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Incarceration as Neo-Slavery: A Feminist Analysis of Angela Davis's Rhetoric

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This research explores rhetorical strategies employed by Angela Davis to (re)conceptualize liberal freedom as collective freedom and uncover hidden forms of oppression within America's criminal justice system. Criminal justice reform movements have gained increased attention in recent years, most notably through the Black Lives Matter movement, and Davis's rhetoric offers insights into how oppressive discourses can be deconstructed and challenged. Davis's strategies also demonstrate how abolitionist rhetoric from the 19th century has adapted to confront exigencies of the 21st century. This essay aims to understand how Davis relied on rhetorical strategies in two speeches she gave in the mid-2000s. I argue that Davis employed the metaphor of "prison is slavery" by using vivid examples and connecting present circumstances to historical beginnings. She also used contradiction as a rhetorical strategy and provided international comparisons to illuminate possibilities for transformation.

Keywords: Feminist rhetoric, neo-abolitionism, intersectionality

Angela Davis, with her striking Afro, is known by many as the face of 1970s Black* pride. Others know her as the vice-presidential candidate of the United States Communist Party. Still others in academe may know Davis as an influential feminist scholar who has made significant, transformative contributions to the field. A new generation of students, activists, and community organizers were introduced to Davis when she, along with several other activists, co-founded Critical Resistance, a grassroots organization dedicated to dismantling the prison-industrial complex (Mayrl, 2013).

A radical, Black, feminist, scholar-activist, Davis has built a career organizing for social change and educating students. Her activism challenging systemic oppression thrust her onto the national stage in the 1970s, especially after her association with the kidnapping and murder of a judge. Davis's rhetoric from that time has garnered some interest by scholars in the field (Dicks, 1981). However, her work later in life, although less notorious, is worthy of review. Issues Davis has spoken about extensively have become increasingly pertinent in the 21st century, including

the war in Afghanistan – America's longest running war, the election of the first Black president of the United States, and national protests responding to the killings of people of color by police officers.

Davis's activism in relation to the prison-industrial complex has also become increasingly relevant as prison reform movements have gained national attention. Begun in 2012, the Movement for Black Lives has been heavily influenced by Davis's employment of intersectional theories (Horowitz & Livingston, 2016). This timely movement has inspired many Americans through its advocacy for radical reform to the criminal justice system. Additionally, 2016 saw the largest prisoner strike in U.S. history after inmates organized themselves to call attention to unjust prison conditions, particularly around labor practices which force them to work for little to no pay (Lopez, 2016). Davis has placed herself on the front lines of these 21st-century struggles. As a result, she is often interviewed by media outlets to testify against sexism, racism, state-sponsored violence, and economic inequality (e.g., Al Jazeera English, 2008; Democracy Now!, 2014, 2016).

In addition to her political and cultural relevance, Davis also challenges scholars and social justice activists to apply Black feminist theories in new contexts. A self-identified neo-abolitionist, she offers new ways to understand how rhetoric about slavery has changed. Scholars in the field of feminist rhetoric have studied 19th-century abolitionists extensively (Atwater, 2009; Logan, 1995, 1999). However, from the prison-industrial complex to debt bondage to forced marriage, modern slavery exists in multiple forms**. Angela Davis offers a connection between abolitionist rhetoric from the 1850s and neo-abolitionist rhetoric of the 21st century. As the idea and conditions of slavery have changed over time, how have rhetors like Davis adapted their messages and rhetorical strategies to confront the new exigencies of this enduring problem?

Feminism has been broadly defined, but for Davis, feminism is a philosophy which addresses multiple aspects of oppression related to identity. Davis recognizes that the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, nationality, religion, and other aspects of identity contribute to various experiences of oppression and privilege. For Davis, feminism is a theory in the flesh, and it requires the recognition that domination is experienced by and through bodies (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983).

My purpose in this research is to understand the rhetorical strategies Davis uses to (re)conceptualize liberal freedom into collective freedom and uncover hidden forms of oppression within America's criminal justice system. I acknowledge that my own identity as a White, heterosexual, middle class, cisgender, able-bodied, male cannot be separated from my research. The analysis contained herein therefore reflects a certain positionality, and I strove to be self-reflexive about my privileged cultural lenses throughout this research project. As Gadamer (1976) has argued, a researcher's positionality can facilitate understanding the Other, for understanding begins when one acknowledges his or her own hermeneutical horizon and seeks to look past it.

