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Interview with Angela Y. Davis

Benjamin D. Kuebrich, Syracuse University

Angela Y. Davis is Professor Emerita in the History of Consciousness and Feminist Studies at the University of California Santa Cruz. In 1998 she founded Critical Resistance, an organization working to abolish the prison-industrial complex. Her activism and scholarship engages with Feminism, Marxism, and African American studies. Benjamin D. Kuebrich met with Professor Davis at Syracuse University to ask her about issues of pedagogy, rhetoric, and community literacy.

BKD: In the last decade or so, universities have begun to promote their service to the community as part of their identity. For instance, here at Syracuse University they have the mantra “scholarship in action.” Since this will-towards-service seems like a trend at schools across the nation, some of us have begun asking questions: Is it critical engagement or surface-level, neoliberal do-goodism? What’s your take as someone in the university who has been doing critical political work?

AYD: Well I think it is really important to unthink the concept that knowledge production happens primarily at the site of the university and the kind of missionary posture that is possible when the university brings its services to the community, not acknowledging that the people outside the academy also help to generate knowledge of use. The question is how to produce a non-hierarchical approach to learning, how to use the resources of the university but not in a way that is going to perpetuate hierarchies and exploitative relations.



BDK: Have you been involved in any university-community engagements that you thought were particularly effective?

AYD: There was a class that I taught at San Francisco University which put students in contact with prisoners at the San Francisco county jail, and the idea was that the students would learn about the theories of punishment and systems of imprisonment and at the same time they would assist the prisoners in various ways. Now, I think that the students from the university went into the whole project assuming that they were the ones in possession of all of the knowledge which they were going to generously share. But, in order to problematize that assumption, when I took the students into the jail on the first day, I informed them that they were about to be educated by the prisoners. So, what I did was I allowed the prisoners to teach the students about the institution, and then I allowed the prisoners to make decisions about the ways in which the students' skills could best be used. So some of them decided that they wanted to spend their time reading and writing, and some of them decided that the students had the skills to really maneuver through the welfare system, so the students did that. It was a really interesting process where the students really did help the prisoners, but they didn't come away from it thinking "oh, I really helped these poor, disadvantaged people." It tended to create a more egalitarian relationship, and I think that's the key question: How do you create egalitarian relationships within a context of structural inequality?

BDK: And in that example the prisoners are deciding the purpose of engagement, whereas in other cases the university may predetermine the purpose.

AYD: That's right, exactly. As if they always already know what everybody needs.

BDK: In another interview you did a while back with Lisa Lowe, you said that "students need to be assured that politics and intellectual life are not two entirely separate modes of existence." It's obvious



how politics and intellectual life are one mode in your work, but I'm wondering how you carry that out in your classroom.

AYD: I suppose I could address that in a broad context. The university is a politicized institution. It is subject to all the various transformations that happen politically, and by assuming that the site of learning is in some way insulated from political questions, people do themselves a great disservice.

We can also think about the classroom and how teachers always go into a particular subject matter with a political framework. We are always told that we need to be apolitical and we need to present the material objectively, but that's impossible. I would think that precisely those people who are not upfront with their own political engagements are the ones who surreptitiously bring those into their teaching by the kind of questions that they ask, by what they are willing to accept from students.

BDK: So it's important to be forthcoming about your political ideals as a teacher?

AYD: To be forthcoming and to allow students to even question it. Oftentimes the assumption is that if you bring politics into the classroom that you are trying to impose politics on students, but I think that the work of teaching is far more effective when you are able to assist students to ask questions about how one thinks—not so much what one thinks but *how* one thinks. And just as I usually try to encourage a set of critical interrogations of the material, I also suggest that they can use that apparatus to question what I'm saying and what I'm trying to accomplish in the classroom.

BDK: What do you think of when you think of community literacy?

AYD: I think that the idea of community literacy is really important and we can broaden the notion of what counts as literacy to include ways of critically engaging with our surroundings. And I think that one of the things that's most lacking is visual literacy. We



think of literacy in terms of reading and writing but not in terms of interpreting visual images. This is an image laden society and we're so effected by images, why aren't there courses for first-year students on visual literacies? You have to pass a composition course, right?

BDK: Right, which is what I'm teaching. And I'm actually teaching a course right now on visual rhetorics and representation, so we've started to take that up here in Syracuse's writing program, but this is the first writing program that I've encountered with an option for focusing on visual rhetoric in first-year composition.

AYD: Well that's great. That's really good, especially when you consider the fact that people watch so much television and see so many movies and they have all these images around them and most of the time they don't interact in this critical way, they absorb it but they don't question it.

BDK: And you've been working on a more critical approach to images, one of your most recent books is about visual representation.

AYD: Right, exactly. *Beyond the Frame*.

BDK: I want to talk more in-depth about the work you've done outside the university as an intellectual, but first I want to know what you think the role of the public intellectual is today. Is it still influential, and do you see yourself as a public intellectual?

AYD: Well, I don't know whether or not that term is used as frequently as it was in the 90s, but I would say that, regardless of the extent to which one is able to claim a public arena, I think that anyone who is developing their skills as an intellectual in institutions like this should think about how to make that knowledge and those skills available beyond their immediate academic community. I think the notion of a public intellectual implied traffic between the academy and other sites. I think a term that is more often used today is "scholar activist" and I like that term, but, I think that regardless



of what one calls oneself, in order to engage in liberatory pursuits of knowledge there has to be a way to move in and among diverse communities.

