are hypersexualized.

In her book, Davis describes the events Australian lawyer and activist Amanda George shared at a conference in November 2001 in Brisbane. At a national gathering of prison personnel in female facilities, several women managed to get on the stage and started reenacting what would happen there during strip searches. Some women took the role of prisoners, while others ‘performed’ the search. Most of the gathered audience was repulsed and tried to distance themselves from those actions. Some guards even started crying, as though they were rethinking their actions.

These practices of misogyny and sexual abuse should serve as additional motivators for, at least, a reform of the prison system if not complete abolition of the prison system as such.

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<sup>20</sup> corporal punishment – physical punishment

<sup>21</sup> Davis, Angela. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York, Seven Stories Press, 2003. (pp. 45)

<sup>22</sup> Davis, Angela. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York, Seven Stories Press, 2003. (pp. 64)

### 3.3 The prison industrial complex

To understand how the prison system today functions, one should know about the prison industrial complex. The prison industrial complex is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as:

“a profit-driven relationship between the government, the private companies that build, manage, supply, and service prisons, and related groups (such as prison industry unions and lobbyists) regarded as the cause of increased incarceration rates, especially of poor people and minorities and often for nonviolent crimes”<sup>23</sup>.

One can connect this to the military-industrial complex, which can be defined as an alliance between the government and the military with defense industries<sup>24</sup>. Although some say that the prison industrial complex is slowly replacing the military-industrial complex, the nature of their relationship is symbiotic. In Davis’s words: “These two complexes mutually support and promote each other and, in fact, often share technologies.”<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, both systems benefit from the destruction of society, each in its way. Led by the governments and corporations behind them, these systems take advantage of the impoverished and racial minorities. Rather than being perceived as people, these individuals become sources of income. These institutions exploit not only the labor of their prisoners but also their bodies, often to an inhumane extent. For example, during the Second World War, the pharmaceutical industry partook in the exploitation of prisoners by subjecting them to medical experimentation. Until the prohibition of this practice in 1974, it was normalized that cosmetic products and face creams were tested on prisoners. Some of these products caused harm to the test subjects and therefore had to be reformulated so that they could be put on the market. From the 1950s to the 1970s, Albert Kligman convinced prisoners, mostly poor black men, to serve as test subjects for skin creams for various ailments, like athlete’s foot, herpes zoster, herpes

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<sup>23</sup> “Prison Industrial Complex Definition & Meaning.” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prison%20industrial%20complex>.

<sup>24</sup> “Military-Industrial Complex Definition & Meaning.” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/military-industrial%20complex>.

<sup>25</sup> Davis, Angela. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York, Seven Stories Press, 2003. (pp. 86)

simplex, ringworm, and staph infections<sup>26</sup>. Moreover, prisoners were often injected with various diseases for medical research. From 1946 to 1948, Guatemalan prisoners were injected with syphilis by the US<sup>27</sup> and during the Second World War prisoners from the Stateville Penitentiary, Illinois, were injected with malaria and treated with experimental drugs<sup>28</sup>. This experiment was sponsored by the military, which furthermore establishes the connection between the military-industrial complex and the prison industrial complex.

The aim of prisons today, instead of ensuring the safety of communities and the rehabilitation of prisoners, is to make a profit by destroying those same communities, based on racist and classist prejudice.

### 3.4 Possible solutions and alternatives

After establishing why prison should be abolished, one might wonder what an alternative solution for prison is. Firstly, Angela Davis suggests reforms of other systems, for example, education. Schools in poorer areas are usually surrounded by crime and violence. If these schools and those communities were to be transformed, the students would probably engage less in criminal activities. Secondly, many impoverished people who struggle with mental disorders usually do not get the medical attention and care that they require, so they often end up in prison. Davis continues that this does not mean that the traditional forms of mental institutions should be reintroduced, rather should the poorer classes get equal care and rehabilitation programs as the wealthier classes.

Decriminalization could also be a ‘vehicle for decarceration’. Drugs and sex work are some of the main reasons why people get incarcerated. If the US government legalized these

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<sup>26</sup> Mütter Edu Staff “The Holmesburg Prison Experiments.” *The Mütter Museum of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia*, <https://muttermuseum.org/stories/posts/holmesburg-prison-experiments>.