My analysis is based on two speeches given by Davis in 2005 ("Abolition Democracy") and 2008 ("The Meaning of Freedom"). I argue that Davis employed a rhetorical metaphor that "prison is slavery" and sought to convince her audience of the appropriateness of this metaphor by using vivid examples and connecting present circumstances to historical beginnings. She also highlighted the contradictions of opposing arguments and provided international comparisons to illuminate possibilities for transformation. I begin with a brief rhetorical biography of Angela Davis, followed by a review of theoretical frames which inform her worldview and rhetoric. I then discuss my method before providing a feminist rhetorical analysis of two speeches given by Davis. I conclude that her rhetoric offers insights into ways that rhetors can uncover seemingly hidden forms of oppression and reimagine a liberated world.

Roots of a Radical Feminist

Angela Davis was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1944, and grew up under Jim Crow segregation. Her parents were both middle-class educators, which was a rarity in her neighborhood (James, 1998). Both her parents were close with Black Communist Party members, and Communism influenced Davis's life from an early age. In grade school, Davis would steal money from her father in order to give it to impoverished classmates so they could buy lunch (James, 1998).

Davis moved to New York City to live with a White family and complete her high school studies. While at her private, Quaker high school, Davis studied The Communist Manifesto and, at fifteen-years-old, joined a youth organization that was associated with the Communist Party. Marxist ideas would continue to influence her activism, scholarship, and rhetoric throughout her

life. After completing high school, she spent part of her college career studying abroad. Her time spent abroad occurred during the height of civil rights protests in her home state of Alabama, and Davis was particularly torn during this period. Her "educational and economic privileges both distanced her from the most marginalized (African Americans) and infused her theories of (black) liberation with an internationalist perspective" (James, 1998, p. 3). With her eyes opened to international examples for liberation, Davis returned to the United States to pursue her doctorate at the University of California at San Diego.

During her time in California, Davis became involved with multiple political organizations, including the Los Angeles Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party. Davis (1993) has maintained that her relationship with the Panthers was a "permanently ambiguous status" that "fluctuated between 'member' and 'fellow-traveler'" (p. 3). She remained on the fringes of the party because of its masculine, sexist posturing. For the Panthers, Black Power meant power over the means of violence, a viewpoint which came into conflict with Davis's feminist philosophy (James, 1998).

Davis joined the Communist Party the same year she joined the Black Panther Party, but her membership with the Panthers lasted only two years while her membership with the Communist Party spanned two decades. Davis was ultimately forced out of the U.S. Communist Party in 1991 because she sought to reform the party by acknowledging the autocratic, repressive, and colonial nature of the Soviet state (Marquit & Marquit, 1992). Marxism and the Communist Party offered Davis a platform which recognized the connections between oppressed Blacks, other racially marginalized people, the marginalization of White workers, and sexism. Understanding the interconnected oppressions of the capitalist system fueled her writing and speaking to advocate for the liberation of all people, especially those most harmed by injustice. By 1969, Davis was a philosophy professor at the University of California Los Angeles and was renowned as a radical antiracist and Communist. During this time, she became a vocal proponent of prisoners' rights and a nationally recognized activist. Since the 1970s, Davis focused on her academic career and less confrontational forms of political organizing. In 1997, she co-founded Critical Resistance, "a national organization dedicated to dismantling the prison-industrial-complex" (Mendieta, 2005, p. 7).

Davis's work spans three decades and has emphasized prison

intellectualism, Marxism, antiracism, feminism, cultural studies, and activism. Her experiences growing up in the Jim Crow South, studying abroad, and organizing politically have informed her worldview and rhetoric. She was on the FBI's "Ten Most Wanted List" for a time and spent months in jail, experiencing firsthand the racism and sexism of the United States prison system. Davis's studies and experiences have led her to advocate for a modern-day form of abolitionism as she promotes collective freedom through an intersectional framework.

Neo-Abolitionism, Collective Freedom, and Intersectionality

Neo-abolitionism, collective freedom, and intersectionality contextualize the goals Davis often hopes to accomplish through her rhetoric. As a neo-abolitionist, she seeks to awaken within her audiences a desire to end incarceration as a form of punishment. Davis's rhetoric operates through the lens of collective freedom as she strives to promote a world underpinned by care for one another, a world where all are bound together through robust democratic systems. Davis faces a challenge in persuading her audiences because these ideas run counter to dominant concepts about punishment, prisons, and freedom. She therefore strives to highlight how her worldview and persuasive goals differ from those of the dominant capitalist discourse by addressing the intersectionality of oppression.