BDK: Your current work is centered around prison abolition and ending the prison-industrial complex. Of all the pressing issues of the day—war, racism, global corporate dominance—why is your energy focused on prison abolition?

AYD: This is what I've been doing for a very long time, and I suppose I also encourage people who are not directly involved in anti-prison work or prison abolition to also think about the extent to which their causes relate. For example, if someone is working against war then it's also important to think about the relationship between the military-industrial complex and the prison-industrial complex and the traffic between those institutions. If someone is an activist struggling for better education, then it is really obvious that resources that go into prisons need to be shifted to schools and universities, so I think about a more holistic approach. The fact that I 'm focusing on the prison-industrial complex and prison abolition does not mean that I'm not thinking about all these other topics.

Those of us who have been with this movement for a while are persuaded that we need a more capacious concept of abolition so that it's not simply confined to the institution of the prison but it involves healthcare, housing, and education, etc. To be consistent as a prison abolitionist one needs to link to struggles for a radically transformed social world; so it is not just about transforming the prison, it's about transforming all the conditions that render this kind of punishment so necessary. In the spirit of third-world feminism, it's about understanding intersections and interweavings and interconnections because otherwise we try to transform one small aspect of a larger system and recognize it's impossible because all the conditions that are responsible for this institution remain intact, and so the only thing we can imagine is a replication of that institution.



BDK: Is there a particular reason that you focused in on prison abolition? Is it because of the time you spent in prison? I also know that you spent some time doing anti-prison work before you went to prison and that your mother had been involved in prison abolition too.

AYD: Right, exactly. And, you know, I don't think it much matters where one decides to focus their primary energies. I think it often has to do with what one feels most comfortable doing and what's available, and it seems as if I've been doing this work all of my life and I know it. And I do take pleasure in it; it's not something you would think of as generating pleasure, but I do enjoy the connections I make with other people cross-generationally, cross-culturally, cross-nationally, and cross-racially, and I like the way in which this movement against prisons has so transformed over the years. It's not the same movement I was working within 40 years ago. The fact that we are now very seriously thinking about incarceration and disability, incarceration and transgender prisoners. It means that it's open enough to constantly change. I really like that about this work. I don't think that this is necessarily different from other movements, although sometimes movements do stagnate and they don't develop. But, as I was saying, I'm interested in encouraging a more capacious approach, so that you don't have to focus specifically on prison issues in order to address the impact of the prison-industrial complex. I would never say to someone who's doing educational activism that you have to leave that field to come and do this work. I would say to incorporate it. Just as prison activists have to incorporate educational activism within our work.

BDK: One thing I've heard you discuss over recent lectures is that "we need to define a new vocabulary for speaking about prisons," so I'm wondering about the rhetorical work you're imagining for prison abolition.

AYD: "Prison abolition" is one good example of that, as opposed to "prison reform" because as long as the prison has existed the notion of prison reform has accompanied it, and so we're trying to trouble



that assumption that the only way to address the problems of the prison is to do prison reform.

BDK: I noticed that the flyer for your most recent lecture was titled “21st Century Abolition,” and I don’t even think the word prison came up in that flyer.

AYD: Right, exactly. So, you know this makes me think about the paucity of the vocabulary in previous years and decades. In the early 90’s, I found that the popular discourse was so linked to the assumptions that prisons were there because people commit crimes, so it was a crime-punishment discourse, and it was also an individualistic discourse—prisons would not be there if there weren’t bad people in the world.

A number of us began to think about how to create a new vocabulary that would allow people to move from that framework to another framework that would enable discussions of other reasons why prisons exists. And it was in this context that we decided to take up the term “prison-industrial complex” because that shifted people, and they began to think about punishment in relation to corporations, in relation to the media, and in relation to government, and not just in relation to the criminal who committed the crime and therefore needed to do the time. So that I think was the most dramatic example of shifting vocabularies and now we’re really trying to popularize this notion of prison abolition. There are other terms we need to use like “excarceration” and “decarceration” as opposed to “incarceration.” Rather than talking about “inmates,” which represents a moment in the development of the prison industry when prisons were medicalized, we need to talk about “prisoners.” We also need to challenge the social-scientific vocabulary of “offenders,” so there is a lot to be done in terms of the area of rhetoric.

BDK: And has that been taken up in your recent scholarship, all these alternative terms?



AYD: Sure. Yes. I don't know whether I've written about it, but I know that at all the conferences where people inside different disciplines use that vocabulary as a part of their theoretical apparatus, we always challenge that and ask them to think critically about the ways in which they are demeaning the people whom they think they are assisting by using this vocabulary that is so poised against the human beings who happen to be in prison.

BDK: We see this move for alternative vocabularies as a big part of other campaigns against racism, homophobia, disability. Whenever we're working politically we're separating terms from their historical situation to open a new way of thinking about them.

AYD: And it is also in order to enact the kind of change that will be effective. If we continue to use the vocabulary of the older form, despite the fact that we may have been successful in some respects, we will be caught up in that older framework.

BDK: Thank you so much for meeting with me today.

AYD: Sure. Thank you.