<sup>27</sup> “Shackled by Science: The Exploitative Use of Prisoners in Scientific Experiments.” *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*, <https://harvardcrl.org/the-shackles-of-science-the-exploitative-use-of-prisoners-in-scientific-studies/>.

<sup>28</sup> Comfort, Nathaniel. “The Prisoner as Model Organism: Malaria Research at Stateville Penitentiary.” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, Sept. 2009, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2789481/>.

activities, the people who partake in them would not be sent to prison, which would result in a decrease in the prison population and slowly lead to the abolition of prison, according to Davis.

Furthermore, Davis mentions how some argue that women who kill their abusive husbands should not be imprisoned because they were just defending themselves from their abusers, whereas others disagree and believe that women should not be treated any differently than men would in that situation. Davis believes that new strategies should be utilized to prevent and stop violence against women.

Finally, Davis does not propose one single solution, but rather a range of alternatives and reforms of other systems that could help lead to the abolition of prison. The main idea is to remove racist, homophobic, classist, and ableist biases from the system, acknowledge the wrongs of the system, and decriminalize not only drugs and sex work but also people of color, who due to the beforementioned racist prejudice and racial profiling very often end up in prison and similar institutions. Davis also believes that the link between crime and punishment should be left in the past and suggests rehabilitation programs for those who commit crimes.

## Conclusion

This paper aimed to discuss the life of Angela Davis and how her experience as a black woman shaped her ideology. Growing up in the South, she was aware of racial prejudice from early childhood. When she visited New York, she got to experience a non-segregated world. Seeing the opportunities that were not available to her, Davis started growing an aversion toward white people.

After graduating from Elisabeth Irwin Highschool in New York, a very liberal and radical community, Davis continued her education at Brandeis University, Massachusetts. It is there that she grew an interest in philosophy and got politically involved. She spent two years in Germany and when she returned to the US, Davis joined the Communist Party and become a Civil rights activist. After getting involved in the Soledad Brothers case, she was arrested on charges of murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy in October 1970 because she was suspected of being involved in the Marin County Courthouse rebellion. After being imprisoned for 16 months and four months after being released on bail, on June 4, 1972, she was acquitted on all three charges.

Due to her own experience in prison, Angela Davis is a strong supporter of the prison abolition movement. In her book *Are Prisons Obsolete?* she explores the punitive system historically and argues why there is no need for such a prison system today. Davis showcases how the contemporary prison system is founded on inherently racist, sexist, and classist principles, and targets minorities. With the emergence of the prison industrial complex, the system takes advantage of these minority groups to ensure profit for the founders of these punitive facilities.

Davis proposes reforms in various sectors, such as the education system, medical care, and the justice system, which should eventually lead to the abolition of prison and benefit society. Instead of focusing on punishment, the system should be more focused on the rehabilitation of possible offenders.

Although she is now in her seventies, Angela Davis is still politically active and vocal about contemporary issues and the Black Lives Matter movement. She is now a professor emeritus at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

About her private life, Davis is now living with her civil partner, Gina Dent, who is also a professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz. In an interview with *The Guardian*,

Davis explained how while rereading her autobiography, she “cringed” when she saw her thoughts about homosexual relationships in prison<sup>29</sup>.

The importance of Angela Davis and similar figures is visible today. Without someone willing to do everything for the cause they are fighting for, there would not be any progress. In today's climate, when racial injustice is still relevant, and with recent events such as the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*<sup>30</sup>, women's reproductive rights are once again threatened. By actively protesting the oppressor, changes are possible. It is also important that oppressed groups, such as people of color and women understand that they must be united in this fight, to win their rights back.

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<sup>29</sup> Hattenstone, Simon. “Angela Davis on the Power of Protest: 'We Can't Do Anything without Optimism!'” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 5 Mar. 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/mar/05/angela-davis-on-the-power-of-protest-we-cant-do-anything-without-optimism>.

<sup>30</sup> Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Roe v. Wade". Encyclopedia Britannica, 24 Aug. 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Roe-v-Wade>. Accessed 6 September 2022.



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