The American penal system is predominantly structured around a retributive conception of justice which emphasizes punishment when crimes are committed. This philosophy maintains that people who violate the law deserve punishment, and retribution satisfies the victims' and survivors' desire for reciprocity (Cottingham, 1979). Retributivists also maintain that incarceration can function as a deterrent, where people will be disinclined to commit a crime because of the severity of the punishment if they do so (National Research Council, 2014). Thus, according to this view, prisons protect innocent people from guilty, violent criminals; people who break the law deserve punishment; and the risk of incarceration functions as a deterrent for those who may commit crime.

In contrast, the modern prison abolition movement rejects retributivist thinking and calls for eliminating prisons as a means of solving social problems and transforming society (Mayrl, 2013). The concept of the prison-industrial complex – defined as "an overlapping system of repression, surveillance, racism, and rapa-

cious capitalism, with prisons and the legal system at their center" (Mayrl, 2013, p. 292) – is central to arguments made by neo-abolitionists. Because of the perceived centrality of the prison-industrial complex to social issues, neo-abolitionists struggle not only against prisons but also against the various injustices perpetuated by the criminal justice system.

Although a full analysis of race, class, and the prison system is beyond the scope of this essay, examples of the consequences of the prison-industrial complex and retributive justice are pervasive and well-documented (e.g., Alexander, 2012; Davis, 2003; DuVernay, 2016; Hartnett, 2010, 2012). Prison is the only institution in the United States where slavery remains legal, as specified in the 13th amendment, and many inmates are forced to work for little or no wages (Lawston, 2011). The United States ranks first in the world for the percentage of citizens behind bars (Prison Communication, Activism, Research, and Education, 2007). People of color are more likely to be stopped by police and imprisoned than White defendants who commit the same crime (McWhorter, 2000). Many poor people of color are unable to afford lawyers and are represented by public defendants, who are often over-worked and under-funded, which increases the chances of conviction (Armstrong, Davila, & Mayo, 2004). The average prison sentence is 20% longer for an African American than for a White American convicted of the same crime, even when controlling for age, education, gender, citizenship, weapon possession, and prior criminal history (United States Sentencing Commission, 2017). This discrepancy is largely due to the sentencing choices made by judges at their own discretion (i.e., racial bias; United States Sentencing Commission, 2017). The prison-industrial complex also "reproduces the worst electoral discrimination of Jim Crow-era racism" (Prison Communication, Activism, Research, and Education, 2007, p. 406) because in 48 states, prisoners cannot vote, and many more formerly-incarcerated individuals are legally disenfranchised. Although African Americans comprise about 13% of the United States population, they constitute almost half of those imprisoned for nonviolent offences (Prison, Communication, Activism, Research, and Education, 2007).

Furthermore, the prison-industrial complex incarcerates many more people than necessary. Between 40-60% of people currently in prison are there with little public safety rationale (Austin & Eisen, 2016; Miles, 2014). Meanwhile, 97% of felony convictions never go to trial and are instead the result of a plea deal, for

"plea bargains make it easy for prosecutors to convict defendants who may not be guilty, … and plea bargains are inextricably tied up with race" (Yoffe, 2017, para. 16). Of course, class is intertwined with these factors, too. Of the 60% of prisoners who are still awaiting trial, nine in ten are in jail purely because they cannot afford bail, with people of color facing higher average bail amounts than White defendants with similar charges, causing people of color to be twice as likely as Whites to be in jail solely because they cannot afford bail (Burdeen, 2016). Taking all these factors together, African Americans and other people of color disproportionately shoulder the direct effects of the prison-industrial complex.

Neo-abolitionists seek to create a world where prisons are no longer the primary form of punishment. Neo-abolitionists work to challenge and eradicate the idea that punishment equals justice. Instead, they "desire a world that addresses the root causes of crime – such as poverty, educational inequality, and mental illness rather than embracing imprisonment as a simple and reactionary solution" (Hill, 2013, p. 19). McLeod (2015) has called this idea decarceration, an attempt to gradually reduce reliance on prisons and the punitive penal code by strengthening the social arm of the state and improving human welfare.

Because Angela Davis's neo-abolitionist rhetoric opposes the prison-industrial complex, her views on freedom are important to understand. Davis rejects liberal, Hobbesian freedom and instead works to reimagine a collective freedom. Liberal freedom is "negative freedom" which "places a premium on the right to own property, to accumulate wealth, to defend property by arms, to mobility, expression, and political participation" (Kelley, 2012, p. 7). Davis imagines a much more inclusive form of freedom – collective freedom. Kelley (2012) argues that Davis defines collective freedom as "the freedom to earn a livelihood and live a healthy, fully realized life; freedom from violence; sexual freedom; social justice; abolition of all forms of bondage and incarceration; freedom from exploitation; freedom of movement; freedom *as* movement, as a collective striving for real democracy" (p. 7). Freedom thus becomes something transformative, enacted, and personified. Collective freedom requires new ways of thinking, being, and participating in civic life – ways that promote collective well-being rather than selfish needs.

For Davis, collective freedom requires a restructuring of the state. Rather than the state punishing those who break its laws, empha-

sis would be placed on rehabilitating and reintegrating the perpetrator into society. Through the lens of collective freedom, various institutions replace the penal system, including a robust education, mental health services, healthcare for all, and the eradication of poverty. Davis (2003) embraces principles of restorative or reparative justice, where perpetrators are expected to take responsibility for their acts and for repairing the breach in the social fabric they caused, rather than the state bearing responsibility for punishing the individual. This perspective of collective freedom thus respects the dignity and agency of all people, even those who break the law.

Intersectionality is also important to Davis's rhetoric. Arguing for the value of intersectionality in feminist scholarship, Griffin and Chávez (2012) explain, "although our extensive body of scholarship tells us much about some people, some places, and some positions of power, it neglects (and even refuses) to tell us much about many other people, and places, with complex identities, subjectivities, and relationships to power." (p. 2). As a Black woman who has benefitted from certain middle-class privileges, Davis has dedicated her activism, rhetoric, and scholarship to the eradication of oppression across a spectrum of marginalized identities. She works to deconstruct the stereotype that the only Black bodies in prisons are male bodies and that the only people who wield state power are men.

Intersectionality, at its core, reflects a commitment "to challenging simplistic thinking in terms of only one axis of identity, form of oppression, or manifestation of power" (Griffin & Chávez, 2012, p. 12). The Combahee River Collective (1983) laid a foundational groundwork for intersectional feminism when it proclaimed:

> We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. (p. 210)

Although the theoretical roots of intersectionality extend far back in feminist thought, Crenshaw (1991) coined the term to explain how domination is based on race, class, sexuality, and/or other dimensions of identity coupled with systemic violence. Davis's views on neo-abolitionism, collective freedom, and intersection-

ality influenced my approach to rhetorical analysis.

Method

Approach to Rhetorical Criticism

This research relies on a hybrid rhetorical analysis which includes a feminist intersectional perspective coupled with metaphor as a central unit of analysis. Foss (2004) originally defined feminist rhetorical criticism as "the analysis of rhetoric to discover how the rhetorical construction of gender is used as a means for domination and how that process can be challenged so that all people understand that they have the capacity to claim agency and act in the world as they choose" (p. 157). A more fitting approach to the rhetoric of Angela Davis would be intersectional feminism, which allows a line of rhetorical criticism that uncovers Davis's ideology — one that rejects hegemonic domination and, instead, encourages audience members to claim their own agency and engage in self-determination by embracing the concept of collective freedom. *Women, Culture, and Politics* (Davis, 1990) was an early expression of Davis's intersectional feminist views, and she has continued to think and speak from such a perspective.

Davis uses metaphor as a central structural element in her speechmaking. Metaphors are significant to rhetors because of the way they can be employed to construct reality for the audience. Metaphor is entirely pervasive in our lives because the linguistic structure of metaphor dominates how we think and act (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphors are embedded in cultural worldviews so that, in the case of Angela Davis, her intersectional feminist worldview is best expressed through understanding one concept in terms of another. Within the structure of metaphor, she uses vivid imagery and historical connection as persuasive strategies.

Artifacts

I chose two speeches given by Davis in 2005 and 2008 for this analysis. The speech transcripts were published in *The Meaning of Freedom and Other Difficult Dialogues* (Davis, 2012d), which is a collection of Davis's speeches and lectures. These texts are examples of Davis's 21st-century rhetoric and were chosen by Davis for publication, which implies that Davis intended them as significant, demonstrative illustrations for her audience.

The speech "Abolition Democracy" (Davis, 2012a) was given in Oakland, California as part of a book launch for Davis's newest manuscript in December of 2005. The event was also a benefit for a local, public radio station. Davis likely spoke to a sympathetic, intellectual audience who would have been familiar with Davis's prior work. The second speech, titled "The Meaning of Freedom" (Davis, 2012c), was given in February 2008 at Metropolitan State College in Denver, Colorado. Davis spoke at a conference commemorating the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade. Again, Davis's audience was likely filled with academics and other intellectuals, although not all of them may have been sympathetic to Davis's radical philosophy. My study of the selected speeches illuminated several persuasive strategies, with the most frequent ones presented in my analysis.

21st-Century Rhetoric of Angela Davis

In the two speeches I analyze here, Angela Davis challenged her audience to think beyond the liberal conceptualization of freedom, which was founded in a philosophy of individualism, and move toward acceptance of collective freedom, which recognizes the inherent value of all people. To achieve her goals, Davis's primary strategy was to create a metaphor that connected the history of chattel slavery to the modern-day prison-industrial complex.

Richards (1936) explains that metaphors are comprised of a vehicle and a tenor. The tenor is the topic or subject that the rhetor seeks to explain while the vehicle is the lens through which that topic is viewed (Richards, 1936). Davis used chattel slavery as a vehicle to organize the audience's conceptions of the tenor – today's criminal justice system. This construction utilized vivid examples and connected the present to historical developments. Davis also highlighted contradictions in opposing arguments as a rhetorical strategy. By demonstrating contradictions in the social structure and philosophy of the United States, Davis weakened the audience's connection to traditional views of freedom. In conjunction with this strategy, Davis encouraged the audience to imagine other possibilities for the nation's prison system by providing international examples. These examples demonstrated that practical alternatives exist to the current, extreme levels of violent incarceration.

Chattel Slavery's Connections to the Prison-Industrial Complex

Davis's use of the word *slavery* is significant and not to be overlooked. The word slavery connected the present moment to the past and conjured emotions in the audience that would foster sympathy in the audience for Davis's argument. For many people in the United States, the institution of chattel slavery – owning human beings as personal property (Frost, 2011) – is still cause for anger, sorrow, embarrassment, and other complex emotions. Davis strategically employed this emotionally laden term to help her audience uncover hidden connections and recognize the immorality of many aspects of the nation's penal system. Metaphors focus on a particular aspect of a phenomenon while hiding other aspects. For example, a common metaphor in the United States is that "argument is war." This causes us to experience argument "as something we can win or lose" (Foss, 2004, p. 301). If we instead used the metaphor that "argument is a dance," then "participants would be seen as partners," and "their goals would be to perform in a balanced, harmonious, and aesthetically pleasing way" (Foss, 2004, p. 301). Such is the power of metaphors in shaping our perceptions, evaluations, and actions. Davis employed a metaphor that associated the characteristics of chattel slavery with today's criminal justice system when she said, "Just as it was once important to imagine a world without slavery…we must challenge ourselves to imagine a world without prisons" (Davis, 2012b, p. 132). Davis's use of the term *slavery* demonstrates how the prison-industrial complex arose from the 19th-century system of chattel slavery and continues to disproportionately oppress people of color across the gender spectrum.

Vivid examples. Of course, a rhetor's metaphors must be deemed relevant and believable by an audience. Rhetors therefore face the challenge of making their metaphors "stick" in the minds of their audience so that the audience begins to see the world through the speaker's rhetorical lens. To convince her audience that the metaphor of "prison is slavery" was appropriate and relevant, Davis elaborated by providing multiple vivid examples in her speeches. These examples served to reinforce the validity of her metaphor in audience members' minds.

Early in her speech, "Abolition Democracy" (2012a), Davis provided a list of people subjected to the death penalty. She told the story of Shawn Humphries, who was executed "just a few hours

ago" (p. 106), and Wesley Baker who is "scheduled to be executed in the next few days" (p. 106). She ended the list by identifying Stanley Tookie Williams, a death row inmate in California who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his post-conviction community work. These examples, taken together, worked to make Davis's speech both personal and pressing for her audience.

Davis also frequently referenced Abu Ghraib in her speeches. Abu Ghraib was a prison in Iraq where the United States Army and Central Intelligence Agency tortured, raped, abused, and killed prisoners. Because women soldiers were depicted participating in heinous and appalling acts against the prisoners, Davis (2012a) argued that the images from Abu Ghraib construed gender equality as an "equal opportunity to wield the weapons of violence controlled by the state" (p. 108). Davis (2012c) also used Abu Ghraib as an example of how the prison system "promotes that violence, needs that violence, generates that sexual violence in order for the system to work" (pp. 147-148). Thus, Abu Ghraib served as a vivid example of a site where the institutionalized violence of the prison-industrial complex enslaved people across boundaries of gender, race, and sexuality. The atrocities committed at Abu Ghraib were not unlike those committed on antebellum plantations, where prisoners/slaves were stripped of their humanity and subjected to psychological and physical torture.

This strategy draws on a rich history of women activists like Dolores Huerta, who is well-known for utilizing powerful examples when discussing the working conditions of farm laborers (Doss & Jensen, 2013). Additionally, Campbell (1986) argues that Mary Church Terrell, an early anti-lynching advocate, used vivid examples of the impact of violent, racist systems to generate empathy and identification with her audiences. These examples "were designed to give her white audience a glimpse of the world as Afro-Americans experienced it" (Campbell, 1986, p. 442). Similarly, Davis had firsthand experience with the racist impacts of the criminal justice system from her time awaiting trial for accessory to murder charges. Her use of vivid examples allowed the audience to recognize the inhumanity of the modern prison-industrial complex as it treats human prisoners as property to be killed, stripped of their human rights, and sexually abused at the state's whim. These examples of executed death row inmates and Abu Ghraib support Davis's metaphor of prison as chattel slavery and were intended to foster audience identification

with Davis's worldview.

Historic connections. A second strategy Davis used to convince her audience of the appropriateness of the "prison as slavery" metaphor was connecting present moments to past developments to uncover hidden meanings. In both selected speeches, Davis spent a great deal of time providing historical summaries of current issues for her audience, and she began the two speeches with the historical context for each event. In "Abolition Democracy" (2012a), Davis opened the speech by acknowledging that she happened to be speaking on the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery, as designated by the United Nations. In "The Meaning of Freedom" (2012c), Davis reminded the audience that the conference at which she was speaking was convened to celebrate the two hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade. These references aimed to help her audience situate themselves and the speech within a historical context.

Davis's connections between the past and present are particularly abundant in "The Meaning of Freedom" (Davis, 2012c). Giving her speech in the month of February, Black History Month, Davis provided a lengthy list of significant Black moments that have occurred in February across the years. Her list included, among other noteworthy events, W.E.B. DuBois's birthday, the foundation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the beginning of the Sit-In Movement. She moved on to enumerate legal accomplishments such as the Thirteenth Amendment, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Davis then used current examples to demonstrate that – despite these accomplishments – slavery is a persistent system hidden from view. She mentioned Shaquille O'Neal being traded to a new basketball team as an example of humans "being bought and sold and still treated as property" (Davis, 2012c, p. 139). Davis referenced felon disenfranchisement and the vast number of people who go in and out of the prison system every year in the United States as examples of the lingering effects of slavery. She explained that the 2000 presidential election was decided by a 537-vote difference in Florida, yet 600,000 felons were prevented from voting in that state.

Davis highlighted these examples to uncover the hidden ways systems of oppression reproduce themselves. One paragraph demonstrates her logic:

> There is . . . a direct connection with slavery.

> When slavery was abolished, black people were set free, but they lacked access to the material resources that would enable them to fashion new and free lives. Prisons have thrived over the last century because of the absence of those resources and the persistence of some of the deep structures of slavery. . . In the aftermath of slavery, the death penalty that was an integral part of slave law was deracialized; it entered the law at large in such a way that its seemingly obvious connection with slavery was subject to erasure. Today, the death penalty has been evacuated of the historical racism that produced it. (Davis, 2012a, pp. 115–116)

Angela Davis situated her argument using historical context and encouraged her audience to escape the myopic view of present circumstances to see a larger narrative written across centuries. Her goal was to reconnect the death penalty and the penal system to their racist roots in order to uncover systemic oppression occurring in the present day.

Highlighting Contradictions as a Rhetorical Strategy

In addition to her artful use of metaphor, Angela Davis repeatedly identified contradictions in opposing arguments as a rhetorical strategy. By criticizing the rational conclusions of liberal freedom, Davis illuminated flaws in its philosophical foundation that allowed for new conceptions of what it means to be free and equal in the United States. Audience members were thus invited to question the shackles that connected them to oppressive structures of empire, prison, and torture. By identifying contradictions, Davis highlighted the weaknesses in those ideological shackles. She showed her audience how they could liberate themselves from individualistic notions of freedom and instead imagine collective ways of structuring the world.

Davis concentrated on the concepts of freedom and equality particularly in "Abolition Democracy" (2012a) where she identified multiple contradictions. Davis concerned herself with the pitfalls of abstract individualism associated with liberalism and neoliberalism. Equality to what end and equality for whom were questions raised in her speech. For instance, how can equality be valued when it is framed around participating in violent systems of oppression? Davis pointed to then-Secretary of State Colin Pow-

ell who characterized the military as the most democratic institution in the country because it created a framework where all were created equal. Davis's critique was sharp and poignant: ". . . because you must eventually arrive at the conclusion that this equality is about equal opportunity to kill, to torture, to engage in sexual coercion" (p. 109). She argued that the audience's likely involvement in racist, sexist acts reflected a society where all can participate in male dominance and racism. However, only those with the financial means can benefit from healthcare, education, and housing. Thus, individualistic notions of equality distill down to a freedom to destroy, instead of the freedom to live and thrive.

Sometimes Davis's use of historical explication connected with her identification of contradictions. She explained that a White man in 19th-century Virginia could be punished by death only if he had committed a murder. However, slaves were eligible for the death penalty for over seventy different offenses. For Davis (2012a), such a contradiction explains how "capital punishment is still very much alive in a country that presents itself as the paragon for democracy in the world" (pp. 117-118). This confluence of history and contradiction is most powerful in the following excerpt:

> Even during slavery there was a contradiction in the way black people were thought about. We tend to think slavery meant that black people were treated as property, right? That's chattel slavery. But then black people were punished, they were found guilty of crime. Can property be accountable? Can property be found culpable? There was something wrong there. (Davis, 2012c, p. 145)

Detailing the contradictions inherent in the foundational principles of the nation encouraged the audience to question the very basis of legal and penal systems. This rhetorical strategy gave the audience the chance to see the world from a new perspective, and it encouraged them to challenge their preconceived notions and reach new conclusions. Her purpose was to "acknowledge the ways in which we sometimes rely on the ideologies we think we are opposing" (Davis, 2012a, p. 113).

Davis is neither the first woman nor activist to highlight contradictions in opponent's arguments. The suffragist Anna Howard Shaw was well known for identifying contradictions in her oppo-

nents' arguments and extending them to their extreme, absurd conclusions (Campbell, 1989). Stewart (1997) also documented how Stokely Carmichael reconstructed social reality by drawing audience attention to the contradictions of a White supremacist society which paid lip service to integration while maintaining an unwavering hold on the levers of power. Davis's own life story of a middle-class upbringing dedicated to socialist values and political activism demonstrated for her audience how ideological contradictions can be overcome to promote justice for all. Yet, Davis did not merely question the status quo; she also steered the audience toward new possibilities by providing international examples.

Comparing Political Systems as Strategy

In these speeches, Davis frequently used a form of comparative politics in order to convince her audience that other ways of organizing social systems are possible. This strategy was likely informed by her personal experiences studying abroad, which she credited with helping her better understand American systems of oppression (Davis, 1974). By referencing other nations, she provided suggestions for pathways towards a reconceptualization of the United States' approach to incarceration. She regularly alluded to international political bodies and policies including the United Nations, the World Court, and the Geneva Conventions. These examples both served to suggest alternative ways of thinking and reinforce the backwardness of American institutions:

> There are more than 3,500 people on death row in the United States at a time when all European countries have abolished capital punishment, when the European Union makes the abolition of the death penalty a precondition for membership. Turkey has recently abolished its death penalty in order to enter into the European Union. Côte d'Ivorie just abolished its death penalty. As a matter of fact, it is now the trend in Africa to abolish capital punishment, following South Africa. (Davis, 2012a, p. 118)

However, international models are not all positive. Although Davis used other nations to demonstrate the possibility of abolishing the death penalty, she also used them as examples for the pervasiveness of the prison-industrial complex. When illuminating the particular challenges faced by women of color, Davis demon-

strated that women of color are the fastest-growing imprisoned population in the United States, Canada, and some places in Europe. She used Australia as an example of a nation where indigenous women have been particularly harmed by the penal code. These examples encouraged the audience to think outside the borders of the United States as Davis sought to alter their worldview.

Conclusion

Angela Davis's metaphor comparing the modern prison system to chattel slavery, use of vivid examples, identification of opponent's contradictions, and international examples aided in persuading her audience to embrace a collective notion of freedom. She demonstrated how incarceration is tantamount to modern day slavery and used vivid examples like Abu Ghraib and historical connections to demonstrate the appropriateness and acceptability of her argument. She also highlighted contradictions in the ideological foundations of the United States and provided examples from other countries that offered possibilities for transformation.

Davis's rhetoric serves as an example of neo-abolitionist rhetoric in the 21st Century. She brings traditional, abolitionist rhetoric out of the 1850s and ventures into new territory. A dominant narrative in the United States is that slavery ended with the conclusion of the Civil War. Arguments that the nation has entered a "post-racial" period in its history (Crowley, 2008; Heckman, 2011; Thernstrom, 2007) bolster ideas that slavery and other forms of racial oppression occurred in the past but have now been eliminated. Instead, Davis argues that the pervasive institutions that contribute to slavery have merely taken new forms, including the modern prison-industrial complex and a state of interminable war-making.

Slavery exists in a different form today than it did in the 19th Century, and it requires from rhetors a different set of responses. New problems require new solutions, and new solutions require new rhetoric. We can take inspiration and guidance from the past, but antebellum rhetorical strategies fall short in this postmodern age. Angela Davis offers new rhetorical possibilities for responding to modern day exigencies, particularly through her use of metaphor surrounding prisons and inmates. She employs an international, intersectional perspective that sees the linked nature of various forms of oppression, and she makes clear that no one is truly free until everyone is free.

Davis's rhetoric provides an opportunity to question foundational assumptions about justice and punishment. Merely considering imprisonment a fate reserved only for "criminals" relieves us from the responsibilities of thinking about the real issues (e.g., racism, poverty, global capitalism) afflicting the communities from which prisoners are predominantly drawn (i.e., minority, low income). Davis raises questions about the social construction of the very class of people deemed "criminals," for not all who break the law are considered criminals (e.g., exceeding the speed limit makes one a law breaker but not a criminal; Davis, 2003). Instead, "criminals" are those human beings society has deemed undeserving of human and civil rights and are therefore locked away, separated from their communities, and subjected to various abuses (Davis, 2003).

Angela Davis illuminates through her oratory that another world is possible, a world that honors the dignity of all people, especially those that have been marginalized, oppressed, and excluded from social and civic life, including people of color, women, homosexuals, transgender/genderqueer persons, and the poor. Although the speeches analyzed in this essay do not offer specific policy solutions, Davis creates a fissure in the hegemonic imaginary, a space to imagine a more just, humane world. Her rhetorical strategies provide hammers and chisels with which we can continue that work of chipping away at the status quo, thus creating space and vision for a different future where people are no longer kept in human cages, no longer deprived of their civil rights, and no longer subjected to institutional violence because of the color of their skin, their income, their sexuality, and their physical and mental ability.

Davis's rhetorical style also makes meaningful theoretical contributions to feminist rhetoric because it builds on women and activist rhetors of the past while taking cues from contemporaries. Her use of vivid examples follows in the footsteps of women like Dolores Huerta and Mary Church Terrell, while Davis's ability to highlight contradictions in society places her in the company of suffragists like Anna Howard Shaw and the civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael.

Future research could analyze a larger selection of Davis's oeuvre and possibly explore how her rhetoric has changed over time. Drawing on the key values of invitational rhetoric (Foss & Griffin, 1995), scholars could explore how Davis advances equality,

immanent value and self-determination through her oratory. Future research could also look to other contemporary Black activists such as Michelle Alexander, Patrice Cullors, and Fania Davis for examples of neo-abolitionist rhetoric to provide comparison to the findings presented in this essay. The uprisings in Ferguson, MO and Baltimore, MD have sparked renewed energy around civil rights issues and prison reform, and women activists have been on the front lines inspiring and persuading various audiences. Feminist scholars may discover new lessons from the rhetoric of these 21st-century activists.

Davis provides an example of modern ways to address contemporary forms of slavery. Her speeches also demonstrate how to rhetorically uncover the insidious forms of oppression which still operate in the United States by employing a feminist intersectional perspective. She challenges feminists to move beyond exploring oppression at a theoretical level and to instead connect with the lived experiences of marginalized peoples, for "the danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression" (Moraga, 1983, p. 29). By offering vivid examples of how the prison-industrial complex corrupts and violates people across boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexuality, Davis (re)conceptualized freedom for her audience as she encouraged them to embrace collective liberation and exercise their shared power by creating a more just world.

Endnotes

**Per APA guidelines, I have capitalized racial groups (Black, White, and African American) in my own writing. For all quotes in this essay, I have chosen to leave the capitalization as it was originally published to maintain the integrity of the quotation.*

***Debt bondage is the practice of compelling an individual to work to repay a debt, and the individual is unable to leave until the debt is repaid. Migrant laborers are particularly vulnerable to such exploitation. Forced marriage occurs when an adult or child is compelled to marry someone due to threats of violence and/or coercion or is sold into marriage without their consent. In the United States, an estimated 3,000 forced marriages occurred between 2009 and 2011 in immigrant communities alone (Tahirih Justice Center, 2011).*

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